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The Background of New Testament Household Codes: Towards a Historical Evaluation of the Roots Shaping Present-day African Families and Gender Roles

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Abstract
This article delves into a comparative examination of household codes present in Jewish, Greco-Roman and New Testament traditions so as to unravel their distinct characteristics and implications. By scrutinizing the socio-cultural contexts of each code, we explore the nuanced roles assigned to individuals within the household structure. Moreover, the study evaluates the profound impact of these codes on the position of women in African families. Through this comparative lens, the research seeks to unveil the intersections between ancient household norms and their enduring influence on gender dynamics in contemporary African societies. Insights gained from this exploration contribute to a richer understanding of the historical roots shaping present-day familial structures and gender roles.

Key Words: New Testament Household Codes, Historical Evaluation, Roots Shaping, African Families, Gender Roles

Introduction

A pivotal focus in the exploration of the New Testament centers on the examination of household codes, manifesting in various passages like Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:9; 1Pet 2:13-21; 3:1-7; 1Tim 2:1; 6:2; and Tit 2:1-10. Within this terrain of study, numerous questions arise: Do these passages mirror the influences of Greco-Roman or Jewish household codes? Are the exhortations within them indicative of cultural influences rather than divine inspiration? What was the African household codes? Besides, does the Greco-Roman household codes impact on African culture, particularly concerning the status of African women? This paper endeavors to delve into and unravel these inquiries, navigating through the biblical verses with an analytical lens. Through meticulous examination, it seeks to discern the echoes of historical influences and cultural impacts woven into the fabric of these enduring directives. Simultaneously, it extends its gaze beyond the historical context, probing into the contemporary implications of these ancient codes, particularly within the intricate dynamics of African societies. The overarching intention is to engage in a thoughtful discussion that not only unpacks the historical and cultural dimensions but also contributes to a nuanced understanding of the present and, hopefully, paves the way for a more enlightened and compassionate future.

The Greco-Roman household codes

The first-century household among the Greeks and Romans was defined in terms of the head of the family. The oldest male in the bloodline of the family was called the *paterfamilias*. The head of the family in all ancient Mediterranean societies exercised very strong control over his wife and children. Also, the Roman family head (*paterfamilias*) controlled all the finances of the home. His wife might give him advice, but all family decisions were his to make as He decided whether he would rear a child born to his wife, how his children would be educated and who they would marry. Marriage was done to ensure the continuity of the head's family and to develop a social relationship among families. He had full control of the household including the power of granting life or death (Jeffers, 1999:285-291).

The father held the highest social and legal standing in the family and possessed power over his children and property. Scholars have used the Latin term *paterfamilias* to describe this all-encompassing power (Green & McDonald, 2017:179). The family in the Greco-Roman world valued the community over the individual and promoted corporate honor and fortune. Those living in the domus ("home") included parents and children, and perhaps extended family, such as adult siblings, cousins, and grandparents, as well as slaves, freedmen, and freedwomen. Each individual had a specific status within the home, and each family member deemed the social status of the family, including its wealth and social prestige as of equal or greater value than their personal happiness (Green & McDonald, 2017:179).

Families were extended in terms of authority but often not clear in terms of living arrangements. That is, frequently adult sons lived in homes separate from (but often near) their parents. Nevertheless, the father-maintained power over his adult sons until his death. In Roman families, he legally owned everything possessed by any member of his family, even his adult sons (Jeffers, 1999:286).

The Greek philosopher Aristotle described the household as consisting of three lines of authority, all controlled by the same man: husband to wife, father to children and master to slave. The Romans had a similar view. They disputed the ability of any but a free man to make decisions, as Arius Didymus wrote in describing the emperor Augustus' position that "a man has the rule of this household by nature, for the deliberative faculty in a woman is inferior, in children it does not yet exist, and in the case of slaves, it is completely absent." (Jeffers, 1999:288).

Family structure

The most significant feature of the Roman household (*familia*) was that its power was concentrated in the hands of the male head, the paterfamilias. The members of the household were those persons over whom the paterfamilias had power. Only the paterfamilias could own property under Roman law. His power was unbroken until his death (Jeffers, 1999:877-885).

