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A Look at the Ancient House Codes and Their Contributions to Understanding 1 Peter 3:1-7

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Understanding the cultural and literary context of the biblical writers sheds a great deal of light on the meaning of biblical texts. This is no less true in the case of 1 Peter 3:1-7. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how a proper understanding of the ancient house codes will lead to a more accurate interpretation of 1 Peter 3:1-7. This essay is structured as follows: definition of the house code, ancient writings on the house code, analysis of Peter's house code, and concluding implications of the study's findings. This paper is not meant to be primarily an exegetical presentation of the passage, but rather a balanced investigation of both the ancient house codes and Peter's house code.

Definition of the House Code

The literary term employed by rhetorical scholars to refer to writings on the management of households is the German word *haustafel*. Literally, it means "house table." Martin Luther introduced the term using it as a list of rules for family life. The *haustafel*, or house code, lists and explains what one's

conduct should be as a member of any household. This household could be the state, work, church, or family. Peter addresses this general issue of house codes in 2:18-3:7. In particular, this paper will examine the husband/wife aspect of household management.

Peter's style of presenting the house code is not exactly the same format as standard house code discourses of Greco-Roman literature. Typically, as seen in Paul's *haustafel* in Ephesians 5:21-6:9 and Colossians 3:13-4:1, the writer would concentrate on two or three pairs of people: husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves. Peter does not list and deal individually with the three pairs as Paul does. He entirely omits the parent/children aspect. Further, his comment on the role of wives comprises six verses of the seven total that are dedicated to the topic.

In his commentary on 1 Peter, Michaels points out a number of additional elements that set apart Peter's house code from Paul's. Peter's "admonition about what is pleasing to God (vv. 3-4)" is one uniqueness. A second is the "specific precedent for the kind of attitude or behavior" which is found in verses 5 and 6. A third peculiarity is his personal choice of words and phrases. Expressions such as "reverence" (φόβω, v. 2), "imperishable" (ἀφάρτω, v. 4) and "hoping in God" (ἐλπίζουσαι εἰς θεόν, v. 5) are characteristically Petrine. One final difference between Peter's and Paul's codes is the wording of verse seven. Peter does not directly state, "Husbands, love your wives." He omits that imperative in order to discuss the husbands' necessary attitudes in living with their wives and treating them as God would want them to be treated.¹

¹J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 49 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 155.

Ancient House Codes

Ancient house codes had already been a rhetorical device used by ancient writers. It is therefore important to introduce several authors and their writings on the house code. Each subsection is arranged in chronological order, so that the reader will observe developments in time as well as similarities in opinions between the three schools of thought. There are extensive quotations from the primary sources, because it is this writer's opinion that the reader should see for himself the extra-biblical literature on the *haustafel*.

Greek Writings on the House Code

Plato, the famous student of Socrates, was a prolific writer. In his *Republic*, perhaps his *magnum opus*, he covered a variety of topics relating to life in the state. According to his political theory, the primary duty of citizens, including husbands and wives, was to do their assigned functions and never to leave their designated roles. In *The Republic*, he records the conversation between Socrates and Adeimantus concerning life as a citizen of the state:

Each one . . . must perform one social service in the state for which his nature was best adapted The principle embodied in child, woman, slave, free, artisan, ruler, and ruled, that each performed his one task as one man and was not a versatile busybody. . . . The interference with one another's business . . . is the greatest injury to a state and would most rightly be designated as the thing which chiefly works it harm.²

²Plato, *The Republic*, 4.10. All classical quotations will be from the Loeb Classical Library unless otherwise stated.

Following closely in Plato's footsteps was Aristotle, his pupil. Aristotle served as Alexander the Great's personal tutor beginning in 342 B.C., then moved on to establish a new academy in 336 B.C. named *Peripatetic*. Of the various issues which he wrote about, he did discuss household management. In his work *Politics*, Aristotle elaborates on the administration of family matters.

