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*Early Christian Wives as Household Missionaries:
An Analysis of 1 Peter 3:1-6*

Miguel Echevarria
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

ABSTRACT: Following the pattern of a Greco-Roman household code, 1 Pet 3:1–6 provides advice to wives who were susceptible to domestic abuse at the hands of their unbelieving husbands. As the *paterfamilias*, the husband could exercise physical punishment on (who he deemed to be) an insubordinate wife—such as a woman who would not partake in the worship of the emperor or household gods. A Christian woman could therefore suffer abuse for refusing to submit to practices that contradict the Christian faith. In this essay, I engage with some Greco-Roman practices and David Horrell’s concept of a female missionary disposition in mixed marriages. With an eye toward the redemption of their husbands, Peter encourages the wives in his ecclesial communities to take a missionary posture in the home, which will hopefully lead to the salvation of their spouses. Thus, a Christian wife’s presence in the household is intended to serve a redemptive purpose.

Wives in the early church were expected to marry, raise children, and handle the day-to-day affairs of a home.¹ They were expected to

¹The specific context of which I am referring is the first-century apostolic church.

remain faithful to their husbands and be pillars of morality. The household structure in the Roman empire² was one in which the members of a family were subject to the *paterfamilias*, a title reserved for the head of the household, the husband, who had absolute power and authority.³ Wives were given little respect within this structure. An angry husband could be harsh or abuse his wife with few repercussions.⁴ Women could find themselves in abusive relationships from which there were few legal recourses and little hope of escape.

What was the solution for Christian wives who found themselves in such households? Were they permitted to leave or divorce their

²Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper Collins, 1984), 33–37, notes the persecution that Christians in the first century faced under Nero and Domitian. First Peter, likely written before AD 72 (Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 18), perhaps during the persecution of Nero, as evidenced by phrases such as “fiery trial” (4:12), was one of the few voices of hope to Christian women who experienced little sympathy from a hostile empire.

³Jane Gardner, *Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 1–2, provides insight into the life of the *Paterfamilias* and his *familia*: “A *familia* was still a *familia* even if it consisted of only one person. Ideally, however, the notion of *familia*, in the strict legal sense, which provided the structural framework for Roman Law consisted of: an adult male Roman [sic], the *paterfamilias*, lawfully married, with children born to him and his wife (or successive wives), together with the children, if any, of sons (and their sons, and so on in the male line only, through as many generations as might simultaneously live). The *paterfamilias* was sole owner of all the property of the *familia* . . . Within the *familia*, he was virtually autonomous; he had *patria potestas*, legal power, over the persons of his children and descendants—and, in early Rome mainly, usually of his wife as well. This was an authority which extended, theoretically at least, to a power of life and death over those under his legal control.” See also Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Clarendon: Oxford, 1991; repr., 2002), 13–36.

⁴A husband could, if he so desired, decide to free his wife from their marriage, in much the same way as children could be released from the *potestas* of their father (Bruce W. Frier and Thomas A. J. McGinn, *A Casebook on Roman Family Law* [Oxford: Oxford University, 2004], 94). Upon the initiative of the husband, this was one way in which a woman could have been delivered from an abusive marriage.

husbands? Without regard for circumstances, the NT exhorts wives to submit to their husbands (1 Cor 14:34; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5).⁵ The underlying assumption is that the context of their obedience is a home in which both the husband and wife are followers of Christ. Ephesians 5:22–33 contains one such admonition. Here, Paul calls women to “submit to their own husbands as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22). In turn, husbands are to “love their own wives as Christ loved the church” (Eph 5:25). This ideal scenario, however, was not a reality for many women in the early church.

Some early Christian women were married to unbelieving spouses, that is, they were in “mixed marriages.”⁶ Their less than idyllic relationships would have likely lead them to ponder whether they should submit to their unbelieving husbands or disobey them; whether they should remain with their husbands or abandon them. After all, why would a Christian woman subject herself to a man who does not acknowledge Christ as king? Why would she obey a man who has no regard for Paul’s admonition to husbands in Ephesians 5, making verbal and physical abuse, or the threat of such behavior, a real possibility? Add to this the potential that their husbands likely practiced a false religion, such as worship of the emperor and worship of household gods, of which all the members of a home were

⁵The idea of submission in the NT is normally associated with the word *ὑποτάσσω*. Often in Peter and Paul’s writings the term is used with the dative case, underscoring “submission involving recognition of an ordered structure . . . to whom/which appropriate respect is shown” (BDAG, 1042). See Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet 2:18, 3:1. Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 122, traces *ὑποτάσσω* to the Hellenistic period “where it meant to place or arrange under or be subordinated” in writings such as Polybius 3.36.7; Plutarch *Pompeius* 64; and *Nicias* 23.4.