The Roman household normally was composed of husband, wife, unmarried children, slaves, freedmen and clients. Bigamy was illegal. With apparently few exceptions, sons set up their own households when they married. The first century B. C. Roman orator Cicero described the family unit as a married couple and children. Brothers and cousins formed their own households like colonies of their parents' home. However, even though the younger generation lived under a different roof, they still were under the legal authority of their father as paterfamilias (Jeffers, 1999:877-885).

The Hellenistic family or household (*oikos*) included members of the family by blood and marriage, as well as property "movable" (slaves, animals) and "immovable" (e. g., house, land, tools). It was more likely multigenerational than was the Roman family, with three generations of a Hellenistic family often living under the same roof. The Hellenistic husband and father never had power close to that of the Roman paterfamilias, but he still was the ultimate authority in his family. For example, he, sometimes with the input of his wife, arranged the marriages of his children (Jeffers, 1999:877-885).

Brotherhood was the most valued relationship which discouraged betrayal and conflicts among individuals. Status was a sensitive area in Roman culture. Class, age, gender and status of individuals was used to rank them into a specific area. This improved people’s traits since everyone aimed at the highest and by this doing, families gained honor. The head of the household chose a god for the family to worship from the Roman assemblage of gods who were worshipped on a daily basis. These gods symbolized several virtues. There were several other vital institutions in this society. Romans used this way of living for long till the mid-first century when Rome rose as a republic (Jeffers, 1999:877-885).

Social status was usually inherited through family descent and gender, all in an assumed ordered hierarchy. Where social advancement was possible, and many pursued it vigorously, by accumulation of wealth, or by marriage, education, manumission from slavery, and military exploits. All Romans belonged to one of the various social tiers of society: senatorial, equestrian, decurion, plebeian, freedman, and slave. Social ranking often determined who would interact with whom, and on what terms (Wright & Bird, 2019:585).

Slaves

Slaves occupied the lowest tier of society in terms of relative social status. Slaves were regarded as little more than property, albeit with a soul. Slavery was widespread, with slaves comprising up to 30 percent of the population in some urban areas. One became a slave when captured as a prisoner of war, when kidnapped by slave-traders, or through being sold into slavery by one's family. Indeed, people could sell themselves into slavery to avoid destitution. Or, of course, you could be born the child of slaves, and hence be a slave yourself. Slaves engaged in a wide variety of tasks, including working as farm labourers, nurses, midwives, prostitutes, painters, doctors, cooks, and even guardians for children. The position of a slave in society was contingent upon the position of their master, whether an artisan or perhaps a senator. While slavery often entailed harsh conditions and cruel exploitation, many slaves were managers for wealthy patrons, positions that could be financially lucrative and even socially advantageous. To be a slave in the service of someone great was to be in a position of authority and legitimacy. Freedom from slavery was possible either by payment of a ransom price or else by the master or owner granting release (Wright & Bird, 2019:585).

Though at the bottom of the social scale, slaves were a numerous and important part of society in New Testament times. Roman slavery, however, differed in one important way from the institution which existed in the American South before the Civil War. In Rome, slaves and masters were of the same ethnic background and thus indistinguishable from one another. Seneca records that a proposal was once put forward in the senate to have slaves wear distinctive clothing, but when someone pointed out that the slaves could then see how numerous they were in comparison to the free population, the idea was quickly dropped (Bell, 1998:192).

The structure of Roman slave families did not differ substantially from that of the free populace. Many slaves in Rome in this era could hope to win their freedom. If they were owned by Roman citizens, they would normally be granted Roman citizenship as well when they were freed. In A. D 4, the minimum age of manumission was set at thirty, but exceptions were allowed. Females were likely to be freed earlier than males, in part because masters had to free them in order to marry them. While marriage to a slave by lower-class freeborn was perfectly acceptable, it was a cause for social ostracism among the wealthy. A slave had no father in the eyes of Roman law, so when he was freed, his former master was recognized as his legal father (Jeffers, 1999:291).

Emancipation, which was common, conferred citizenship. But even freed slaves continued to have obligations to their former masters, who became their patrons. In some ways, a man was better off

as a slave, since the free man had no one but himself and his family to care for him if he was sick or injured. A slave owner had money invested in his slaves and saw to it that they had medical care and sufficient food and housing. A free man could take none of those things for granted (Bell, 1998:193).

