

Exegesis of 1 Peter 3:1-7

By Armin J. Panning

Among the many clichés that have found a place in our daily speech are the expressions “the fairer sex” and “the weaker sex.” We use them without giving much thought to their precision or accuracy. It never occurs to us, for example, to demand statistical proof for them. If we did, the epithet regarding feminine beauty might well prove to be totally subjective and incapable of proof. The latter expression, however, seems better founded, having a direct connection to a Scripture passage. But in what sense is woman weaker? With the present interest in equal rights and the pitch of emotion that has come to attach itself to that issue, the question no longer remains one simply of idle curiosity. We need to address ourselves to this point of which Peter speaks in his First Epistle.

There is a temptation to get at the heart of the matter by turning directly to 1 Peter 3, where Peter’s directives to wives are recorded. Two things, however, deter us from that course of action. The first is the opening word *ὁμοίως* (“likewise”), indicating that what Peter is here saying in chapter 3 is in some aspect like that which preceded. We do well, therefore, to cut into the train of thought at an earlier point.

The other deterrent is grammatical. In the first seven verses of chapter 3 the expressions that obviously convey the main thought of the verses are without finite verbs. The verbals are participles, directly dependent on a previous construction. We therefore need to observe the wholesome hermeneutical principle of looking at our passage in its general context.

A workable point at which to start would be 2:11, where Peter writes:

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day that he visits you.

The letter seems to be addressed to gentile readers who, in becoming converted and freed from their former evil way of life, no longer feel at home in their present pagan community. Hence they are “aliens” and “strangers” in the world. Their estranged condition is the more complete because of their being misunderstood and maligned by their unbelieving neighbors. But even toward these they have a sacred obligation—that of trying to win them for Christ. In many respects the letter is simply an enlargement of the Savior’s directive: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

But how are they to do this? Not by asserting themselves. Not by loudly protesting the injustice of the “system,” nor by petitioning for equal rights, but rather by patient submission to the political and social structures in which they find themselves.

Submission—that is really the keynote which permeates the whole section under our discussion. In verse 13 of the second chapter Peter writes: *ὑποτάγητε πάσῃ ἀνθρωπίνῃ κτίσει διὰ τὸν κύριον*. “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men.”

This *ὑποτάγητε* of verse 13 is the finite verb that provides the grammatical structure on which the participles at 2:18, 3:1, and 3:7 depend, as well as the adjectives at 3:8. Note also that the participles at 2:18 and 3:1 are, in fact, variations of this same verb *ὑποτάσσω*.

Submission is the keynote. In verses 13 and 14 it is submission to civil government, “whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him.” Let us note, and note well, that in submitting to the existing government, pagan though it be, Peter’s readers are not demeaning themselves or conceding any essential inferiority. The ones who are here asked to submit to governmental authority are the same ones who five verses earlier were addressed in the glowing terms: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (9). They give up none of these qualities when they submit to authority. Rather, they fulfill the purpose for which they were chosen by God, namely, “that you may

declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (9b). “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men” (15). That is what it means to “submit *for the Lord’s sake* to every authority instituted among men.”

The submission that is asked of all in their relationship to government is channeled a bit more narrowly when Peter now turns his attention to οἱ οἰκέται. Peter’s choice of terms here is interesting. He does not use the standard term δοῦλος, “slave,” but rather employs the warmer and more affectionate οἰκέτης, “household servant.” This is in keeping with the tone of the whole letter in which Peter strives to strengthen the feeling of unity and cohesiveness among the family of believers who need to stand together in their fight against the worldly pressures that beset them on every hand.

Note the scope of Peter’s table of duties. It begins with an admonition to *all* believers to submit to government. The admonition becomes more specific in treating the role of Christian slaves to masters, then that of wives to their husbands and husbands to their wives, and then finally returning to the unit concept with the concluding directive: “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers” (3:8).

The familial atmosphere is served very nicely by Peter’s substituting for the galling term δοῦλος the much more tolerable οἰκέτης. In its basic sense οἰκέτης means “a member of the household,” and then by extension it comes to include also the “household servants,” or “domestics,” as we might say. In a very real sense then Peter is including slaves in the Christian family circle when he urges them:

Οἱ οἰκέται ὑποτασσόμενοι ἐν παντὶ φόβῳ τοῖς δεσπόταις, οὐ μόνον τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς καὶ ἐπιεικέσιν ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς σκολιοῖς.

Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

Actually, there is no vocative. The οἰκέται is nominative. And there is no finite verb (imperative), but rather a participle. All is dependent on the ὑποτάγητε of verse 13. Literally: “Submit yourselves...the household servants submitting in total reverence to their masters.”

This section, covering verses 18 to 25, is by far the longest of the four areas that Peter treats. It is likely that a good percentage of the membership of the young churches consisted of converted slaves. For them this decidedly human institution (ἀνθρωπίνη) of slavery was perhaps not only burdensome but downright galling—the more so when their masters were not “good and considerate,” but “harsh” with a vengeance fueled by pagan antagonism. But difficult as their lot was, even this situation offered slaves an excellent opportunity to win their masters for Christianity by patient submission. Hence they are urged to bear up, even under pain and unjust suffering “for conscience toward God” (διὰ συνείδησιν θεοῦ—19).

But there is yet another feature that expands Peter’s treatment of the case of slaves, and that is the unexcelled opportunity it offers him to urge a truly Christ-like submission by drawing attention to the encouraging and enabling example of Christ, the suffering Servant. Noting their frequent lot of “suffering for doing good,” Peter points out: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (21). And then he adds in verses 22 to 25 a masterly portrait of the Savior’s submissiveness in allusion after allusion drawn from Isaiah 53. With that picture of the suffering and submissive Savior before the readers’ eyes, Peter makes it really quite unthinkable for anyone, even a slave, to think of it as an indignity to be asked to submit in the cause of his Master. Following Christ’s example of submission cannot be ignoble or a mark of inferiority! On that upbeat note Peter now proceeds to his ὁμοίως αἱ γυναῖκες; “Likewise the wives ...”

3:1–2 Ὁμοίως [αἱ] γυναῖκες, ὑποτασσόμεναι τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν, ἵνα καὶ εἴ τινες ἀπειθοῦσιν τῷ λόγῳ, διὰ τῆς τῶν γυναικῶν ἀναστροφῆς ἄνευ λόγου κερδηθήσονται, ἐποπτεύσαντες τὴν ἐν φόβῳ ἀγνὴν ἀναστροφὴν ὑμῶν.

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without talk by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.

With ὁμοίως Peter calls to mind all that has preceded, beginning with the ὑποτάγητε of 2:13. “Likewise, (submit yourselves)...the wives submitting themselves to their own husbands.” Again γυναῖκες is nominative, not vocative, and ὑποτασσόμεναι is a present middle participle depending in sense on the previous imperative. The meaning of γυναῖκες could technically be either “women” or “wives,” just as ἀνδράσιν could mean either “men” or “husbands.” In noting the general context of the whole table of duties, we have already seen in connection with Peter’s use of the term οἰκέτης that in this letter interpersonal relationships are decidedly viewed in the setting of *family*. That consideration would seem to be adequate reason for here translating the terms γυναῖκες and ἀνδράσιν as “wives” and “husbands.”

Additional support for that view can be found in the specifying adjective ἰδίοις. It is true that no special significance need be attached to ἰδίοις, as though the stress were on their *own* husbands. In koine Greek this adjective became a virtual equivalent to the simple possessive. But as soon as the idea of possession is attached to ἀνδράσιν, the conclusion becomes almost inescapable that in Peter’s eyes submitting to their ἀνδράσιν is viewed in the setting of marriage and the home. Hence the translation, “Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands ...” seems entirely warranted. Note incidentally that here, as in most translations, the “their” of the original has been changed to “your” to correspond to the second person of the understood ὑποτάγητε of 2:13.

With the ὁμοίως, however, Peter is calling attention not only to the similarity to the previous construction, but also to a similarity in purpose. The purpose of submission to civil government was to win men (“that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men—2:15). In a similar way slaves were to make an appeal to their masters by leaving no doubt that what they were doing was being done “for conscience toward God” (2:19). In the same way, wives are to submit themselves to their husbands ἵνα...κερδηθήσονται, literally: “in order that, if some of them are disobedient to the Word, they may be gained through the conduct of their wives without a word (being spoken).”

The indicative in the protasis of the conditional clause (εἰ...ἀπειθοῦσιν) marks it as a simple condition and indicates a high degree of possibility regarding its fulfillment. It implies that it is very likely that there are numerous wives among the readers whose husbands are as yet “disobedient to the Word.” The purpose of these wives’ submission is to be that their husbands “may be gained” (κερδηθήσονται: future indicative substituted for the more usual subjunctive).