⁶I take this term from David Horrell, “Fear, Hope, and Doing Good: Wives as a Paradigm of Mission in 1 Peter,” *Estudios Biblicos* 73/3 (2015): 409–429

expected to partake.

Peter's First Epistle to scattered churches in Asia Minor (Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia; 1 Pet 1:1) provides hope for early Christian women who lived under the threat of such abuse. In 1 Peter 3:1–6, he encourages these women to take a missionary posture in the home.⁷ Peter's instructions are in striking agreement with Paul's in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16, in which Paul encourages women to be a sanctifying influence in the household, for the sake of both their husbands and children.

This article will focus on Peter's advice to wives in 1 Peter 3:1–6. Here, I will show that Peter is aware that wives in his ecclesial communities are susceptible to abuse that would not be tolerated in "unmixed" Christian households, that is to say, homes in which both the husband and wife are followers of Christ. His advice is sensitive to this reality. Even still, Peter does not part ways entirely with cultural expectations, for his instructions follow the general pattern of a Greco-Roman household code. In view of this, I will examine the nature of Peter's household code before discussing his advice to wives.

The Petrine Household Code

The Petrine household code begins in 2:18 and ends in 3:7. In Hellenistic literature, a household code is a listing of obligations of various members of a household toward one another.⁸ Such codes are common in antiquity and address the reciprocal relationships

⁷Horrell argues that in 1 Peter 3:1–6 wives are to take a "missionary stance" in the household (Horrell, "Fear, Hope, and Doing Good").

⁸J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 121.

between master and slave, husband and wife, and fathers/parents and children. Aristotle presents one of the clearest presentations of these reciprocal relationships: “The primary and the smallest parts of the household are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children. . . . We ought therefore to examine proper constitution and character in each of these relationships.”⁹ The NT discusses these pairings in passages such as Colossians 3:18–4:1 and Ephesians 5:21–6:9. The household code in 1 Peter follows the reciprocal pattern of relationships in Hellenistic literature and the NT. Peter, though, focuses his advice on the master and slave (2:18–25) and the husband and wife pairings (3:1–7).

Although his exhortation to wives follows those to the slave, Peter does not assume that the relationship between the husband and wife is like that of the master and slave.¹⁰ The only similarity is their motivation for submission—for the Lord’s sake (2:13).¹¹ Therefore, the weaker partners in the relationships, slaves and wives, are expected to submit to the stronger partners, masters and husbands, out of reverence for Christ. Consequently, the former may be vulnerable to

⁹Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.2.1, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 21 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 13.

¹⁰The adverb ὁμοίως, “also” or “too,” does not imply that Peter sees the relationship in this manner. See BDAG, 707–708. Michaels, *1 Peter*, 156–57; Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2003), 148.

¹¹Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 135. Importantly, Peter does not condone the evil practice of slavery. He tries to make the best of a social reality present in the first-century, exhorting slaves to submit to their master (both kind and crooked, 2:18–25). If they should suffer, then they are walking in the footsteps of Christ, who suffered in their place. While Paul also calls for submission to masters (e.g., Eph 6:5–9), he also says that, if possible, slaves should seek to gain their freedom (1 Cor 7:22).

the latter's abuse and mistreatment.¹²

Wives in the Petrine community found themselves under the threat of such harm. The problem had to have been significant enough to warrant an entire section of Peter's letter. Unlike traditional Roman women, Christian wives were not to despair. Peter is keen to encourage them to maintain a Christian witness in the face of possible mistreatment, knowing that their consistent Christian conduct will hopefully lead to their husbands being "won over" to the faith.

Having discussed the nature of Peter's household code, I will now examine his exhortation to wives. Oddly enough, Peter does not begin his advice by sympathizing with the wives' difficult circumstances. To the critic, Peter may not even care for the wellbeing of women, preferring instead to maintain the household hierarchy. These speculations are from true, for his words sound the note of hope in the face of suffering.

Exhortation to Wives (3:1-2)

Peter begins his exhortation by calling wives to "submit to their own husbands" (ὑποτασσόμεναι τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν, 3:1).¹³ Peter's call to

¹²Horrell, "Fear, Hope, and Doing Good": 3-4.

¹³In 3:1, *ὑποτασσόμεναι* derives its imperatival sense from the imperative *ὑποτάγητε* in 2:13. The relationship between the two words is one of attendant circumstance. James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 128-29, argues that *ὑποτασσόμεναι* carries an independent imperatival sense. Similarly, Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 650-51. Neither argument changes the meaning of the text, since both views contend that *ὑποτασσόμεναι* carries an imperatival force: "submit" to your husbands.