Bell (1998:193) presents some anecdotes from other writers that support how slaves were treated in the first century A.D. varied with the individual master but still the majority of slaves were suffering from ill-treatment for example; Martial, who was Rome's favorite writer from AD 80-95 (Bell, 1998:293), describes an aristocratic woman striking a slave girl who had not arranged her mistress' hair to suit her, and a man who cut out a slave's tongue and crucified him. The satirist Juvenal also comments on upper-class women who take out their anger at their husbands by beating their slaves. The problem was common enough that the city of Athens provided a place of refuge where slaves could escape brutal treatment, though not slavery itself. The emperor Claudius passed laws limiting a master's right to punish or kill slaves, but in law the slave always remained a piece of property.

By the middle of the first century A.D., Stoic philosophy was widespread enough to bring about improvements in the condition of slaves because of its view that all persons are subject to fate and not responsible for their social status. Seneca professed to see no difference between the slave and the free person except an accident of birth or political misfortune (cf. Gal. 3:28). Anyone could become a slave if his country was conquered by another. There is thus no inborn inferiority in a slave. Aristotle, by contrast, had taught that some ethnic groups were by nature suited to be slaves (Bell, 1998:194).

Women

In Rome at this time, it remained true, as always in antiquity, that women did not count for much. They were not included in census figures. Not even the New Testament writers were enlightened enough to count them. When describing the feeding of the five thousand, Matthew (14:21) concludes, "Those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children". Roman women did not even bear individual names. Their names were simply feminine forms of their fathers' family name, as with Julia from Julius. If a man had more than one daughter, the second would be designated "Secunda," the third "Tertia," and so on. Or they might be designated as "Major" and "Minor," the elder and the younger (Bell, 1998:192).

Greco-Roman women lived under the protection of their fathers until they were handed over to their husbands. If the husband and father both died, the closest male relative became the woman's guardian. Throughout their lives, they had the legal status of children. In Cicero's words, "Our

ancestors made it a rule that women, because of their weak intellects, should have guardians to take care of them" (Bell, 1998:196).

Most men and women married in the ancient world; many women experienced widowhood, while fewer experienced divorce. Often women were defined in relation to their male relatives - their father, husband, or son. Moreover, society reinforced for women the ideals of modesty, industry, or fidelity to family, the state, and the gods (Green & McDonald, 2017:179). A woman in Greco-Roman household codes must be submissive to her husband, take care of her children, avoid expensive clothes and rather put on good deeds, be silent and subordinated to men, plus older women should teach the younger women.

Greeks and Romans did not recognize bigamy (marriage to two people at the same time); however, we have some evidence that Jews practiced polygyny (two or more wives). Women were generally much younger than their husbands and could thus be widowed while still in their childbearing years, and husbands could lose their wives in childbirth. Remarriage was common, not only after the death of a spouse, but also following divorce (Solevåg, 2013:96). Wives were restricted to sexual intercourse with only their husbands, but men were charged with adultery only if they had intercourse with another man’s wife (Green & McDonald, 2017:179).

In the *Kyriarchal* structure of the household, woman is submitted to her husband. However, she is in a superior position in relation to her children and slaves. Women in Greco-Roman families generally ran the domestic area of the household, subject to the approval of their husbands. They oversaw the domestic slaves and other workers, as well as the nurture and education of their children. Both Greeks and Romans believed in the inherent superiority of men. They both believed that women lacked men' s capacity to resist sexual temptation and thus needed to be protected. The Greek ideal was to seclude women within the home, allowing them out in public only at certain times and under the watchful eyes of male family members. At the center of the traditional Greek home were the women's quarters, which were off limits to male visitors and even to some male members of the family. By contrast, the Romans allowed women to join them in public events, such as dinner parties, but they kept a close eye in particular on the unmarried young women (Jeffers, 1999:291).

The Jewish household codes

Unlike Roman and Hellenistic law, Jewish law allowed polygamy. But in the cities of the Greco-Roman world, the Jews typically adopted the marriage practices of the larger culture. The Jewish

household probably consisted of two, sometimes three, generations of kin by blood and marriage. Most Jewish families probably did not own slaves. Unlike the Roman *familia*, those that included slaves probably did not include freed men, since freed men owed no continuing service to former masters who were not Roman citizens (such as most Jews) (Jeffers, 1999:885).

