

ARTICLE 2

THE SUBVERSIVE SUBMISSION OF WOMEN IN 1 PETER 3:1–6

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ABSTRACT

First Peter 3:1–6 presents a context-sensitive and theologically significant model of evangelism for first century Christian women married to non-Christian husbands. This article situates the passage within its historical and cultural context through examining the Roman honour-shame value system and the household codes (*oikonomia*). It then places 1 Pet 3:1–6 within the broader thematic framework of the letter, looking particularly its emphasis on submission as Christian witness, and offers an exegetical reading informed by these insights. It concludes that 1 Peter does not reinforce Roman patriarchal norms, but instead affirms the moral agency of women, portraying their voluntary Christ-like submission as a strategic and faithful means of evangelism within a restrictive social environment.

¹ Wives, in the same way, be subject to your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, ²when they see the purity and respect of your conduct. ³Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; ⁴rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight. ⁵It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by being subject to their husbands. ⁶Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you (1 Pet 3:1–6; NRSV).

The First Epistle of Peter presents interpretive challenges to twenty-first century readers, particularly where it references—and, as complementarian theologian Wayne Grudem argues, reinforces—social and household structures from a pre-modern context.¹ One such passage is 1 Pet 3:1–6, where the author exhorts the Christian women of Asia Minor to submit to their husbands. Yet beneath layers of historical and cultural context lies immense value. This paper proposes an interpretation of 1 Pet 3:1–6 in which women are portrayed as agency-filled evangelists who subtly subvert cultural norms and uniquely reflect the image of Christ. This reading will be developed through detailing the historical context 1 Peter spoke into, situating 1 Pet 3:1–6 in the broader conversations surrounding submission in 1Peter, and interpreting the

¹ Wayne Grudem, “Wives Like Sarah, and the Husbands Who Honor Them,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 253–272.

text within these contexts. It will also address interpretations that fail to properly contextualize this passage through Wayne Grudem's chapter in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (1991). This paper does not seek to construct a systematic theology of Biblical womanhood; rather, it presents an exegetical framework for 1 Pet 3:1-6 grounded in historical and literary context. Within this framework I seek to illuminate the theological and pastoral dimensions of 1 Pet 3:1-6, particularly its affirmation of women's agency in the context of Christian witness.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In discussing a passage regarding gender roles, it is important to have context regarding the Roman honour-shame value system which was key to the organization of households. Value systems do not ascribe value to right or wrong as moral systems do, but rather value is determined by whether something brings honour or shame. Honour and shame were gendered, and honour was the exclusive right of men. Ernest van Eck states that,² This does not mean women were inherently shameful, but that the Roman value system framed men's virtue as active, achieved through gaining honour, while women's virtue was passive, achieved through avoiding shame. This understanding limited women's moral agency: virtue could not be actively pursued but instead was maintained by avoiding vice which in Roman discourse is gendered as feminine. This value system is foundational to the household structures presented in *oikonomiai* (*οἰκονομῖαι*).

Roman household expectations can be found in *oikonomiai*—Hellenistic codes for household management.³ This paper will briefly utilize *oikonomiai* as a window into the household context of the first-century wives in the Roman Empire which 1 Pet responds to. Such texts depict women as both naturally inferior moral agents to men and as a potential threat to the success of a household, particularly if they deviated from religious norms. Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, a popular *oikonomia*, depicts wives as less capable of moral agency, requiring instruction from their husbands on proper behaviour.⁴ In the dialogue, Socrates explains this by comparing women to animals stating, " 'If a sheep,' replied Socrates, 'is in ill condition, we generally blame the shepherd; if a horse is mischievous, we impute the fault to the groom; and as

² Ernest van Eck, *Galilee and Jerusalem in Mark's Story of Jesus: A Narratological and Social Scientific Reading* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 1995), 167.

³ John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, Anchor Bible 37B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 553.

⁴ Xenophon, *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus*, trans. E. C. Marchant and O. J. Todd, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923); D. M., "Households and Householding," in *The Classical Tradition*, ed. Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and Salvatore Settis (2010). Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, is a dialogue with Socrates written in the early 300s BCE, and is an archetype of an *oikonomia* giving instructions on how a Greek man should organize his household—including good farming practice and marital relations. The influence of *Oeconomicus*, extended beyond the Greek classical era and into the Roman empire—being translated into Latin by Cicero 200 years later, and beyond that into the first century.

to a wife ... if her husband does not teach her what is right and proper ... would he not justly be visited with condemnation?"⁵ Submission in Roman household codes reflects the broader cultural presumption that women had a reduced capacity for moral agency.