Here, it is also important to note that the call to submit does not demand that women obey all husbands in general. Rather, it is an exhortation for wives to subject themselves to "their own" (τοῖς ἰδίοις) husbands. So Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 209.

submission does not suggest that wives are inferior to their husbands.¹⁴ That a woman is inferior to a man would have been foreign to Peter's worldview, which was grounded in the creation account, affirming that both men and women are equally created in God's image (Gen 1:27). Thus, it is nonsense to think that the command to submit suggests the inferiority of women. If submission suggests inferiority, then Jesus' obedience to his earthly parents means that he was ontologically "lesser" than Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:51). Such logic is hogwash. The reason for Jesus's submission was his obedience to God's will (Exod 20). We can make a similar point in 1 Peter 3:1. Peter's call for a wife to submit to her husband does not mean that she is "lesser." Instead, she, like Jesus, submits voluntarily, in keeping with God's divine order.¹⁵

Peter's exhortation applies to all wives, whether their husbands are Christians or not (εἰ τινες ἀπειθοῦσιν τῷ λόγῳ, 3:1).¹⁶ There is no room for disobeying, or even abandoning, unbelieving husbands. Peter desires for Christian wives to see that they have a great purpose (ἵνα) in their submission: that their husbands might be "won over without a

¹⁴Plato, for example, says that women are inferior to men (*Laws* 781b). Aristotle argues that since men are superior to women, women should be ruled by men (*Politics* 1254b).

¹⁵James R. Slaughter, "Submission of Wives (1 Pet. 3:1a) in the Context of 1 Peter," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January–March 1996): 70. See Ps 36:7 and 2 Macc. 13:23 for similar uses of "submission."

¹⁶Being disobedient "to the word" (τῷ λόγῳ) occurs in both 2:7 and 3:1. Both note being disobedient to the gospel because of unbelief. Simon J. Kistemaker, *1 y 2 Pedro, Judas*, Comentario al Nuevo Testamento (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 142; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 210; Ernest Best, *1 Peter*, New Century Bible Commentary, ed. Matthew Black (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 124; Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, Thornapple Commentaries (London: Macmillan, 1946; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 183.

word” (ἀνευ λόγου κερδηθήσονται, 3:1). The verb κερδαίνω occurs most frequently in 1 Corinthians 9:19–21, where Paul uses it in the context of “winning someone to Christ.”¹⁷ Peter uses it similarly, in that he calls wives to live out their obedience to Christ before their husbands’ eyes, in hopes that their husbands might be “won over” to the savior. While Christian wives may be tempted to disrespect their unregenerate husbands—especially if they are unappreciative and inconsiderate—such behavior only reveals that they are actually disobeying Christ, and potentially nullifying their gospel witness. In Peter’s eyes, submission has redeeming qualities not found in obstinacy and disobedience.

Peter also says that husbands may be converted “without verbal nagging” (ἀνευ λόγου, 3:1).¹⁸ The wives of the Petrine communities likely struggled with nagging or coercing their spouses about the truth of the gospel.¹⁹ They may have even done so with very good intentions, not realizing that they were bludgeoning their spouses with the words of life. Though likely well-intentioned, a wife’s verbal pressure would have had the adverse effect of driving her husband away from the savior. Peter suggests that wives resist this urge and take a more

¹⁷J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 128; James R. Slaughter, “Winning Unbelieving Husbands to Christ (1 Pet. 3:1b-4),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (April–June 1996): 204.

¹⁸While λόγος often carries the sense of “word,” the context of 1 Pet 3:1-6 suggests that it denotes “oral persuasion, verbal nagging, or coercion.” Jeannine K. Brown, “Silent Wives, Verbal Believers: Ethical and Hermeneutical Considerations in 1 Peter 3:1–6 and Its Context,” *Word and World* 24.4 (Fall 2004): 400; Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Double Day, 1982), 101. Contra Selwyn, *First Epistle of St. Peter*, 183, who argues that λόγος is a reference to the gospel.

¹⁹Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 150.

redemptive approach: live a godly lifestyle before unregenerate husbands (ἐποπτεύσαντες τὴν . . . ἀναστροφὴν ὑμῶν, 3:2).²⁰ This has more redeeming qualities than verbal nagging.