Jewish wives living in the cities of Rome would have had more freedom in some respects and less in others than women who lived under Jewish law. In the cities, they were more free to actively engage in the society outside their homes. They would have found it easy to divorce their husbands, whether or not their marriage was legal in the eyes of Rome. Under Jewish law, a wife could not divorce her husband unless she prosecuted him and the court ordered a divorce (Jeffers, 1999:899). Also under Jewish law, the wife's guardianship was transferred from her father to her husband at marriage. On the other hand, Jewish law allowed women to take legal actions without the assistance of a guardian, to own property and to control property without interference from their husbands.

The fundamental obligation of Jewish parents, according to Jewish literature, was to feed and clothe their children. Failure to do this was the worst type of neglect. According to Philo, a Jewish intellectual of the upper classes in Alexandria, the father was primarily responsible for financial support, from providing a dowry for daughters and an inheritance for sons, to basic food, clothing, education and health care. The rabbis considered it a paternal obligation to teach a son a trade. Jewish parents, especially fathers, were expected to discipline their children. Corporal punishment was the primary means of discipline. Parents were not to play or laugh with their children or risk spoiling them (Ecclesiasticus 30:1-13). At the same time, they were not to be too harsh in disciplining their children (Jeffers, 1999:907).

Much less about the particular arrangements of Jewish marriage in the Greco-Roman world of the first century CE is known. Jews could certainly describe their marriages and family life as part of what set them apart from Gentiles, but in terms of practical arrangements, Jewish marriages seem to have shared many points in common with marriages in the ancient world generally, reflecting such practices as the payment of dowry, family-arranged marriages, and emphasis on the virginity of the bride.

The most important goal of Roman marriage was producing children, but it was not the only goal or expectation of Jewish marriage. In fact, a man who divorced his barren wife might be chastised for putting the desire for children above marital loyalty. By contrast, Palestinian Jewish custom required a husband to divorce a barren wife. Jews saw having children as an obligation, based on the command "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28). The general consensus was that this commandment was directed

to men only. The expressions of sentiment in the Jewish inscriptions discovered in the city of Rome give us some insight into what qualities were expected in a spouse, parent or child: a good reputation, religious piety and devotion to family members (Jeffers, 1999:887).

Philo wrote during the early first century A. D. about the proper Jewish family. Philo said that the family was based on three features: an unbreakable bond of love and kinship, the inherent superiority of parents and a hierarchy of male and female that associates women with the senses and men with the mind (Jeffers, 1999:893).

One notable aspect of New Testament teachings on family life, distinct from both Jewish and Greco-Roman societies, is Jesus' prohibition (or restriction in Matthew's Gospel) of divorce (see Matt 5:31-32; 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Cor 7:10-16). Although Ephesians 5:22-33 doesn't explicitly forbid divorce, the notion of permanency underlies the idealized marriage, reflecting the relationship between Christ and the church. Despite this idealization, early church communities faced the reality of divorce, as seen in Paul's letters (1 Cor. 7:10-16), suggesting it could be initiated by either spouse, aligning with the prevalent Roman world practice. While the Hebrew Bible implies that only husbands could divorce (Deut. 24:1-4; cf. Deut. 22:13-19), caution is urged due to findings like the Babatha Archive and marriage contracts from Elephantine, challenging assumptions about women's divorce rights among Jews. In reality, many Jewish and Gentile women likely had little control over factors determining their fate in divorce matters (Neufeld & DeMaris, 2010:37).

The New Testament household codes

The New Testament household codes are closely linked to Greco-Roman ideals of household management. The New Testament household codes can be found in various passages, such as Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:21-6:9; 1Pet. 2:13-21; 3:1-7; 1Tim. 2:1; 6:2; and Tit. 2:1-10. These codes adapted existing household codes even to follow the same three areas of submission and obligation: wives to husbands, children to parents and slaves to masters, but introduced a distinctively Christian perspective.