And now that it is clear what are the component parts of the state, we have first of all to discuss household management; for every state is composed of households. Household management falls into departments corresponding to the parts of which the household in its turn is composed . . . master and slave, husband and wife, father and children.³

Then in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he compares the leadership style of the man in his home to that of political administration:

The relation of husband to wife seems to be in the nature of an aristocracy: the husband rules in virtue of fitness, and in matters that belong to a man's sphere; matters suited to a woman he hands over to his wife. When the husband controls everything, he transforms the relationship into an oligarchy, for he governs in violation of fitness, and not in virtue of superiority. And sometimes when the wife is an heiress it is she who rules.⁴

Balch quotes from "On the Happiness of House" Neopythagorean philosopher, Callicratidas, who writes at greater lengths on the house code than the previously mentioned sources:

³Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.1

⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachian Ethics*, 8.10.5.

The husband governs, but the wife is governed, and the offspring of both these is an auxiliary Since therefore the husband rules over the wife, he either rules with a despotic, or with a guardian, or in the last place, with political power. But he does not rule over her with a despotic power: for he is diligently attentive to her welfare It remains, therefore, that he rules over her with a political power, according to which both the governor and the thing governed establish [as their end] the common advantage Those that govern them politically are both admired and beloved.⁵

The last Greek writer on house codes to be examined is Plutarch. Plutarch was born circa 46 A.D., making him a relatively close contemporary to Peter. He studied in Athens where the greatest education of the Hellenistic world was offered. Despite the fact that Plutarch wrote chronologically following Peter's completion of his epistle, he adds valuable insight to the house code developments of the first century. In his "Advice to Bride and Groom," Plutarch offers many stories and proverbial tidbits of counsel to newlyweds:

A virtuous woman ought to be most visible in her husband's company, and to stay in the house and hide herself when he is away.⁶

Those [husbands] who are not cheerful in the company of their wives, nor join with them in sportiveness and laughter, are thus teaching them to seek their own pleasures apart from their husbands.⁷

⁵David O. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 56-57.

⁶Plutarch, *Moralia*, 139c.

⁷Plutarch, *Moralia*, 140a.

Plutarch continues,

It is a lovely thing for the wife to sympathize with her husband's concerns and the husband with the wife's, so that, as ropes, by being intertwined, get strength from each other, thus, by the due contribution of goodwill in corresponding measure by each member, the co--partnership may be preserved through the joint action of both.⁸

Jewish Writings on the House Code

The first significant Jewish author of Hellenistic times who discussed matters pertaining to the house code was Jeshua son of Eleazar son of Sira. More commonly known as Ben Sira, this thinker produced *The Wisdom of Ben Sira (The Book of Sirach)*. Originally composed in Hebrew between 190-175 B.C., it was translated into Greek by his grandson between 132-117 B.C. As wisdom literature it is not quite the same as the standard rhetorical structure of ancient house codes. Here is one example of his contribution to family roles in chapter 7:

- 23 If you have sons, chastise them;
cure their stubbornness in their early youth.
- 24 If you have daughters, keep them chaste,
and be not indulgent to them.
- 26 If you have a wife, let her not seem odious to you;
but where there is ill feeling, trust her not.
- 27 With your whole heart honor your father;
your mother's birth pangs forget not.
- 28 Remember, of these parents you were born;
what can you give them for all they gave you?⁹

⁸Plutarch, *Moralia*, 140e.

⁹Ben Sira, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (New York: Doubleday, 1987) translated by Patrick W. Slahan, 203.

The second Jewish writer who seems to have influenced Peter in his discussion on the husband/wife relationship is Philo of Alexandria, born between 15 and 10 B.C. He wrote a series of books commenting on the decalogue of Moses. Among the books were analyses of the "special laws" in the Pentateuch. The following quotation is from his *Special Laws*:

The women are best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house Organized communities are of two sorts, the greater which we call cities and the smaller which we call households. Both of these have their governors; the government of the greater is assigned to men under the name of statesmanship, that of the lesser, known as household management, to women. A woman, then, should not be a busybody, meddling with matters outside her household concerns, but should seek a life of seclusion.¹⁰

Balch also points to Philo, drawing from the *Apology*:

Wives must be in servitude to their husbands, a servitude not imposed by violent ill-treatment but promoting obedience in all things.¹¹

Flavius Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, was born in 37/38 A.D. in Jerusalem. Widely experienced in various positions such as priest, scholar, military leader, and historian, he included some discussion on the husband/wife relationship in his work *Against Apion*. A short segment of Book 2 reads as follows:

Let [the wife], therefore, be obedient to him; not so that he should abuse her, but that she may acknowledge her duty to

¹⁰Philo, *Special Laws*, 3.169-171.