When Peter says that this is to take place ἄνευ λόγου, he does not mean to imply that the men can be saved without the Word, the gospel means of grace. Here λόγου is without article and simply implies the absence of talking. Wives are not to nag or browbeat, or even to cajole and “sweet-talk” their husbands into nominally accepting Christianity, but they are rather to let their conduct of patient submission speak for them, so that their husbands may be gained ἐποπτεύσαντες τὴν ἐν φόβῳ ἀγνὴν ἀναστροφὴν ὑμῶν, “When they see the

purity and reverence of your lives.” The entire object is in the attributive position—literally: “upon seeing the in-fear-pure conduct of you.” Her fear is not fear and terror of her unbelieving husband, but rather respect and reverence for God’s will in her life. Her “fear” thus corresponds to the “for conscience toward God” of 2:19.

One reason for patient submission on a wife’s part is that it may help to win her unbelieving husband for Christianity. But that is not the only reason. It is not, in fact, applicable in every case, for some wives no doubt had believing husbands. But Peter now moves to a reason for submission that is binding upon every Christian wife. And that reason is: patient submission pleases God.

3 ὧν ἔστω οὐχ ὁ ἔξωθεν ἐμπλοκῆς τριχῶν καὶ περιθέσεως χρυσίων ἢ ἐνδύσεως ἱματίων κόσμος 4 ἀλλ’ ὁ κρυπτός τῆς καρδίας ἄνθρωπος ἐν τῷ ἀφθάρτῳ τοῦ πραέως καὶ ἡσυχίου πνεύματος, ὃ ἐστὶν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ πολυτελής.

Translating verse 3 is complicated by two factors. The first is that, after speaking directly to wives in the second person (ὕμῶν), Peter now continues in the third person (ὧν). The other feature to note is that everything between the article and the noun (ὁ...κόσμος) is again in the attributive position. Literally translated, Peter would be saying something like: “Of whom let not their adornment be (the adornment) of braiding of hair and putting around of gold and donning of (fashionable) clothes.” To be preferred is a rendering that for continuity retains the previous second person, eg. the NIV’s “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes.”

Peter warns against the natural inclination to become engrossed in personal appearance and attire. It is entirely possible, however, that the problem does not lie completely with the wife’s vanity. It is just as possible that she is trying to please her husband who, especially if he is not a believer, might well expect of her the ostentation that characterizes so much of what the world does. Peter is not objecting to any specific fashions or styles, nor is he condemning a wife to perpetual dowdiness. The point is rather one of attitude. She is not to make her appeal on outward and external considerations. Her adornment is not to be ἔξωθεν, but rather ὁ κρυπτός τῆς καρδίας ἄνθρωπος, “the hidden person of the heart.” Again, continuing in the second person is preferable: “Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.”

A wife’s true adornment lies not in what she does to make herself attractive, but in a sense, what she doesn’t do. Peter says that, ideally, she is to distinguish herself with a “gentle and quiet spirit.” Notice that we have returned to what is essentially a definition of submission to her husband. The world may not be much impressed with a “gentle and quiet spirit,” but that is of no consequence, for it is ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ πολυτελής, “very precious in the sight of God.” For the believer that settles the matter.

But Peter adds yet a third inducement to wives. Submission may gain her husband for Christianity. It is furthermore very pleasing to God. But also, it puts a wife into good company, for it makes her one of Sarah’s daughters. Speaking of submission, Peter continues:

5 οὕτως γὰρ ποτε καὶ αἱ ἅγαι γυναῖκες αἱ ἐλπίζουσαι εἰς θεὸν ἐκόσμου ἐαυτὰς ὑποτασσόμεναι τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν, 6 ὡς Σάρρα ὑπήκουσεν τῷ Ἀβραάμ κύριον αὐτὸν καλοῦσα, ἧς ἐγενήθητε τέκνα ἀγαθοποιοῦσαι καὶ μὴ φοβούμεναι μηδεμίαν πτόησιν.

For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

The imperfect active indicative verb ἐκόσμων picks up the concept introduced above in the noun κόσμος (3). The imperfect brings the idea of an action that was constant, repetitive, habitual: “They were wont to do,” “they used to make themselves beautiful.” And how did they do that? By ὑποτασσόμεναι τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν, “by submitting to their own husbands.” It was a regular and habitual feature of their conduct and could thus be said of any number of pious women who put their hope in God but, for purposes of illustrating the principle, one outstanding case is cited—that of Sarah.

The reference undoubtedly is to Genesis 18:12, where we are told of the Lord’s announcement to Abraham and Sarah regarding the future birth of their son. In her incredulity Sarah could not refrain from asking, “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?” Whatever weaknesses Sarah may on that occasion have showed in her “laughter” at so ridiculous an announcement, in her devotion and submission to her husband she remained above reproach.