Household language is used to describe the Christian church throughout the New Testament. The use of domestic idioms reflects the social situation of early Christianity. The first generations of believers gathered in homes of certain people. This situation is patent when Paul writes about “the church in their/your house” (*καὶ τὴν κατ’ οἶκον αὐτῶν ἐκκλησίαν*, Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Phlm. 2; see Col. 4:15). The Christian household was the *Sitz im Leben* of New Testament epistolary literature, which were written to groups of believers who gathered in people’s homes. The gathering together of

Christians in household units is suggested almost as often as the New Testament uses household language. In the house, the reader could explain the apostle's words; there, too, the assembly discussed the meaning of the kerygmatic message. There, finally, the assembly could break bread and celebrate its traditional meal, the "Lord's Supper" (1 Cor. 11:18–34) (Collins, 2002:104).

"Household codes," whose origins date to the time of Plato and Aristotle, summarized the way that members of the household were to relate to one another. Via Hellenistic Judaism and the dominant Stoic ethic of the era, household codes entered into Christian paraenesis, especially on social order, social responsibility, and respect for one another's role in society. Several passages in the Pastoral Epistles provide examples of the Christian use of this literary form (see 1 Tim. 2:8–15; 5:1–2; 6:1–2; Tit. 2:1–10; 3:1) (Collins, 2002:105).

But on closer examination, we see important differences. Aristotle says that the husband's rule over the wife is like an aristocracy, because he is more capable to rule and thus superior to her. But the husband still gives her areas to control within her ability. He also says that "the male is by nature fitter for command than the female". By contrast, the New Testament passages above do not assert that the husband is in any way superior to his wife or more capable of making decisions; rather they say that God has put him in this position. Aristotle says also that the father's rule over his child is like a monarchy, because he is concerned for the welfare of the child, not about how the child can benefit him. The New Testament tells children to obey their parents, in the spirit of Old Testament injunctions to obedience (e. g., Ex 20:12, quoted in Eph 6:2-3) rather than in keeping with the philosophy of Aristotle (Jeffers, 1999:304).

Aristotle believes that the master's rule over a slave is like a tyranny, since the purpose of the relationship is strictly the benefit of the master. He also says that "a slave is a living possession". The New Testament household passages say that Christian masters should treat their slaves humanely, acknowledging that they share the same ultimate Master. They never suggest or imply that a slave may be seen as a possession. While Aristotle seeks to justify slavery, the New Testament does not. The New Testament does not suggest that the master should be obeyed because he is more capable (either by nature or experience); rather a master should be obeyed because God commands it (Jeffers, 1999:285-291).

The *kyriarchal* structure of the household of God and its organization is an important topic especially in the Pastorals. All believers must live according to their place in the household (Tit. 2:1–10). Men are instructed to lead decent family lives and are expected to have subordinate family

members under control (1Tim. 3:4; 12; Tit. 1:6). Women, children and slaves are urged to be obedient and submissive (1Tim. 3:4; 3:12; 5:1–6:2; Tit. 2:2–10). We recognize the *Kyriarchal* structure of Greco-Roman family life, where the householder dominates over wife, children and slaves. Thus, the community of believers is envisaged as a household— the household of God. The overseer is called God's steward or household manager and the gospel is called God's household plan. The individual households of believing families are the key building blocks of the "household of God"- structure. Each believer has a place and a responsibility as a member of his or her household, and that place in turn requires a particular kind of behavior or certain duties in the *ekklesia* (Solevåg, 2013:96-103).

Two elements are particularly striking when comparing discussions of household management in ancient literature to the New Testament evidence. The first is the presence of the same three pairs of relationships that we find in the household codes. Colossians and Ephesians are usually understood to offer the clearest examples of the household code genre (Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9), with other New Testament works drawing on household management themes more loosely, sometimes lacking one or more pairs of the relationships or exhorting only one of the partners (e.g., 1 Pet 2:18–3:7; 1 Tim 2:8–15; 5:1–2; 6:1–2; Titus 2:1–10).

