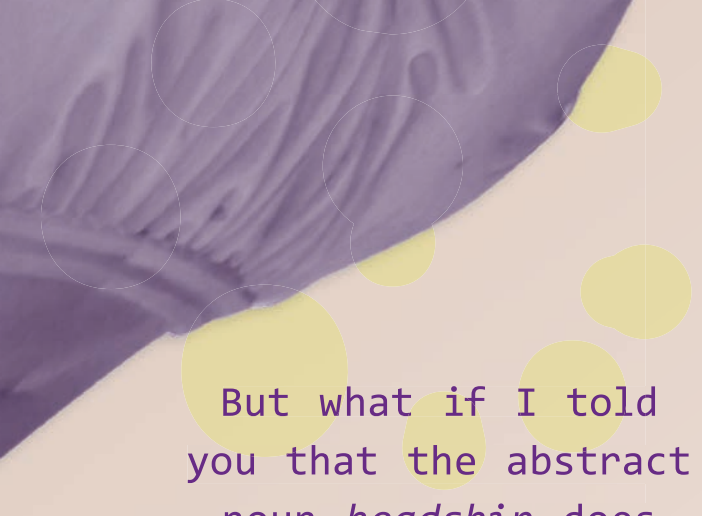


How the New Testament Turned Marriage in the Ancient World on Its “Head”

By Scott Goode



But what if I told you that the abstract noun *headship* does not actually show up in the New Testament?

Do husbands hold an innate leadership role over their wives? Are wives to (willingly and joyfully) submit to their husband's authority? Those who answer *yes* to these questions often describe marriage as an expression of male headship, and they appeal to what appears to be a plain reading of such passages as Ephesians 5:21–33.¹

But what if I told you that the abstract noun *headship* does not actually show up in the New Testament? Yes, Paul uses a head-body image to teach about marriage. But what if he meant not to reinforce a rule of male leadership but to turn ancient assumptions about authority in marriage on their “head”? I invite you to come into an ancient Greco-Roman household and see Paul's teaching with fresh eyes. You'll discover how Paul subverted hierarchical norms and established an ideal of mutuality which was described at Creation as “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).

The Social World of the New Testament

First-century Greco-Roman society was centred around the pursuit of honour. It was

hierarchical, status-driven, and patriarchal. Women were thought to be naturally inferior to men and unfit to govern, and as a result they were functional minors with limited access to society's social, legal, and economic structures.

As the sun rose on an ordinary day in the first century, each person knew their place in the social hierarchy. And they knew whom they were obliged to honour. For a married woman it was her husband, her *paterfamilias*. Wives had personal and social obligations towards their husbands. Meanwhile, married men had *patria potestas* (paternal power) over their households. They were essentially the legal trustees of all their family assets. This was the patriarchal social setting in which Paul wrote.

It was a world where a husband's authority was enshrined in law, in philosophy, and in social norms.² The marital teachings of the New Testament addressed husbands and wives who were bound by such ancient household structures. These couples would not have understood modern ideas of headship such as *humble leadership* or *voluntary submission*. Ancient marital harmony was based around the honour, preferences, and activities of the husband, and female obedience was embedded in family and societal structures.

Now, imagine if Paul was writing not to redeem patriarchy but to overthrow it? What if he never meant for us to take the head-body metaphor from its original social setting to create a principle called *headship* (that is, male authority)? If Paul's intention was instead to turn marriage in the ancient world on its “head,” how would he have gone about this? Well . . . exactly how he did go about it!

Turning Marriage on its “Head” in Ephesians 5:21–33

Head-body metaphors were common in the ancient world. Sometimes, they described relationships of superior-inferior social status. When Paul applies this metaphor to marriage his readers would have, initially

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at least, assumed that he was about to endorse the cultural assumption of male pre-eminence. But there is something remarkable about the head-body image throughout Ephesians 5:21–33. See, it does not, as expected, command one-way submission from a wife to her husband—that is, the wife simply following the head. Rather, Paul turns the metaphor on its “head,” and the husband serves the body.³

Paul calls the one who has the place of honour (the husband) to take the position of humility to serve the welfare of the “lesser” (the wife): “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). In the Roman world such humility was not a virtue but a *humiliation*. To serve someone of lesser status was morally suspect and shameful.⁴ Yet this is exactly the picture that Paul paints: the head serving the body (Eph. 5:28–29). It’s a radical reversal of ancient marital norms consistent with Paul’s earlier emphasis on mutuality: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21).