First Peter is addressed to Christians living in Asia minor under the rule of Rome in the first century. The text claims authorship by the apostle Peter predating his death in the 60s C.E. However, due to its emphasis on persecution, some scholars suggest it was written later, possibly during Domitian's reign in the 90s.⁶ Assuming the later date, a possible reason for the persecution addressed in 1 Pet was Christian subversion of Roman household expectations regarding, in part, the role of women.⁷ First Peter presents strong parallels to *oikonomiai*, particularly Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*.⁸ The purpose of these parallels is not for 1 Pet to encourage Christians to conform to Roman society, and it is not a compromise so that Christians will face less persecution. Rather, it is a subtle subversion of Roman societal norms, not through overt rebellion, but by redefining submission in light of Christ's voluntary suffering and moral agency.

Within this framework, wives were also expected to worship the same gods as their husbands. A wife's decision to worship different gods was considered taboo and a possible threat to the well-being of the household.⁹ Plutarch highlights this expectation in his *Advice to Bride and Groom*,

A wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals and outlandish superstitions. For with no god do stealthy and secret rites performed by a woman find any favour.¹⁰

Christianity was chief among the religions deemed "strange and superstitious" in Rome, as it rejected all deities but the Jewish God.¹¹ This included rejecting the imperial cult, which could hold serious social and political repercussions, since participation in the imperial cult was a pillar of the Roman social world and a gauge of political loyalty.¹² A wife that converted to Christianity was a threat to the unity of her household, and the standing of her husband.

The Roman value system, household structure and religious expectations for women

⁵ Xenophon, *Oec.* 3.11 (Marchant and Todd, LCL)

⁶ Greg W. Forbes, *1 Peter* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014), 1–4.

⁷ Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 616.

⁸ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 553.

⁹ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 557–58.

¹⁰ Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 19, *Mor.* 140D, (Babbitt, LCL).

¹¹ Pliny the Younger, *Letters and Panegyricus*, vol. 2, *Letters, Books VIII–X and Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice (London and Cambridge, MA: Heinemann, 1969).

¹² N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 154–55.

form the backdrop against which 1 Pet 3:1–6 must be read, revealing the radical nature of this passage’s pastoral strategy in addressing Christian women as moral agents within a system eliminating their autonomy.

LITERARY CONTEXT

In addition to an awareness of historical context, one must also understand the literary context in which 1 Pet 3:1–6 arises within the broader book. First Peter 3:1–6 is situated within a conversation about Christian submission to authority and Christian witness of Christ. Philip Chia highlights the connection between submission and the Christian witness through the term, *hypotassō* (ὑποτάσσω), which appears five times within 1 Pet.¹³ He states, “Peter always connects the submission of believers to the Lord or Christ. Peter exhorts the believers to subject themselves to human institutions for the Lord’s sake.”¹⁴ Across the audiences addressed, 1 Pet 2:12 introduces this theme by urging Christians to live honourably, so that even when they reject cultural norms for the sake of Christ, they may still retain a measure of respect. This theme shapes the following passage in 1 Pet 2:13–17, where submission to imperial authority is framed not as submission for its own sake, but as a means of Christian witness. The discussion then turns to the submission of slaves to their masters in the remainder of chapter 2. First Peter 3:1–6 continues this theme of submission as witness, focusing specifically on the context of marital relationships. The rest of chapter 3 then calls all Christians to pursue peace and goodness, virtues that, within this framework, are expressed through submission to authority structures. When approaching a passage that speaks to the submission of women, it is essential to recognize that it belongs to a larger conversation in 1 Pet about submission as a defining feature of Christian witness, modelled after Christ’s own submission to earthly authority.¹⁵

INTERPRETATION

Having outlined the cultural and literary context of the passage, I now turn to its interpretation, focusing primarily on 1 Pet 3 verses 1, 2, and 6b, which most clearly capture the author’s instruction to Christian wives.¹⁶ Verse 1 begins with the phrase “likewise” connecting 1 Pet 3:1–6 to the earlier conversation about submission as witness. This verse continues instructing wives to

¹³ 1 Pet 2:13, 18; 3:1, 22; 5:5.

¹⁴ Philip Chia, “An Irresistible Beauty in 1 Peter,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* (2021).

¹⁵ It is important to note that 1 Peter is not downplaying the evil of domestic abuse through this line of argumentation. As the interpretation section will later show, he is actively concerned for women placed in dangerous family circumstances and is advocating for their safety within their witness, rather than diminishing the weight of their possible suffering.