¹¹Balch, *Let Wives be Submissive*, 54.

her husband; for God hath given the authority to the husband.¹²

Roman Writings on the House Code

Roman thought on the management of households was not very different than the Greek perspective. Dionysius, one of the empire's writers, wrote the *Roman Antiquities* between 30-7 B.C. Balch cites Dionysius' reference to one of the founding laws of early Rome:

Both the married women, as having no other refuge, to conform themselves entirely to the temper of their husbands, and the husbands to rule their wives as necessary and inseparable possessions. Accordingly, if a wife was virtuous and in all things obedient to her husband, she was mistress to the same degree as her husband was the master of it.¹³

A Roman poet who was one of the most influential writers of classical literature was Ovid (43 B.D. - A.D. 17). His two greatest contributions were *Artis Amatoriae* and *Metamorphoses*. The former work, also known as the *Art of Love*, is divided into three books. Writing to men in love, Ovid offers advice in Book 2 about the importance of accepting a woman "warts and all."

Particularly forbear to reproach a woman with her faults,
 faults which many have found it useful to feign otherwise .
 . . . Grow used to what you bear ill: you will bear it well;
 age eases many a smart Time itself removes all faults

¹²*The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus*, translated by William Whiston (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1936), 893.

¹³Balch, *Let Wives be Submissive*, 55.

from the body, and what was a blemish ceases to be a hindrance.¹⁴

Considered by historians as the most important public individual in Rome during Nero's reign, Seneca wrote extensively. In one of his books comprising the set entitled *Moral Essays*, Seneca alludes to Hecaton's philosophy of family responsibilities:

Every obligation that involves two people makes an equal demand upon both It is true that a husband has certain duties, yet those of the wife are not less great.¹⁵

Analysis of the Passage

Peter addressed his epistle to hellenized Christian Jews who lived in the area of modern-day Turkey. There were a variety of different family situations in which Christians themselves were involved. In some cases, both the husband and wife were believers, in other cases only one of the mates was a Christian. Regardless of the home situation or of how the unsaved mistreated them, they were to have a blameless testimony to the world. Without sidetracking to a treatise on the apologetic function of Peter's responses to charges levelled at the early Christian community, this paper will remain focused on the husband/wife relationship as seen in 3:1-7. This segment of the paper will examine the verses on the conduct of wives in the home, followed by the conduct of husbands in the home.

¹⁴Ovid, *Art of Love*, 2.641-655.

¹⁵Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, 2.18.1.

The Wife's Conduct in the Home

Verses one through six cover the woman's relationship to her husband, and Peter uses a basic outline that appears as follows: specific instructions are given to believing wives, (vv. 1-2), genuine virtue is valued by God (vv. 3-4), and Sarah's obedience is an example to all (vv. 5-6).

The first two verses specifically instruct women on how they should live in their families. Verse one initiates the house code by addressing women (γυναῖκες) in the vocative. Peter makes it obvious to the readers that he is writing particularly to these women who are married, by choosing the phrase "to your own husbands" (τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν) as the recipients of their action. The action, or precise admonition, is that the wives be "submitting" to their husbands. The idea of this word is to subject oneself to the authority of another. The audience of Peter's day would understand this participle to be used in an imperative type of connotation. A simple translation is, "wives, be submitting yourselves to your own husbands." Notice the close parallel with Plutarch's words: "So is it with women also; if they subordinate themselves to their husbands, they are commended."¹⁶ The reason for this self-imposed conduct is clearly seen in the following ἵνα clause and first class conditional sentence (vv. 1b-2): "in order that if any disobey the word, they may be won by means of the wives' conduct without a word, after observing your pure conduct in fear." In other words, in the case of an unbelieving husband, he may be gained into the spiritual family by his observing and responding to her godly lifestyle on a daily basis.