Note that she refers to him as κύριον, “my master.” And our text gives us to understand that this incident at Mamre was not an isolated use of that term. The present participle καλοῦσα indicates it as regular and continuing terminology, reflecting her attitude toward her husband.

This attitude toward her husband would be emphasized even more if the imperfect tense ὑπήκουεν were the stronger reading here. While there is some support for it (B, 69, Latin and Syriac versions), the aorist ὑπήκουσεν must be taken as the preferable reading. But even so, the very choice of that verb, regardless of its tense, indicates clearly that Sarah’s submission to her husband and her yielding to his leadership were so complete that it may fairly be said of her that she *obeyed* Abraham.

In this obedience she provides a role model for godly wives of all time. Peter says ἧς ἐγενήθητε τέκνα ἀγαθοποιοῦσαι καὶ μὴ φοβούμεναι μηδεμίαν πτόησιν—literally: “whose children you prove yourselves to be, doing good and not fearing any terror.”

The verb ἐγενήθητε has caused some discussion. In this instance it seems not to be the standard past tense of completed action but rather the fairly common application of the aorist form of γίνομαι having the meaning “to show oneself, to prove to be” rather than “to become.” Pious wives of all times show themselves to be daughters of Sarah in doing good and fearing no terror.

“Doing good” is straightforward enough, but what is the “terror” which they are not to fear? The noun πτόησιν is a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament. Its origin here seems to be Proverbs 3:25 with which Peter would undoubtedly be thoroughly familiar. The expression becomes particularly apt if we add the second part of the Proverbs verse and thus retain the parallelism. In the Septuagint it reads:

καὶ οὐ φοβηθήσῃ πτόησιν ἐπελθοῦσαν
οὐδὲ ὀρμᾶς ἀσεβῶν ἐπερχομένας

Do not fear the terror coming upon (you),
Nor the onslaughts coming upon you from the wicked (persons).

Peter repeatedly notes that Christians live as aliens and strangers in a hostile world. The patient submission of Christian wives to their husbands will not endear them to less sanctified or even unbelieving wives whom they encounter in their daily life and dealings. Natural unsanctified inclination counsels resistance and self-defense, not patient submission to others. Christian wives may therefore experience rejection and even reprisal from their neighbors.

But even worse, the foreign and alien spirit, the “terror,” may even invade the privacy of their home and jeopardize the intimacy of their marriage if the husband acts in an unsanctified manner. It is this concern to which Peter addresses himself in a fairly short closing section. He writes:

7 Οἱ ἄνδρες ὁμοίως, συνοικοῦντες κατὰ γνώσιν ὡς ἀσθενεστέρῳ σκεύει τῷ γυναικείῳ, ἀπονέμοντες τιμὴν ὡς καὶ συγκληρονόμοις χάριτος ζωῆς εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐγκόπτεσθαι τὰς προσευχὰς ὑμῶν.

With his ὁμοίως Peter indicates that here too there is something that is similar to the foregoing and thus suggests a point of likeness. The basic thrust of ὑποτάγητε (2:13) remains on the scene. The husband too is to bring a pliable and tractable spirit to the situation.

It may be worth noting that Peter’s structure and progression here is a striking parallel to what the Apostle Paul does at Ephesians 5:15ff. There, after urging a careful and circumspect Christian life, Paul urges all the Ephesians:

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις ἐν φόβῳ Χριστοῦ—literally: submitting to one another in reverence to Christ.

In turning now to the role of wives, the idea of *submitting* is implied in verse 22 (“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord”) and stated explicitly in verse 24, where wives are urged, “Now as the church submits (ὑποτάσσεται) to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”

In speaking next to husbands, the general injunction of deference to all stated in verse 21 still applies, but the verb ὑποτάσσω is not used in speaking of the husband’s relationship to his wife. Paul says rather, “Husbands, love your wives ...” (25ff).

This same progression and pattern is observable also in Peter’s handling of the subject matter. He does not lose sight of the general directive inherent in the ὑποτάγητε of 2:13. The husband is to bring a spirit of deference to the situation. He does not operate alone or autonomously. He too lives in an intricate web of interpersonal relationships. But in describing a husband’s relationship to his wife, Peter does not use participial forms of ὑποτάσσω, as he did in speaking of the wife’s role. She is to submit to him. In fact, her submission, like Sarah’s, is to be of such unquestioning nature that it may be equated with obedience. To ask the husband now to “submit” or to “obey” her would obscure the clear lines that Peter has drawn. Hence the husband’s role is not described in terms of ὑποτασσόμενοι, but rather with two other participles: συνοικοῦντες and ἀπονέμοντες.