Rather perplexingly, the wife is to live her household life “in fear” (ἐν φόβῳ, 3:2). Does Peter suggest that wives are to fear their husbands? This would seem to contradict passages such as Psalm 118:6: “The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?” A better proposal is that wives are to live in fear of God (cf. Eccl 12:13). Peter directs “fear” (φόβος) to God on three other occasions (1 Pet 1:17; 2:17; 2:18), his point being that wives are to live their holy lives before their husbands with a sense of reverence toward God.²¹ Hence, the wife does not submit to her husband out of a desire to please him, satisfy his wishes, meet cultural expectations, or even to dissuade his anger. Her motivation for submission is in keeping with her reverence for God. While husbands should be nice and considerate, Peter does not make these conditions for submission.²² His argument is clear: Christian wives are to live submissive holy lives before their husbands, doing so out of reverence for God.

At this point, it is important to ask: Does Peter call the wives of his communities to submit to their husbands in all things? Or does he suggest that there are limits to their submission? Perhaps a concrete example is in order. What if an unbelieving husband requests that

²⁰Peter commonly uses ἀναστροφή with the sense of “godly lifestyle” or “conduct” (1:15; 3:16).

²¹Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 150; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 158; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 210; Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 117. Reicke, *The Epistles of Peter*, 101, wrongly contends that wives should fear their husbands.

²²Michaels, *1 Peter*, 117.

his wife participate in the worship of the household gods, such as Zeus or Hestia? Does Peter's call to submission include complying with such demands? Before answering the question, it is important to understand that in the first-century Mediterranean world the wife was expected to adopt the religion of her husband.²³ Plutarch argues: "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 her husband believes in."²⁴ I contend that Peter's call to submission does not include the worship of false gods, for this practice is forbidden in Scripture (Exod 20; Deut 6). Nor does he call wives to yield to any sinful practice.²⁵ In principal, he expects that wives will submit to their husbands so long as their obedience does not contradict the teachings of the Christian faith.²⁶ In

²³Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 160 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 147; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 210; Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 152–153; Kistemaker, *1 y 2 Pedro*, 142; David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 185.

²⁴Plutarch, *Mor.* 19, trans. Frank Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library 222 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 311. Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Greco-Roman Religions*, trans. Brian McNeil (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 55–68, provides an excellent discussion of the expected religious customs of the first century Greco-Roman household. Among these practices was the worship of the household gods, common among them being Zeus, "father of the gods and men, and Hestia, goddess of domesticity and family concord" (*ibid.*, 59). Each home would normally set up alters to the household gods. Domestic rituals for the gods would consist of leaving a small portion of one's meal, making drink offerings, and even performing ritual sacrifices. Occasionally, persons from outside of the home were invited to partake in worship. As a member of the household, the wife was expected to participate in all religious activities.

²⁵Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 153; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 158.

²⁶See also Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 211; Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 153.

this regard, Peter's instructions are countercultural, for he expects that a wife will disobey the *paterfamilias* when his request is contrary to Christ, her final authority. Such resistance would have certainly drawn the ire of husbands, who would have felt dishonored by their wife's actions.

In spite of possible repercussions, the Christian wife's life style is to be "pure" (ἀγνή). While some regard this purity is only sexual (e.g., 2 Cor 11:2), it actually encompasses the entirety of her Christian character toward her husband.²⁷ The broad range of qualities is "spelt out further in vv. 3-4 and exemplified in vv. 5-6: subordination, modesty, meekness and silence."²⁸ I will now examine each of these qualities in turn.

Qualities of a Pure Lifestyle (3:3-4)

Peter elaborates on the "pure and holy" way of life in a negative-positive pattern: that is, "not this, but that."²⁹ The focus of the negative depiction is the "external adornment" (ὁ ἔξωθεν . . . κόσμος, 3:3).³⁰ Three types of external adornment that were common to first century women were the "braiding of hair" (ἐμπλοκῆς τριχῶν), the "wearing of gold" (περιθέσεως χρυσίων), and the "wearing of clothes"

²⁷Davids, *1 Peter*, 116; F. Hauck, "ἀγνή," *TDNT*, 1:112. See also Phil 4:8; 1 Tim 5:2; Jas 3:17.

²⁸Horrell, "Fear, Hope, and Doing Good": 5.

²⁹Horrell, "Fear, Hope, and Doing Good": 6.

³⁰The article ὁ modifies the distant noun κόσμος. The separation of the article and the substantive is common in 1 Peter (1 Pet 1:17, 2:15, 3:2, 3:4). See A. T. Robertson, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament in Light of Historical Research* (Reprint, Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1947), 779. The noun κόσμος commonly carries the sense of "world" (BDAG, 561). Peter, though, uses it in reference to "women's attire/adornment."