¹⁶ Further work must be done in interpreting verses 3–6a in light of the author’s call for the women in 1 Peter to practice evangelistic submission. I will focus on 1, 2, and 6b viewing 3–6a as a clarification and justification to 1 Peter’s instruction and its context presented in 1, 2, and 6b.

submit, *hypotassō*, to their husbands. As was previously noted, this term *hypotassō* has a strong connection to Christ within the literary context of 1 Pet. It is the same language of submission utilized by Roman household codes, but it is now redefined under the Christian value system where women are capable of moral agency. Just as Christ chose submission as a means of redemptive witness, women in this text are portrayed as participating in that same Christ-like pattern, choosing submission not out of inferiority, but as a form of self-giving love. Submission is then transformed from something women are obligated to by nature, to a way that women can voluntarily reflect Christ (1 Pet 2:21; 3:18). The voluntary nature of this submission is explicit as verse 1 directly addresses women. This stands in contrast to *oikonomiai*—which addressed husbands exclusively.¹⁷ Douglas Harink notes that this text depicts that women have the choice to freely submit to social constructs just as Jesus freely submitted himself to becoming man.¹⁸ A freedom to choose submission in this way frames it as evangelistically purposeful, not universally defined. The *hypotassō* of women encouraged in this text is not one done out of a choiceless obligation to nature, but rather an agency-filled submission to a human social structure for the purpose of reflecting Christ.

Another clear subversion of cultural norms is the type of woman addressed by the author of Peter. These are Christian women with non-Christian husbands. Verse 1 encourages women to submit to “[husbands] who do not obey the word” (1 Pet 3:1). These women are defying the *oikonomia* expectation of adopting their husband’s religion. First Peter does not instruct them to submit to this social norm; rather, these women are to submit to their non-believing husbands for the sake of evangelism: “be submissive to your husbands, so that some ... may be won without a word by the behaviour of their wives” (1 Pet 3:1). If the goal of 1 Pet were purely to promote Roman household norms, one would expect him to include a rebuff of Christian women who were not sharing the religion of their non-believing husbands. From this one can dismiss the assumption that the purpose of encouraging *hypotassō* in 1 Pet was for adherence to patriarchal norms. First Peter takes a different approach: it acknowledges the dangerous position of wives who reject their husband’s religion and offers them a way to evangelize that is subtle, non-compromising, and theologically dignified, as it mirrors Christ’s own redemptive work in hostile space.

The potential for danger is highlighted by verse 6b which instructs women not to fear. The phrasing of the Revised Standard Version translation simply states that wives should “let nothing terrify you” (1 Pet 3:1; RSV). John H. Elliot clears this ambiguity by stating that this fear

¹⁷ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 553.

¹⁸ Douglas Harink, *1 & 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 87.

may be fear of marital abuse due to their faith.¹⁹ If this understanding is proper, it can be assumed that the author encourages *hypotassō* as an evangelistic tool because of his awareness of the potential for domestic abuse that may stem from a wife rejecting their husband's religion for Christ. This tool would stand in place of witnessing with one's words as is highlighted by the phrase "without a word" in verse 1. I argue that rather than being a means to oppress women and hold them to social norms, 1 Peter's *hypotassō* is presented to women as a subtle and safer tool than words for evangelizing their non-Christian husbands. First Peter's strategic working of the social system demonstrates pastoral sensitivity to women's vulnerable position, and theological intentionality in modelling Christ's self-giving love through culturally intelligible means.²⁰

COMPLEMENTARIAN READINGS

Contemporary complementarian readings, such as entries in Wayne Grudem's entry in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, utilize 1 Pet 3:1–6 as a defence of traditional household structures as a divine command. However, such interpretations often abstract the passage from its literary and cultural context, thereby diminishing the theological nuance with which 1 Pet frames submission as a Christ-like act of agency oriented toward witness.

Grudem defines submission in this text not as an evangelistically purposeful act, but as a general disposition, stating that "submission is an inner quality of gentleness that affirms the leadership of the husband."²¹ While this definition is not incompatible with 1 Pet 3:1–6, it underemphasizes the passage's explicit evangelistic aim. In verse 1, wives are exhorted to submit "so that ... they may be won without a word," situating submission within a missional framework (1 Pet 3:1). To derive a predominantly generalized definition of submission from this passage requires universalising an instruction that is addressed specifically to women with non-believing husbands. Grudem references some arguments for generalization may stem from certain translations of *kai ei* (καὶ εἰ; lit. "and if") but does not engage this debate in depth. Instead he presumes the text's universality in order to focus on the qualities of submission largely abstracted from evangelism.²²

Furthermore, Grudem presents evangelism not as an act of agency on the part of the wife, but as a secondary outcome of obedience to a prescribed role. He writes, "Peter holds out one reward that wives are ordinarily to expect from this submission to their husbands: the

¹⁹ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 574.

²⁰ This is reminiscent of hidden transcripts regarding anti-imperialism that pepper the New Testament, encouraging primary allegiance to God's kingdom through the rhetoric of honouring Rome.

²¹ Grudem, "Wives Like Sarah," 256.