Perhaps this is the place to call attention to a matter involving punctuation. The placement of commas in the text cited above reflects the Nestle division in preference to that of the UBS text. The context seems to suggest a parallelism, namely, each of the two participles having a ὡς attached to it—not two instances of ὡς, both attaching themselves to the second participle ἀπονέμοντες.

Translating the first of these two participial expressions, συνοικοῦντες κατὰ γνώσιν ὡς ἀσθενεστέρῳ σκεύει τῷ γυναικείῳ, involves us in problems both in syntax and vocabulary. Let us address ourselves to syntactical matters first, without attempting any polish or precision of meaning in the vocabulary. Note that the compound verb sunoikevw takes its object in the dative—here represented in the noun σκεύει. Husbands accordingly are spoken of as “living with a vessel.”

This “vessel” in turn has two modifiers. The one modifier is the attributive expression τῷ γυναικείῳ. The vessel with which a husband is to live is “the womanly one,” or “the wifely one.”

The second modifier is attached in a somewhat more oblique fashion. It is the comparative particle ὡς coupled with the comparative form of the adjective ἀσθενής. Hence this womanly or wifely vessel is further described “as weaker.”

Assembling these components in an attempt to reproduce Peter’s idiom yields the basic directive: “The husbands ... living as with a weaker vessel, the womanly/wifely one.” The Greek idiom is, of course, totally unacceptable English. To improve it we need to direct our attention to Peter’s choice of vocabulary.

In setting forth this part of his table of duties Peter could have penned an exact counterpart to the directives he gave wives, something like: Οἱ ἄνδρες ὁμοίως συνοικοῦντες ταῖς ἰδίαις γυναιξίν—“The husbands likewise...living with their own wives.” He chose, however, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to express the object of the participle συνοικοῦντες with a form of σκεῦος rather than the more straightforward γυνή. What additional meaning may we see in this choice?

By itself σκεῦος is actually a rather bland and colorless noun. Its use in various contexts suggests a considerable range of meaning: bowl, vessel, instrument, furniture, equipment, clothing, accouterments, etc.. Underlying all of these, however, is the basic idea that a σκεῦος is something that is useful in accomplishing a task, completing an assignment, fulfilling a role, etc.. The verb σκευάζω means *to prepare*. A σκεῦος is that which is useful and helpful, even essential, for accomplishing some preparation or carrying out some task.

Whether all of this is explicit in Peter’s use of the term can be debated, of course. But it is certainly true that implicit in the range of meanings allowed by σκεῦος lies the idea expressed by the Creator when he declared it his gracious purpose to create for Adam a helper who would be “meet” and “appropriate” for him. It may fairly be said that only after God had created Eve and presented her to Adam was the man fully equipped to assume the role his Creator had assigned to him. Hence, σκεῦος is not a demeaning term or a term fraught with purely sexual connotations, but a term of dignity for a cherished spouse or partner.

That meaning of σκεῦος fits very well for Peter’s use of it here in his directives to husbands, and it seems to accord also with the sense of what Paul urges upon the Thessalonians when he encourages them that each is to acquire his σκεῦος (“spouse”) in sanctification and honor (1 Th 4:4).

Using the meaning “spouse” or “partner” to render Peter’s term σκεῦος reflects the situation accurately also in that it does not *per se* indicate gender. The partner could be masculine or feminine. However, if Peter had merely wished to indicate that a husband’s partner was feminine, he might simply have used the appropriate form of the adjective θῆλυς. He uses instead the adjective γυναικεῖος.

The suffix—ειος indicates possession. Hence γυναικεῖος bears the meaning “belonging to or characteristic of a γυνή.” That of course does not conclusively settle its meaning because, as noted above, γυνή can mean either “woman” or “wife.” Obviously the situation is not helped by the fact that Peter’s use of this adjective is its only occurrence in the New Testament.

Concordances usually list six instances of its use in the Greek Old Testament. Two of these (Gn 31:35 & Lv 18:22) should perhaps be discounted because the critical text (Rahlfs) relegates the adjective form to the footnote and reads instead the genitive form of the noun γυνή. The meaning of γυναικεῖος at Esther 2:11 may be ambivalent. Here we are informed that Mordecai checked on Esther’s status by daily walking κατὰ τὴν αὐλήν τὴν γυναικείαν, i.e., past the court of the γυναικῶν. Whether the status of the inhabitants of a Persian harem was that of wives or simply that of kept women could no doubt be debated.