(ἐνδύσεως ἱματίων, 3:3).³¹ This thought follows closely with Paul's in 1 Tim 2:9: "Likewise, the women are to dress in suitable apparel, with modesty and self-control. Their adornment must not be with braided hair and gold or pearls or expensive clothing."³² On the surface, it appears that Peter, like Paul, is saying that women must not braid their hair or wear gold. This argument is misguided, because the same reasoning might be used to say that they should not put on clothes.³³ Peter, instead, desires for women to remain modest in their dress, for external adornment is not the main source of beauty and attractiveness.

The call to female modesty was a common admonition in the Greco-Roman world. Xenophon explains to women: "It is not through outward comeliness that the sum of things good and beautiful is increased . . . but by the daily practice of the virtues."³⁴ He also notes that the use of cosmetics was an attempt to deceive.³⁵ Plutarch says: "For, as Crates used to say, adornment is that which adorns, and that adorns or decorates a woman which makes her more decorous. It is not gold or precious stones or scarlet that makes her such, but whatever invests her with that something that betokens dignity, good behavior

³¹The genitives ἐμπλοκῆς τριχῶν, περιθέσεως χρυσίων, and ἐνδύσεως ἱματίων are expegetical, naming specific examples that fall within the category of external κόσμος. Robertson, *Greek Grammar*, 498-99, also identifies the genitives as expegetical.

³²NET translation.

³³Grudem, *1 Peter*, 140; D. Edmond Hiebert, *First Peter* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 187.

³⁴Xenophon, *Oec.* 7.43, trans. E. C. Marchant, Loeb Classical Library 168 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 429.

³⁵Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 204-5, cites Xenophon, *Oec.* 10.2.

and modesty.”³⁶ Peter’s exhortation to female modesty is therefore in accord with Greco-Roman values. Early Christian women were not to be known for the flash or seduction of their dress, but in virtues not readily seen.

In contrast to externals (ἀλλ’),³⁷ Peter calls women to adorn “the inward person of the heart” (ὁ κρυπτὸς τῆς καρδίας ἄνθρωπος, 3:4), that is to say, the “inner self.”³⁸ Though not apparent at first glance, the inward qualities of a woman are revealed through “words and actions that reflect inward attitudes.”³⁹ The contrast between internal and external attributes is common in Scripture. Peter’s first century counterpart, Paul, shows clear awareness of the inner (Rom 7:22; Eph 3:16) and outer selves (2 Cor 4:16). During the period of the Israelite monarchy, the author of 1 Samuel 16:7 contrasts these aspects: “God does not view things the way men do. People look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”⁴⁰ Peter’s perspective on beauty is therefore not uncommon among biblical authors. For that matter, it is also not out of step with

³⁶Plutarch, *Mor.* 26, Loeb Classical Library 222 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1936), 317–18.

³⁷In 3:3–4, the οὐχ . . . ἀλλ’ construction forms a disjunctive proposition which presents external adornment in a negative light and the inward person of the heart in a positive light. The point is that the woman should not be focused on externals but internals. Maximillian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, trans. Joseph Smith, 4th ed. (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963; Reprint, 2005), 150, has good discussion on disjunctive propositions.

³⁸BDAG., 570; John H. Elliot, *1 Peter*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 565; Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 154; Best, *1 Peter*, 125. The genitive καρδίας refers to the “center and source of human life” (BDAG, 508), functioning exegetically, clarifying that the inward person is the “center and source” of a woman’s existence.

³⁹Grudem, *1 Peter*, 140.

⁴⁰NET translation.

Greco-Roman values expressed in authors such as Xenophon and Plutarch.

Furthermore, the internal is expressed “in imperishable qualities” (ἐν τῷ ἀφθάρτῳ, 3:4). Peter commonly contrasts the perishable and the imperishable (1:4, 18, 23). This is also the case with Greco-Roman authors such as Herodotus and Thucydides.⁴¹ More to the point, since outward adornments are perishable, wives are to express themselves in the imperishable characteristics “of a gentle and quiet disposition” (τοῦ πραέως καὶ ἡσυχίου πνεύματος, 3:4).⁴² As opposed to being loud and boisterous, meekness and quietness are the imperishable qualities that are to be exemplified in a wife’s disposition (cf. 1 Tim 2:11). These are the less than flashy attributes after which wives are to strive. Peter’s exhortation to meekness and quietness of spirit would have resonated with the first century Greco-Roman world, which expected wives to exhibit these characteristics of modesty.⁴³ Such modesty would have been pleasing to the husband. The attributes of a meekness and quietness are therefore more likely to attract unbelieving husbands to the faith, as opposed to a nagging verbal witness, which may have the unproductive effect of producing irritation rather than conversion.⁴⁴

⁴¹So Freidrich Blass and Alfred Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), 138.