Verses three and four deal with the importance of true, godly character. Peter first mentions the attractive, yet worthless, appearance of a woman's decorating her outward physical person. Hellenistic and Roman literature are excellent

¹⁶Plutarch, *Moralia*, 142c.

sources to turn to for opinions on the outward adornment of women. Perictone, quoted by Pomeroy, wrote these statements:

A woman will neither cover herself with gold or the stone of India or of any other place, nor will she braid her hair with artful device; nor will she anoint herself with Arabian perfume; nor will she put white makeup on her face or rouge her cheeks or darken her brows and lashes or artfully dye her graying hair; nor will she bathe a lot. For by pursuing these things a woman seeks to make a spectacle of female incontinence. The beauty that comes from wisdom and not from these things brings pleasure to women who are well born.¹⁷

Plutarch, who has been quoted previously, comments also on the matter of external appeal: "It is not gold or precious stones or scarlet that makes her such, but whatever invests her with that something which betokens dignity, good behavior, and modesty."¹⁸ Additional contemporaneous writings on the topic confirm that excessive adornment was closely tied with immoral lifestyles. Peter was aware of this, and he purposely contrasted (using an adversative ἄλλα) the visible, external, physical qualities with the invisible, internal, spiritual qualities. On the contrary, the wife who possesses a gentle and quiet spirit (πραέως καὶ ἡσυχίου) is of great worth and value (πουτελής) to God. It is the hidden person (ὁ κρυπτὸς τῆς καρδίας ἄνθρωπος) that matters most (v. 4). The quality of the inner being is the most important, from God's perspective.

Peter concludes the part of the house code that pertains to women in verses five and six by illustrating the previous points

¹⁷Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 135.

¹⁸Plutarch, *Moralia*, 141e.

from the Old Testament. The identification of the holy women in verse five (αἱ ἅγιαι γυναῖκες), according to Michaels, was "a more specific group, the four 'matriarchs' or Jewish tradition: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah."¹⁹ These godly wives adorned themselves not by putting on the outward ornaments, but rather by submitting themselves to their own husbands. They fashioned themselves in a metaphorical sense, rather than a literal physical putting on of clothing and jewelry. Horine explains it this way: "Submission to their husbands characterized by the matriarchs' habitual activity of quiet inner adornment as opposed to the external adornment of extravagant ostentatious hairdos, ornate jewelry, and the frequent changing of dresses which characterized the behavior of unfaithful wives."²⁰ By using ὡς Peter is using Sarah as a specific example from the group of the matriarchs. First, she obeyed (ὑπήκουσεν) her husband. Second, she used the title "lord" (κύριον) in reference to him. Peter is alluding to Genesis 18:12 when Sarah addressed Abraham as lord. Despite her unbelief at the time of that incident regarding her predicted pregnancy, she acknowledged his authority. The application is to the believing women who have now become spiritual children of Abraham (ἡς ἐγενήθητε τέκνα). These children of Abraham are admonished to imitate Sarah's example by obeying and respecting their mates.

The Husband's Conduct in the Home

Peter's attention now turns to the husbands (οἱ ἄνδρες) in the audience. Although he uses only one verse, his message is powerful. Peter exhorts them to live with their wives in an

¹⁹Michaels, *1 Peter*, 164.

²⁰Steve Horine, *An Exegetical Study of 1 Peter 3:1-7 With Respect to Its Genre* (Unpublished research paper for the course #350 New Testament Seminar: 1 Peter), 60-61.

understanding way (συνοικοῦντες κατὰ γνῶσιν). The idea the author is conveying is one of the husband's knowing *how* to live with his wife. That is, his relationship with her must be much deeper than merely the physical/sexual aspect. It requires special effort for the man to know his wife intimately, in every facet of her person.