Deuteronomy 22:5, however, offers a use of the adjective that seems clearly to favor the meaning “womanly, belonging to women.” Moses states God’s will:

Οὐκ ἔσται σκεύη ἀνδρὸς ἐπὶ γυναικί, οὐδὲ μὴ ἐνδύσῃται ἀνὴρ στολὴν γυναικείαν.

Literally: There will not be (future indicative for imperative) man’s clothing upon a woman, nor is a man to wear women’s clothes.

The directive is not that men are to refrain from wearing clothes what would be characteristic of a wife, but woman’s garb in general.

Incidentally, it is interesting to see in this passage a substantiation of the preceding remarks regarding the rather wide range of meanings permissible to *σκεῦος*. Here it is virtually the equivalent of masculine “accouterments” that a woman is not to wear.

Genesis 18:11 is another passage that seems to work very well if the basic meaning of “womanly” is retained as the translation of *γυναικεῖος*.

Esther 2:17, on the other hand, is one instance where *γυναικεῖος* clearly means “belonging to a *wife*.” Recall that after Vashti had openly defied King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, and had been deposed as queen, there was a “contest” to find a replacement for her. When Esther succeeded in gaining the king’s affection, he *ἐπέθηκεν αὐτῇ τῆ τὸ διάδημα τὸ γυναικεῖον*—“he placed upon her the diadem marking her as his wife.”

The diadem was not in recognition of the fact that she was a woman. If her femininity had at all been in question, she would long ago have been scratched from competition in the Mrs. Persia Pageant. The crown rather marked her as queen, the official wife of the king. The next verse bears that out when it informs us that Ahasuerus *ἕφωσε τοὺς γάμους Ἐσθήρ*—“celebrated in high style his marriage to Esther.”

Secular use of the adjective *γυναικεῖος* reflects the same dichotomy of meaning between “womanly” and “wifely” and thus reinforces the conclusion that the specific meaning of the adjective must be determined from the context. Without attempting any statistical analysis, it would seem that the number of cases where it means “womanly” versus “wifely” is in about the same proportion as that which marks the use of the noun *γυνή*, i.e., there seem to be considerably more cases where the context suggests the meaning “woman” and “womanly” rather than “wife” and “wifely.” This disparity is increased by the fact that it lies in the nature of the case that every *wife* is perforce also a *woman*.

It may, in fact, be this very flexibility or dichotomy which commends *γυναικεῖος* as the adjective for Peter to use in a situation where he is describing a “vessel” or “partner” who is regarded not only as a *woman*, in distinction to men, but a woman who as a *wife* stands in a very specific relationship to one man. That overlap may become a bit more evident as we probe the nature of the “weakness” that Peter ascribes to her.

Peter uses the comparative form of the adjective *ἀσθενής*. With its alpha privative that would suggest the meaning “without strength.” A check with the lexica shows, however, that in an overwhelming number of cases—including the noun *ἀσθένεια* and the verb *ἀσθενέω*, as well as our adjective—the dominant meaning is “to be *sick*.” There is no doubt a connection between the root meaning of “lacking in strength” and the debilitating effect of sickness, but it is noteworthy that there are relatively few cases where the main point of *ἀσθενής* lies in a lack of the kind of strength that the weightlifter needs.

In a literal sense, if one may call it that, the meaning “sickness” predominates, but there are also numerous figurative uses. Most of those equate weakness with a lack of influence or authority. Paul can speak of his presence as being “weak,” i.e., unimpressive (2 Cor 10:10). Or certain parts of the body are “weaker” (1 Cor 12:22). The *στοιχεῖα* of this world are viewed by Paul as “weak and beggarly” (Ga 4:9). To those who were

spiritually weak and immature, Paul became weak (1 Cor 9:22). In a very real sense we are all weak, for Christ died for the ungodly, ὄντων ἡμῶν ἀσθενῶν—“while we were weak” (Ro 5:6). In secular Greek ἀσθενής often means “financially disadvantaged, poor.” There is even the case of a stream being called “weak,” i.e., small or insignificant.

In what sense then does Peter, in speaking to husbands, view their partners as “weaker?” It will be evident that the rather wide range of meanings possible for ἀσθενής does not hand us a pat interpretation of ὡς ἀσθενεστέρω σκεύει.

It would be hard to convince anyone who has seen a mother tend her family day and night, year in and year out, that by definition she is the frail and sickly one. Furthermore, woman’s greater tolerance to pain is attested to by many in the medical profession, and her greater longevity is taken into account in virtually every life insurance policy.