²² Grudem, "Wives Like Sarah," 263.

unbelieving husband may be won to Christ.”²³ Grudem attributes evangelism mentioned in 1 Pet 3:1-6 to an assumed, universal male affinity for female submissiveness, suggesting that such behaviour reflects a divinely inscribed recognition of the goodness of female submission in marriage. He assumes, “The attractiveness of a wife’s submissive behaviour even to an unbelieving husband suggests that God has inscribed on the hearts of all mankind the rightness and beauty of role distinctions in marriage.”²⁴ This reading shifts the emphasis away from the contextual and agency-filled nature of a wife’s conduct in 1 Pet 3:1–2, where behaviour functions as a form of non-verbal witness within a restrictive social environment. In contrast to Grudem’s interpretation a contextualized understanding depicts evangelism not as an automatic result of submission, but as its intended purpose. The text does not claim that all men are naturally drawn to submission, but rather that, within a specific honour-shame framework, such conduct could serve as a persuasive and intelligible witness. For an interpretation of 1 Pet 3:1–6 to focus on submission for submission’s sake as Grudem does devalues submission from an agency-filled reflection of Christ’s love to a natural obligation, something women must endure, even in potentially dangerous situations, that may passively result in their husband’s salvation.

An essential element of 1 Pet is that submission to human social structures is not an end in itself for women. For submission to bear witness to Christ, it must be freely chosen for the sake of evangelism, just as Christ willingly submitted to suffering for the sake of redemption. If Christians are stripped of agency in choosing this evangelism, their submission no longer mirrors Christ’s voluntary love and thereby risks becoming a distortion of the gospel. In addition, if submission is made an end in itself, the possibilities for manipulation and abuse broaden. The gospel of agentless adherence to social systems is not the message proclaimed by 1 Pet’s author as he encourages women to stand firm in their faith and subtly evangelize in the face of possible domestic abuse.

CONCLUSION

First Peter 3:1–6 has been utilized as a proof text for complementarian theologies. Yet, when read within the broader narrative of 1 Pet and against the backdrop of Roman household expectations, this passage reveals itself to be a conversation about restoring moral agency to women, evangelism, and submission as a powerful means of reflecting Christ. First Peter addresses Christian women as active agents, capable of choosing Christ-like submission not out of divine mandate, but as a strategic and faithful method of evangelism within their vulnerable social position. This reading does not intend promote a divinely ordained vision of womanhood;

²³ Grudem, “Wives Like Sarah,” 263.

²⁴ Grudem, “Wives Like Sarah,” 265.

it invites all readers to consider how Christian submission, when filled with agency and modelled after Christ, can become a source of dignity within constraining social systems.

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AUTHOR'S BIO:

Kirsten Spolar is an undergraduate student at Gordon College studying Biblical Studies and Theology. She has enriched her theological training through classes at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and a semester abroad studying in the University of Oxford. In her free time, she enjoys choral singing, watching anime with her brothers, and embroidery. Her academic interests include New Testament studies, early Christianity, liberation theologies, and the intersection of psychology and theology—particularly as these fields relate to neurodiversity and mental health. She hopes to pursue further study in theology at the graduate and postgraduate levels to contribute thoughtful scholarship that serves both the academy and the church.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This project began as an exegetical essay submitted during my second year of undergraduate studies, but it has since grown into a private research project that I am continuing to explore. I have long wrestled with the apparent tension between the call to submission found in 1 Peter and the gospel's affirmation of female agency and freedom from restrictive social conventions. I am delighted to publish a portion of the answer that has unfolded for me through sustained engagement with the text of 1 Peter 3:1–6 in its context, and I am deeply grateful for the encouragement I have received from professors, friends, and family throughout that process.

EDITORS' NOTE

This paper weighs into the debate about the perceived problematic attitudes towards women found in the New Testament. Kirsten Spolar argues that the claim made in 1 Peter 1-6, that women should submit to their husbands, is not an urge for submission but rather a subversive statement. This is justified by contextualising the letter with contemporary Roman views on gender. By examining it in this light, it is concluded that the verse is encouraging women to submit in a voluntary and Christ-like manner. This therefore contrasts the views of some, such as Wayne Grudem, who argue that the passage was written to reinforce the natural superiority of men.

The paper's argument is significant, as it provides a new interpretation of 1 Peter 3:1–6—which establishes early Christianity as potentially subversive and empowering for women in Roman society. The examination of the historical context of the letter emphasises that the Bible does not exist in a vacuum and therefore this kind of analysis is crucial for understanding verses which may appear problematic to the modern reader. The author acknowledges that while this verse does not conform to modern standards of gender equality, there is still a plausible explanation for the verses which establish them as more comprehensible and dependent on their context to be understood. This also creates a wider conversation surrounding whether passages should be treated as “outdated” and whether we should instead treat these as opportunities to understand the nature of the world in which they were written. Overall, the paper is a strong contribution to its field, providing a well-argued and insightful piece of analysis.

EDITORS: Molliver Brooks and Wilder Prichard