Now, we might think that there is no direct instruction for a husband to submit to his wife. But this would fail to appreciate Paul’s rhetorical intent. It would have sounded absurd for him to *directly* tell the *paterfamilias* to submit to members of his household. There was no such flexibility in the social structures of the day. So instead, Paul is more subtle. He addresses the one who has the power in the household. Through the example of Christ, he invites the husband to be the *first* servant in a marriage of mutual “one-flesh” service (Eph. 5:31–33).⁵

Rewriting Marriage Contracts in 1 Corinthians 7:3–5

Paul expresses this ideal of marital unity and mutuality more directly in 1 Corinthians 7:3–5. Here, he uses a Greek term typically translated *to have authority* (*exousiazeti*) to teach on marriage. Astonishingly, Paul assumes both husband and wife have the same rights, authority, and obligations towards one another. Moreover, we discover the only concrete example in the New Testament of how husbands and wives ought to make decisions: by “mutual consent” (1 Cor. 7:5).

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There is no hint that husbands are the ones who have more influence, authority, leadership, or decision-making powers.

Consider again how remarkable all this would have sounded to Paul’s first readers.

We actually have an example of a Roman marriage contract from this time. The groom is to “furnish” his new wife with all “necessities . . . according to his means” while the bride (represented in the contract by her legal guardian) must “fulfill her duties towards her husband . . . not sleep away from the house or be absent one day without [his] consent.”⁶ In the Greco-Roman world men freely engaged in sexual relations outside of their marriage as long as it was not with married women. For a wife to engage in such adultery was a divorceable offense.

Yet Paul addresses the husband *first* when referring to a couple’s “marital duty” (1 Cor. 7:3). Then both husband and wife are given equal authority and full agency: “The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife” (1 Cor. 7:4). This is an invitation for each spouse to not selfishly exercise authority over their own body, but to serve their spouse in a mutually self-giving sexual relationship.

Where now is the sexual freedom of the Roman man? What has happened to the social contract which indebted a wife to her husband? Imagine listening to Paul’s description of marital authority, mutual agreement, and the full agency that a wife has alongside her husband! Paul has torn up the assumptions inherent in ancient marriage. He has turned the husband-wife relationship upside down or, perhaps, the right way up.

Spiritual Leadership in the Home in 1 Corinthians 7:14–16

There is one more way Paul turns marriage in the ancient world upside down. He unashamedly assumes that both husband and wife can exercise spiritual leadership in their home.

When Paul addresses Christians married to unbelievers (1 Cor. 7:12–16), he conveys a fascinating principle to encourage them to stay committed to their interfaith marriages. He writes: “For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (1 Cor. 7:14). In other words, the believer married to an unbeliever creates “a sacred environment” for their household whereby they spiritually influence their children and unbelieving partner.⁷

Just as in 1 Corinthians 7:2–6, Paul addresses wives in the same manner as husbands. In fact, somewhat surprisingly, her influence comes first. There is no hint that husbands are the ones who have more influence, authority, leadership, or decision-making powers. This is astounding in the context of the ancient world in which Paul writes. Consider the Greek philosopher Plutarch who, in his *Advice to the Bride and Groom*, presents the ideal of religious practices within a pagan household: “A married woman should therefore worship and recognize the gods whom her husband holds dear, and these alone.”⁸

Paul’s guidance in 1 Corinthians 7:14–16 must have indeed been a revelation for Paul’s first readers! He writes that the wife, as much as the husband, can hold the position of Christian spiritual leadership within her house.

How the New Testament Turns Marriage the Right Way Up

When we seek to understand the “plain meaning” of the Bible we may miss what is clear: Paul is, in fact, intent on turning marriage the right way up. Reading the New Testament in its social setting contrasts Greco-Roman gender norms with the astonishing “one-flesh” marital

ideal. Far from reinforcing hierarchy and patriarchy, Paul rewrites the rule book on how authority, rights, decision-making, and leadership should function in the household—both in ancient times and for us today.

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2. For a summary of Roman marriage see Susan Treggiari, “Marriage and Family in Roman Society,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 132–182.
3. Michelle Lee-Barnewall, “Turning ΚΕΦΑΛΗ on its Head: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Ephesians 5:21–33,” in *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, vol. 1 of *Early Christianity in Its Hellenistic Context*, in vol. 9 of *Texts and Editions for New Testament Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 599–614.
4. John Dickson, *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 85–95.
5. Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), Kindle ed., ch. III.C.1, “The Household Codes (5:21–6:9).”
6. Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), Kindle ed., ch. 2, “Marriage and Matron Ideals,” 107.
7. Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1997), Kindle ed., ch. “Counsel for Corinthians in Various Marital Statuses,” 122.
8. Plutarch, “Advice to the Bride and Groom,” in Plutarch’s *Advice to the Bride and Groom and a Consolation to His Wife: English Translations, Commentary, Interpretive Essays, and Bibliography*, ed. Sarah B. Pomeroy, trans. Donald Russell (New York: Oxford University, 1999), 7.