In the area of physical strength, however, a comparative weakness may legitimately be noted. It really was no great surprise to hear the Milwaukee Fire Department recently attribute the low number of women on the Milwaukee fire fighting force to the fact that only a relatively small number of women can pass the rigorous physical endurance and exertion tests required. Granted that there are exceptions, but with his greater size and weight, man tends to be physically stronger than woman.

One of the effects of the current equal rights movement is that some age-old presuppositions are being reexamined. One of the presuppositions held in some quarters was the notion of an innate intellectual edge enjoyed by men. Regardless of what one may think of the prerogatives that woman is now exercising in the academic, scientific, and commercial world, the fact of the matter is that she holds her own very well with men. Inferior mental powers on the part of women dare not be blithely assumed.

Perhaps the emotions are another area where a difference may legitimately be noted. Again we hasten to add that difference does not per se imply inferiority. The unbiased observer will no doubt come off with the conviction that woman has come from the hand of the Creator wonderfully complementary to man, but that quality of being complementary is attributable largely to her being emotionally different from man.

What do these observations contribute to an understanding of Peter’s term “the weaker vessel?” For one thing it seems evident that her weakness is not centered in one specific area, as though it is that one particular “shortcoming” that brands her as “weaker.” It seems more defensible to say that it is a composite of the various “differences” in her nature and make-up such as those noted above that can work to her disadvantage. She is not ἀσθενής in the sense that she does not have any strength, but rather that in her dealings with people and situations she does not operate from a position of strength. To be sure, there are exceptions, but in general it seems fair to say that it does not lie in the nature of woman to demand for herself by force. The result is that she can be exploited and imposed upon.

Perhaps a set of somewhat parallel incidents can be useful, not so much as proof, but for purposes of illustration. This exegetical study is being done in the wake of what some have called “the social event of the century,” the royal wedding in England. In the flood of media coverage of the events preceding the wedding, considerable prominence was given to an incident involving the bride, Lady Diana Spencer. Overcome by the pressure of a veritable sea of camera lenses recording her every blink and twitch, she burst into tears and asked to be taken home from a polo match in which her prince was competing. No sensitive person blamed her. Nor did her reaction strike anyone as particularly uncharacteristic for a woman suffering from what can only be called the crassest invasion of her privacy. The incident became newsworthy only because it offered the poignant scene of one of the most powerful women in the world, the prospective queen of England, reduced to tears of helplessness.

As something of a parallel, though with quite a different outcome, the author recalls an incident in the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem during the Summer Quarter in Israel, 1978. There was a picturesque scene of an Arab herdsman on a donkey, guiding his sheep to market with his staff. To the first raising of a camera he reacted in broken and menacing English, “You take my picture, and I broke your camera!”

His reaction to what he viewed as an invasion of his privacy was every bit as emotional as Lady Diana's. And who would venture to argue that his belligerence was ethically or morally a better way of coping with the problem? The major difference is that his "solution" worked. Undoubtedly there are thousands of pictures of Lady Diana at the polo game, with the most-prized shots perhaps being those of Lady Di dabbing the tears from her soon-to-be-royal cheeks. To my knowledge there is no photographic record of the memorable scene of sleek, fat-tailed sheep being driven to market by a brawny Arab brandishing a four-foot club.

Granted that these are two isolated cases, yet neither one is atypical of feminine or masculine reaction to a problem. The point is simply that women can more easily be imposed upon. History offers us the sad record that it not only can, but does, happen that women's rights have been abridged, their dignity insulted, and their persons mistreated.

Under *γυναικεῖος* (p 133), Moulton and Milligan give an example that is intriguingly close to the vocabulary Peter uses. According to a papyrus found at Oxyrhynchus (dated 55 A.D.), a woman is said to have appointed her grandson to act as her representative in a lawsuit *οὐ δυναμένη προσκαρτερῆσαι τῷ κριτηρίῳ διὰ γυναικείαν ἀσθένειαν*, which the editors translate, "since she is unable owing to womanly weakness to remain at the court."

We have in recent years seen a considerable amount of legislation introduced which is intended to alleviate some of the inequities that still today put women at a legal and financial disadvantage. There have been, for example, changes in the criteria used in granting financial credit to women and improvements in the settlement of estates involving widows. That the legislation is deemed necessary is an admission that women have previously been at a disadvantage.