The second element is less obvious, but no less important. Like discussions of household management in the ancient world more generally, the household codes view familial relationships as determinative of wider social realities, even theological conceptualizations. This is made especially clear by the metaphorical comparison of marriage to the interaction between Christ and the church which runs through Ephesians 5:22–33; domestic relations here are used to articulate nothing less than the relationship between the human and the divine. It is often said that Aristotle's vision presents the household as the microcosm of the state. This connection between micro and macro is very interesting to consider in relation to Ephesians which interweaves concepts of citizenship with familial concepts to describe the nature of the church community: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19; NRSV). This is a text that prepares the way for the celebration in Ephesians 3:15 of God as the great pater (father) from whom every family (patria, literally fatherhood) in heaven and on earth is named. Using theological categories to profess a new identity, we have a clear example of what anthropologists call fictive kinship. Members of the church (in the period of the New Testament, usually new converts) have a new, ultimate Father and belong to a new family—an entity that seems both to subsume, and to stand in some critical tension with, their earthly family/kinship alliances (Neufeld & DeMaris, 2010:32).

Finally, some scholars argued that the household codes in the New Testament were concerned about power rather than gender. Whereby the purpose of the household codes was not to endorse the power structures of Greco-Roman household codes, however, it was to lessen the potential for abuse that often came with unequal power. Hence, the New Testament household codes emphasized mutual love, respect, and submission among family members, rather than solely focusing on authority and hierarchy. They emphasized the roles of husbands as loving and sacrificial leaders, wives as respectful and supportive partners, children as obedient and respectful, and slaves as obedient to their masters.

The gender roles in the N. T household codes through the lens of Eph. 5:22-33

One of the most significant passages addressing household codes in the New Testament is in Eph. 5:22-6:9. According to Keener (2014:552), the section (Eph. 5:21–6:9) addresses what we call “household codes”; ancients used such codes to express what their culture regarded as virtuous relations within the family. In Paul’s day, many Romans were troubled by the spread of “religions from the East” (e.g., Isis worship, Judaism and Christianity), which they thought could undermine traditional Roman family values. Members of these minority religions often tried to show their support for those values by using household codes, a standard form of exhortations developed by philosophers from Aristotle on. These exhortations about how the head of a household should deal with members of his family often break down into discussions of husband-wife, father-child and master-slave relationships. Paul borrows this form of discussion from standard Greco-Roman moral writing. Paul is probably concerned with outsiders’ views of Jesus’ movement (cf. 1 Tim 5:14; Tit 2:5). But unlike most ancient writers, Paul undermines a basic premise of these codes: the male head of the house’s assumption of absolute authority.

Wifely submission remained the ideal (see e.g., Philo, Creation 167; Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.255; Marcus Aurelius 1.17.7). Most ancient writers expected wives to obey their husbands, desiring in them a quiet and meek demeanor; some marriage contracts even stated a requirement for absolute obedience. This requirement made sense especially to Greek thinkers, who could not conceive of wives as equals. Age differences contributed to this disparity: husbands were normally older than their wives, often by over a decade in Greek culture (with men frequently marrying around age thirty and women in their teens, sometimes early teens) (Keener, 2014:552).

In this passage, however, Paul differs from the usual conventions, which normally addressed only the male head of the household. The closest Paul comes to specifically defining submission here is "respect" "*φοβῆται*" (v. 33), and in the Greek text, wifely submission to a husband "*αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς*

ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν" (v. 22) is only one example of general mutual submission of Christians, where the final expression is "submitting to one another" *ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις* because Christ is one's Lord. All the household codes Paul proposes are based on this idea. But although it was customary to call on wives, children and slaves to submit in various ways, to call all members of a group (including the paterfamilias, the male head of the household) to submit to one another (cf. Mark 10:43-45) was unheard of. A minority of ancient writers did express the value of mutual concern and sensitivity (Keener, 2014:552).

According to Piper (2009:77-84), one of the things to learn from this mystery of marriage is the distinct roles of husbands and wives as outlined in Ephesians 5:22–25, where husbands are likened to Christ and wives to the church. Drawing on this analogy, Piper highlights that while Jesus demonstrated servant leadership by washing his disciples' feet, it didn't diminish his unquestionable leadership. He argues that mutuality of submission and servanthood coexist with the reality of leadership and headship. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul emphasizes Christ's sacrificial love, portraying it as a model for husbands. Piper contends that Christ's leadership involves decisive action, as seen in his initiative for the church's salvation and sanctification. Headship, as Piper describes, is not a license for control or abuse, but a responsibility to emulate Christ's sacrificial love in leading, protecting, and providing for wives and families. Furthermore, Piper asserts that submission, in the context of Ephesians 5:21–33, should be free, willing, glad, refining, and strengthening, guarding against abuses of headship by urging husbands to love like Jesus and preventing the debasing of submission by encouraging wives to respond as the church does to Christ.