The phrase immediately following this is the source of debate for feminists. The comparative wording "as a weaker vessel the woman" (ὡς ἀσθενεστέρω σκεύει τῷ γυναικεῖ) has been interpreted in many ways. A particular reason for this diversity of opinion is the ambiguity of the text. However, the most plausible understanding of his concept is that the woman is physically weaker than the man, and the authority of God has entrusted to her is subordinate to her husband's. This does not mean that women are inferior, but at creation God placed her in a particular responsibility order following after man.

Further, Peter explains that the attitude of the husband must be one of honor and respect (τιμῆν). "1 Peter 3:7 summons men to give their wives the honor due to them . . . is the respect which is to be shown to the wife."²¹ Keeping in mind the immediately preceding phrase, Peter is quick to emphasize the husbands must never take advantage of their wives' weaker position. He does this by stating that both the man and the woman are on an equal plane of value in God's eyes. They both are co-heirs of the grace of life (συνκληρονόμοις χάριτος ζωῆς). That is, they each have equal standing as beneficiaries of His saving and sustaining grace.

Finally, Peter gives the result (εἰς τὸ) for the husband's conduct toward his wife. The end result of the man's knowing how to live with his wife and treating her with honor is an

²¹J. Schneider, "τιμῆν," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 8, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and augmented by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 174.

unhindered prayer life (μη ἐγκόπτεσθαι τὰς προσευχὰς ὑμῶν). It is of utmost importance that the husband keeps everything in his spiritual life in right standing before God. If he fails to treat his wife as God has outlined in verse seven, then his fellowship with the Lord will be obstructed. His communication with God in prayer will be jeopardized by his mistreatment of his wife. Consequently, the lesson that all husbands must learn is that the quality of their relationship with God is contingent on the quality of their conduct at home with their wives.

Conclusion

With all of the previous discussion examining extra-biblical sources as well as Peter's text on the house code, there are several important observations to present.

The first matter concerns the correlation of 3:1-7 with other ancient writings. Did Plato, *et al* influence Peter's discussion of the husband/wife relationship? Did Peter base his verses upon other house codes of the day, or was 3:1-7 an original *haustafel*? Despite the similarities, 3:1-7 was authentic when Peter wrote the words in the mid-60's A.D. His purpose for utilizing the house code's rhetorical structure was for the sake of his recipients: hellenized Jews. They were acquainted with the common viewpoints regarding marriage, and they could easily identify with Peter's exhortations on each mate's responsibilities.

The second observation deals with the submissive role of the wife. After reading the ancient house codes, it is obvious that the woman was viewed as inferior to the man. Often, they were treated as servants, with their primary purpose in life to wait on their husbands. In light of that prevailing mindset, evangelical feminists claim that 3:1-6 is merely culture bound. That is, it does not apply to Christian women of the twentieth century. The truth is, Peter never intended for the wife to be the husband's slave. She is to submit herself to his authority, but at

the same time she is viewed by God as being equal in value. As a response to the feminists, yes, there are certain culture peculiarities which no longer apply to today's society, yet the overriding principle of respect and obedience still holds true today.

Third, what about verses three and four in which Peter mentions the outward adornments of jewelry, hair styles, and clothing? Some interpreters perceive this to be a condemnation of fashion's externalism. In fact, there are sincere believers today who shun the wearing of makeup, jewelry, and certain hair styles. Unfortunately, their understanding of the original text is seriously lacking. Peter is not admonishing the women to never wear such things, but rather he is making a comparison between a woman's looks and her character. The main point of the two verses is that the wife's inner qualities, not her outward appearance, ought to be that which makes her beautiful.

Finally, although the patriarchal setting in which the house-code literature was produced inevitably affected a male bias in those codes, 1 Peter 3:1-7 stands apart in its clarification of the husband's beneficent duties toward the wife and the "weaker" vessel, while maintaining the husband's authority as the leader in the home. Writing under the divine supervision of the Holy Spirit, Peter's words remain relevant not only to Christians in the first century, but in the twentieth as well.