But there is an even more damaging testimony to the ongoing imposition on "womanly weakness" in the fact that there is a growing number of social agencies that offer counseling and aid to battered women. Let us grant that the number of women involved comprises a small percentage of the total number of women. Let us also grant that there are some women who possess the unfortunate combination of being both able and inclined to rough up men. It is unlikely, however, that there will ever be any general need for agencies to help beleaguered men seeking protection from aggressive women. It just is not in the nature or make-up of woman to become belligerent. She tends rather to suffer aggression and exploitation. And in a sin-corrupted world such exploitation will unfortunately continue.

If it is woman's lot in general that she can be exploited, how much greater is not that possibility in the proximity offered by marriage and in the privacy of the home! Let us not forget, Peter in this whole context is speaking to husbands and wives. The more scrupulously a wife observes the Lord's directive to submit to her husband, the more vulnerable she becomes, humanly speaking, to exploitation. But exploitation is NOT to be the pattern in the home, least of all in the Christian home.

Lest we form too low an estimate of the husbands whom Peter is addressing, let us remind ourselves that this letter is being written to Christians, not run-of-the-world opportunists. Note also that in his choice of *present* participles (*συννοικοῦντες* and *ἀπονέμοντες*) Peter is giving husbands the benefit of the doubt—if any doubt, in fact, exists. Literally he says to them, "*Continue to live* with your wives according to knowledge," and "*continue to accord* them honor as co-heirs." They are doing what Peter expects of them. The very fact that Peter needs to warn them, however, is an earnest reminder of the potential for evil that ever lurks even in the Christian husband's heart.

In that connection it is instructive to note that Peter does not make his appeal to the husband on the grounds of the husband's *strength*. In fact, the comparative *ἀσθενεστέρῳ* implies exactly the opposite. Hence it becomes his responsibility to show deference to her.

Note in substantiation of this that the discussion regarding the "weaker vessel" does not occur in the directives to wives. Her "weakness" is not the reason why she is to submit to her husband, as though might made right. Peter brings "weakness" into the picture only when speaking to husbands, and then he uses it as the reason why a husband should live with his wife *κατὰ γυνῶσιν*.

It seems too weak to render this phrase simply as “to be considerate,” or “to treat her with respect.” To be sure, a Christian husband will show the utmost consideration and respect for his wife, but to live with her “according to knowledge” takes into account the whole range of Scripture knowledge, including an understanding of *σκεῦος* that recognizes her role as a God-given helpmate. It is not mere courtesy that moves a Christian husband, but full understanding and realization that in creating woman and instituting marriage, God has graciously given him a priceless blessing that enriches every facet of his life here on earth. True *γνώσις* recognizes that ill-treatment of a submissive wife is an affront to her and her Creator, as well as totally self-defeating for him as a husband.

But it is not only what a wife brings to her husband that urges considerate treatment of her. It is also a realization of what she is as a person. Hence Peter adds a second participial phrase, *ἀπονέμοντες τιμὴν ὡς καὶ συγκληρονόμοις χάριτος ζωῆς* “showing honor to them as co-heirs of the grace of life.”

Here is the real equal-rights clause in Peter’s table of duties. In everything else of interpersonal relationships it is a matter of submission and deference to others. But in spiritual matters we have Peter voicing a bold statement of absolute equality between husband and wife. Here there is neither male nor female. Both of them are co-heirs of the “the gracious gift of life.”

Let us beware of viewing this “gracious gift of life” too narrowly, as though it applied only to heaven and eternal bliss beyond. Husband and wife are to share that gift already here and now. For both of them Christ has come “that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). So that this blessed end may be realized, Peter attaches a final incentive for the husband when he concludes: *εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐγκόπτεσθαι τὰς προσευχὰς ὑμῶν*, “that your prayers be not hindered.” Note that *ὑμῶν* (“your”) is plural. Nothing he does dare stand in the way of his wife’s growth in faith and Christian maturity, or hinder them in their joint spiritual life together.

It is noteworthy that Peter’s section on the duties of wives and husbands closes as it began, with an overriding concern for the other’s spiritual welfare. The first reason cited for a wife’s submission to her husband is that he may be gained for the faith. The last thought Peter would leave with husbands is that they are to do nothing that would hinder a wife’s spiritual life and growth.

What a touching description Peter gives us of the atmosphere that prevails where marriage follows God’s plan! It remains our continuing task to recognize and appreciate God’s gracious institution of marriage for our own lives. And by our example and teaching in an alien and foreign world, let us hold God’s ideal before our people, so that they too may understand what God’s will for them is and gladly and thankfully conform their lives to it.