⁴²Ernest Best, *1 Peter*, 126, argues that πνεύμα refers to the Holy Spirit. While often the case, here it is best to see that it refers to the wife’s disposition. See BDAG, 833; Selwyn, *1 Peter*, 184; Hiebert, *1 Peter*, 188.

⁴³David Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 26 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981), 102–103.

⁴⁴Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 154.

Most importantly, a gentle and quiet disposition is “precious before God” (ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ πολυτελές, 3:4).⁴⁵ Peter underscores that a gentle and quiet spirit is what God values, not clothing or ornamentation.⁴⁶ The wives in Peter’s communities to acquire the things that are highly valued in the eyes of God.⁴⁷

Example of the Holy Wives, 3:5–6

Peter now grounds (γάρ) his focus on internal adornment on the example of the “holy wives” (αἱ ἅγιοι γυναῖκες) of the past (3:5). The reference to αἱ ἅγιοι γυναῖκες is unique in the NT and is an allusion to the holy women of the Old Covenant.⁴⁸ Most likely, Peter refers to “the four matriarchs of the Jewish tradition: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah (the wives of Abraham and Isaac, and the two wives of Jacob).”⁴⁹ Their holiness was not a result of their membership in the nation of Israel, but because of their pleasing character in the eyes of God.⁵⁰

These women lived in sometimes terrifying circumstances. Abraham, for example, placed Sarah in danger in Egypt, in an effort to “save his own skin” (Gen 12). Sarah’s hope for deliverance was not in

⁴⁵The noun πολυτελές carries the sense of something that is “of great value or worth” (BDAG, 850).

⁴⁶Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 155; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 214; Davids, *1 Peter*, 119; Hiebert, *1 Peter*, 188–89.

⁴⁷Horrell, “Fear, Hope, and Doing Good”: 8, cites the examples of Sophocles, *Ajax* 293; Sir 26:14; and 1 Clem 21:7.

⁴⁸James R. Slaughter, “Sarah as a Model for Christian Wives (1 Pet. 3:5–6),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (July–September 1996): 357; Grudem, *1 Peter*, 141.

⁴⁹Best, *1 Peter*, 126.

⁵⁰Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 155; Grudem, *1 Peter*, 141.

her husband. She, like other holy women, “hoped in God” (ἐλπίζουσαι εἰς θεόν, 3:5). Some scholars wrongly argue that their expectation was more focused on one of their sons being the Messiah.⁵¹ More in line with the immediate context, their hope was based on their belief that God would ultimately deliver them from their difficult situations.⁵² This is consistent with the theme of “hope in 1 Peter as eschatological, which brings consolation in persecution (1:3–9).”⁵³ This is the kind of hope that freed the holy women of the OT to continue living under sometimes difficult circumstances. Peter draws on the example of courage displayed in ancient Hebrew women to encourage wives to endure hard, if not dangerous, conditions, knowing God will one day come to their rescue, even if it will be in the eschaton.

As well, Peter notes that the holy women adorned themselves “by being subject to their own husbands” (ὑποτασσόμεναι τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν, 3:5).⁵⁴ The focus continues on internals, suggesting that the holy women’s adornment was not based on flashy external jewelry or clothing but on submitting to their husbands, which was exemplified in the qualities of meekness and quietness.⁵⁵ A prime example is Sarah, who subjected herself to Abraham (ὑπήκουσεν τῷ Ἀβραάμ, 3:6).⁵⁶ Although Peter does not use the verb ὑποτάσσω, ὑπακούω also carries a

⁵¹Selwyn, *First Epistle of Peter*, 185.

⁵²Kistemaker, *1 y 2 Pedro*, 146–47.

⁵³Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 155.

⁵⁴The participle ὑποτασσόμεναι functions as an adverbial participle of means.

⁵⁵Slaughter, “Sarah as a Model,” 359.

⁵⁶Grudem, *1 Peter*, 141; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 215; Jacques Schlosser, “1 Pierre 3, 5b–6,” *Biblica* 64 (1983): 409.

sense of “submissiveness” (cf. Eph 6:1; Col 3:20; Eph 6:5; Col 3:22).⁵⁷ Peter’s use of the former is most likely a stylistic variation. So Sarah’s submission to her husband is still in view.⁵⁸

Sarah displayed her obedience to Abraham “by calling him Lord” (κύριον αὐτὸν καλοῦσα, 3:6). There is an allusion here to Genesis 18:12, in which Sarah laughs “to herself, saying, ‘After I am worn out, and my lord (κυριός LXX) is old, shall I have pleasure?’”⁵⁹ Peter uses this text not to depict Sarah’s sense of amusement or doubt, but to focus on her use of the word κυριός in reference to Abraham,⁶⁰ which carries the sense of “one who is in a position of authority.”⁶¹ What is significant about Sarah’s use of this word in Genesis 18:12 is that she still attributes a rightful title of respect and dignity to her husband,⁶²

⁵⁷BDAG, 1028.