The evangelical feminists conclude that a difference in function necessarily involves a difference in essence; i.e., if men are in authority over women, then women must be inferior. The relationship between Christ and the Father shows us that this reasoning is flawed. One can possess a different function and still be equal in essence and worth. Women are equal to men in essence and in being; there is no ontological distinction, and yet they have a different function or role in church and home. Such differences do not logically imply inequality or inferiority, just as Christ's subjection to the Father does not imply His inferiority (Piper and Grudem, 1991:120).

According to wa Gatumu (2022:12), despite Ephesians 5:21-33 often being interpreted within an androcentric framework that reinforces hierarchical structures and marginalizes women, it actually challenges Graco-Roman and Jewish social hierarchies, elevating the status of women instead. While it may appear to advocate for subordination, it also promotes genuine liberation through principles like

mutual submission, the husband's self-sacrifice, and the interdependence of spouses. whereby, the sacrificial love, as described for husbands, cannot coexist within a hierarchical structure. Furthermore, Ephesians 5:21-33 directly confronted social norms that oppressed and silenced women, children, and slaves within its historical context, leading to a radical transformation of social and gender dynamics within the family. Thus, the relationship between husband and wife in Ephesians 5:21-33 had no parallel in the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures (Girard, 2000: 138). However, the concept of women's submission in Ephesians 5:21-33 diverges significantly from the traditional understanding seen in Greco-Roman and Jewish households. In Ephesians, submission is conveyed through the Greek middle voice, indicating that the subject of the verb performs the action for their own benefit. It emphasizes voluntary subordination to another, but for the well-being of the one who submits. This contrasts with imposing an absolute hierarchy on husbands and wives, as Paul's point is that no believer inherently holds superiority over another believer, regardless of gender (wa Gatumu, 2022:14).

African household codes

In terms of family structure and roles, African household codes typically emphasize the importance of extended family structures. In many African societies, the extended family plays a crucial role in providing support and guidance. The concept of “ubuntu,” which is prevalent in many African cultures, underscores the interconnectedness of individuals within the community. This interconnectedness extends to the family unit, where multiple generations often live together or in close proximity. The elderly members of the family hold significant authority and are respected for their wisdom and experience. Gender roles within African households are also governed by traditional codes. The majority of African societies are patriarchal in nature. In this context, an ideology exists in support of gender inequalities and roles. Patriarchy is an affirmation of male domination, a way to stratify societies along gender lines, such that men receive more prestige and power than women (Falola, 2010:150-153).

In various regions of Africa, patriarchy has long been established, shaping different aspects of gender relations. It's not inherently "evil" but a hierarchy where men hold more power than women. Cultural justifications often rationalize gender inequality, with roles and rewards grounded in traditional beliefs. Even in complementary gender roles within households, men are seen as the heads, while women, valued as mothers and wives, uphold traditions and kinship by bearing and socializing children. The respect and prestige a woman gains within the household are often tied to her role as a

child-bearer, especially if she bears male children, ensuring marital stability and the continuity of kinship traditions (Falola, 2010:152).

Interestingly, despite the traditional household management system being patriarchal, household management in most African cultures is primarily the responsibility of women. However, African culture dictates specific positions and roles for both women and men. According to this cultural framework, women are expected to fully submit to the leadership of their husbands, a dynamic that extends to all males in society (Mwaniki & Mouton, 2015: 347-349). Consequently, the concept of male superiority and female inferiority has not only infiltrated the mindset of non-Christian Africans but also that of African Christians. While women are responsible for managing the household, they do so on behalf of their husbands, who retain their roles as household heads. Essentially, women are utilized as conduits for men to exert control over the household, relegating them to an inferior status and excluding them from leadership positions beyond household management (Wasike, 2001:179).

When a woman marries, for most of the African tribes, she moves to the household of the man, where she is expected to behave in certain ways. This relocation from under her father's power to be under her husband's power, in any way she is subordinate under male dominion. As part of the socialization process, her mother will insist that she retains her virginity, know how to cook food that will please her future husband, and show respect. She is expected not only to respect her husband, but to respect those senior to her in age and even men younger than her within the household. Her own respect will come with age and seniority. The longer she is married, the more senior she becomes, and the more respect she acquires (Falola, 2010:150-153).

Cultural norms that control female sexuality often reflect male dominance. For example, in southeastern Nigeria and Mauritania, beauty is linked to fatness so that they practice the fattening practice, while among the Hausa in West Africa, girls are taught to be modest, obedient, and silent to enhance their subordination to males. In some Muslim communities, women may be secluded to prevent interaction with men or those outside their husband's approval (Falola, 2010:153). Polygamy is another evidence of male domination and a marriage practice not based on love. Polygamy was ingrained in the social fabric; it carried prestige and was of great social significance in the African society. The men took pride in having many wives and numerous children. Where wealth is counted in people, the polygynous man with numerous wives and children demonstrates success and prestige. Therefore, polygamy is to use women to make men acquire wealth and status (Falola, 2010:159).

Overall, In Africa, echoes of the *Kyriarchal* structure seen in Greco-Roman household codes persist in various societal phenomena. Women, whether under the protection of their fathers or husbands, continue to grapple with male authority. Traditionally, they transition from the guardianship of their fathers to that of their husbands, or in the absence of both, the closest male relative assumes the role of guardian. Perceived as subordinate, women often find themselves excluded from leadership roles and decision-making processes. The belief in their susceptibility to deviation has contributed to practices like female circumcision, rooted in the notion that women need male guardianship for protection against sexual temptation. Societal emphasis on marriage and childbirth defines a woman's worth, relegating those without these attributes to diminished value. Polygamy is viewed by some African communities as a social privilege, reinforcing the perception of women as possessions. In certain contexts, the tradition of a groom paying a bride price to the father without the woman's consent persists. Adultery carries disparate consequences for women, who face shame, while men are typically charged only if engaging with another man's wife. Women are frequently barred from leadership positions, both within households and religious institutions.

Conclusion

As previously elucidated, the household codes in the New Testament emerge as a profound reflection of the *Kyriarchal* structure, casting a revealing light on the societal dynamics of their time. Embedded within the rich tapestry of either Jewish or Greco-Roman cultural contexts, the authors drew inspiration from the prevailing norms, seamlessly intertwining their narratives with the socio-cultural fabric that surrounded them. It is crucial to recognize that these writers were not detached from their cultural settings; rather, they engaged with them in a dynamic dialogue that shaped the very essence of their scriptural contributions.

However, amidst the echoes of the *Kyriarchal* structure, a revolutionary chord is struck within the New Testament—a chord that resounds with a transformative perspective on human relationships. This perspective transcends the societal demarcations of gender, color, and ethnicity, boldly proclaiming the inherent equality of all individuals as bearers of the divine image. In this revolutionary paradigm, the New Testament not only challenges the prevailing norms but also invites its readers to embrace a more profound truth—one that stands in stark contrast to the cultural hierarchies of the time.

Central to this transformative message is the unequivocal assertion that all are one in Christ. The New Testament extends an invitation to move beyond divisive constructs, fostering a community where unity is forged in a shared identity in Christ. This theological underpinning becomes a powerful lens

through which to reconsider societal norms, challenging the very foundations of the *Kyriarchal* structure that had entrenched notions of superiority and inferiority.

Moreover, the New Testament introduces a moral imperative for those occupying positions of authority within the *Kyriarchal* hierarchy. It goes beyond mere acknowledgment of their status and emphasizes a profound responsibility—to wield power not as a tool for exploitation but as a force for love and care. This ethical stance seeks to redefine the very nature of authority, emphasizing its potential for positive influence and nurturing rather than domination.

In our contemporary context, the call to live in accordance with the truths embedded in the Gospel echoes with a resounding relevance. It beckons us to transcend the confines of cultural rituals and societal norms that may perpetuate inequality. Instead, it urges us to embrace a timeless ethos—one grounded in the enduring principles of equality, compassion, and a shared identity in Christ. The New Testament's household codes, therefore, stand not only as historical artifacts but as living testimonies to a transformative vision that challenges us to continually strive for a more just and equitable society.

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