⁵⁸Slaughter, “Sarah as a Model,” 359–60; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 164; Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter*, 159.

⁵⁹ESV translation.

⁶⁰Michaels, *1 Peter*, 164. D. A. Carson, “1 Peter,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 136, notes some have suggested that either Gen 12 or Gen 20 are in view, since these passages depict Sarah’s submission to Abraham regardless of the precarious positions in which she is placed. This therefore puts the female readers of 1 Peter in a difficult position: “They should submit to the unjust demands of their husbands.” Is submission to morally questionable demands in view in 1 Pet 3:6? This is unlikely. What can be ascertained is that Peter is alluding to Sarah’s use of the title κυριός in Gen 18:12 (LXX). Jobes, *1 Peter*, 205, argues, “Peter is most likely simply drawing on Jewish interpretation and would not have intended a choice of any one passage from Genesis or any other text. . . . In Jewish tradition Sarah is a virtuous woman, and virtuous women are understood to be obedient to their husbands.” Jobes makes a good point. However, we do not have to throw out the baby with the bath water. Peter may have had Jewish tradition in his purview, while drawing specifically on Gen 18:12.

⁶¹Foerster, “κυριός,” *TDNT* 7:1081–82.

⁶²Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 156; Slaughter, “Sarah as a Model,” 361; Davids, *1 Peter*, 121.

instead of mocking him for being an old man.⁶³ Peter transfers the sense of *κυριός* from the Genesis narrative into the context of 1 Peter 3:6, recognizing that Sarah’s act of obedience to Abraham rightfully ascribes to him a title of respect and honor, in spite of the difficult circumstances that surrounded her.

Some argue that Peter misapplies the text of Genesis 18:12, because the verse is not set in the context of “differential wifely behavior.”⁶⁴ There is no need to argue that Peter misapplies this verse. He simply takes the example of Sarah’s respectful attitude toward Abraham in Genesis 18:12, and uses it as a model of obedience in 1 Peter 3:6. The contexts of both passages do not have to be identical for Peter to employ an OT example—for it is the principle of obedience that is pertinent to the women he addresses in 1 Peter 3:1–6.

The Petrine wives “have become Sarah’s children” (*ἡς ἐγενήθητε τέκνα*, 3:6). The aorist verb *ἐγενήθητε* is ingressive, suggesting that the women of 1 Peter have already become Sarah’s offspring, entering this state upon their conversion.⁶⁵ The OT depicts Abraham and Sarah as the parents of the righteousness (Isa 51:1–2). In the NT, Paul notes that all Christians are the children of Abraham (Rom 4:1–12; Gal 3:6–29) and Sarah (Gal 4:22–31). Both testaments, then, identify believers as the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah. So, it seems that Peter’s purpose for identifying the wives as Sarah’s children is twofold: (1) to remind them they have become believers; and (2) to foster in them the

⁶³ Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 156.

⁶⁴ Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter*, 159.

⁶⁵ So Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 157; Elliot, *1 Peter*, 573. Michaels, *1 Peter*, 166. Hiebert, *1 Peter*, 190, and Davids, *1 Peter*, 121, argue that both conversion and baptism are implied. Conversion is evidently in view, but baptism is less likely (Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 157).

attitude of submissiveness associated with Sarah.⁶⁶

Remaining Sarah's daughters depends on the wives "doing good" (ἀγαθοποιῶσαι) and "not fearing anything fearful" (μὴ φοβούμεναι μηδεμίαν πτόησιν, 3:6).⁶⁷ Peter is following the NT ideal that "perseverance is necessary to obtain eternal life."⁶⁸ This perseverance is exemplified in carrying out the proper behavior required of all Christians (ἀγαθοποιῶσαι), a common theme throughout 1 Peter (2:14, 15, 20; 3:10–12, 17), and not fearing the harsh treatment of one's husband (μὴ φοβούμεναι μηδεμίαν πτόησιν). The wives of unbelieving husbands in Peter's communities would have been prone to abusive treatment, such as physical and emotional intimidation, because of their Christian faith and their lack of conformance to the household religion. Peter, however, encourages them to fear God, not other humans (1:17; 2:17–18; 3:2). This admonition would have been especially difficult for

⁶⁶Michaels, *1 Peter*, 166. See discussion in F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982; Reprint, 2002), 214–27.

⁶⁷The participles ἀγαθοποιῶσαι and φοβούμεναι underscore that salvation is dependent on whether wives persist in "doing good" and "not fearing any fear." Some interpreters have difficulty seeing these participles as conditional, contending that nowhere else in 1 Peter is conversion dependent on anything but the work of God (Michaels, *1 Peter*, 166; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 216). Consequently, some have proposed up to three syntactical alternatives for the participles: (1) means, "by means of doing good and not fearing" (Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* [Reprint, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978], 15–54); (2) temporal, "when you do good and do not fear" (Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 216.); and (3) imperatival, "Do good and do not fear" (Michaels, *1 Peter*, 166; Best, *1 Peter*, 191). In view of the options, the participles are best construed as conditional. A conditional sense does not sit awkwardly with the idea of past conversion, for there are "many statements in the New Testament where a past conversion is noted and then a conditional statement follows (e.g., Rom 11:21–22; Col 1:21–23; Heb 3:14)" (Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 158.).

⁶⁸Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 158.

women who would have been inclined to worship the gods of their husbands out of fear of retribution. While Peter is certainly aware of this situation, he still affirms that Christian women have become children of Sarah (i.e., believers). To remain in this state, they must continue in proper Christian behavior and not fear the reprisal of their spouses. In other words, they must persevere in the Christian faith, in spite of potential persecution and hostility.⁶⁹

Peter likely understands that early Christian women suffer under the threat of abuse in their households. As I have already noted, this is perhaps Peter's motivation for dedicating a substantial portion of his letter to wives. His advice, then, is meant to encourage the wives in his early ecclesial communities to continue living out their Christian lives in the face of possible suffering, hoping that their witness might lead to the salvation of their husbands.

Conclusion

Peter's instructions provide wives in the dispersed early Christian communities of Asia Minor with a redemptive perspective on their "mixed marriages." Beyond these communities, his instructions may supply insight into what could have been the reality for Christian wives throughout the Roman Empire. That is, they lived under the real possibility that they could be subjected to abuse at the hands of their unbelieving husbands.

⁶⁹Importantly, Peter is not arguing that wives should remain in an abusive household. He is simply providing redemptive instructions to wives who found themselves in potentially abusive marriages from which there was little hope of escape. By implication, I do not condone that women should remain with abusive spouses. A victim of abuse should seek help from the church and/or authorities. Thus, a wife should only seek to be redemptive influence in the household so long as she is not the victim of abuse.

In the face of such danger, Peter does not call wives to abandon their non-Christian spouses. Instead, he calls them to the role of a missionary in the household. In their submission and the way they exemplify their Christian character, their husbands may be won over to Christ. Yet, they are to be tempered in their desire to convert their husbands, seeing to it that they do not verbally badger their husbands with the gospel. While a wife may mean well, nagging her husband with the truth may have the opposite effect: turning him away from the saviour. The way she lives out her Christian life is a more effective missional witness.

As well, the Petrine wives are to remember that submission to their husbands is not a blanket call to obey in all things, such as partaking in a false religion. The exhortation is particular: obey in so far as your husband is not leading you to sin. In refusing to conform to sinful practices, a wife shows her loyalty to Christ, silently beckoning her husband to repent and follow the savior. An unrepentant husband, though, may not take such noble disobedience lightly, striking fear into the heart of his wife. In the face of possible verbal and physical attacks, Peter encourages wives to stand fast in Christ, not succumbing to sinful demands. Refusing to follow their husbands' sinful practices proves that they are the beautifully adorned daughters of Sarah, awaiting the arrival of Jesus Christ.

Within Peter's cognitive worldview was likely the cosmic reversal of roles that will occur in the eschaton.⁷⁰ At this time, Christ will dress wives in "fine linen" and seat them at his banquet table, caring for

⁷⁰Perhaps we can call this Peter's "cognitive peripheral vision," that is to say, Peter is aware of more than he directly communicates in his letter. See G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden but Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 340–64, where they discuss the cognitive peripheral vision of biblical authors.

them as the greatest of all husbands (19:6– 9). Abusive husbands will not be so fortunate. Christ will judge them according to their deeds, striking fear into *their* hearts (Rev 20). To put it bluntly, at his coming Christ will make things right: oppressive husbands will be crushed, while oppressed wives will be delivered from their sufferings.

In view of what is to come, Peter would rather see unbelieving husbands converted, not condemned. For Peter, the missional witness of wives in the household will hopefully prompt their husbands to follow Jesus, so that husbands might await, and not dread, his return. But in the event that they are abused or mistreated, the wives in Peter's early Christian communities have the hope that Christ will deliver them from their circumstance and crush their oppressors.