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The Structure of Authority in Marriage: An Examination of *Hupotasso* and *Kephale* in Ephesians 5:21–33

The problems raised by the relationship of man and woman in the New Testament continue to fascinate contributors to The Evangelical Quarterly. *Dr. Park, who serves as a military chaplain in the United States Air Force and has previously taught in a Baptist Seminary in the Philippines, offers a fresh examination of the question of authority in relation to marriage.*

In recent years questions increasingly have been raised among Christians regarding the roles married partners should assume in relating to one another. On the one extreme are advocates who affirm a 'chain of command' approach with God, Christ, husbands, and wives grouped in descending order of authority. On the other extreme are proponents of open family systems in which no one seems in charge and everyone does his or her own thing. Between these extremes is considerable middle ground characterized by confusion and ambiguity.

Few passages of Scripture are as controversial or as relevant to the current debate concerning the structure of authority in marriage as Ephesians 5:21–33. The pivotal focus of this passage centres on the meaning of the terms ὑποτάσσω and κεφαλή. Presented in sharp contrast to each other, these words depict a hierarchical model of marriage perplexing in its aspects when superimposed upon egalitarian marital systems. The following discussion, therefore, is an attempt to assess the meaning of ὑποτάσσω and κεφαλή and the degree to which first-century cultural considerations affect interpretation. To achieve this goal, a philological study is made of the terms ὑποτάσσω and κεφαλή followed by an exegesis of these words within the context of Ephesians 5:21–33. Finally, conclusions are presented based on the total study.

The verb ὑποτάσσω actually is a compound word made up of

the preposition ὑπό and the verb τάσσω. The preposition ὑπό means 'under' and the verb τάσσω means 'to arrange'. Thus, ὑποτάσσω literally means 'to place or arrange under'. Accordingly, the term is often used in classical literature as a reference to persons, ideas, or objects being subject or subordinate to something or someone else. The process of subjection is portrayed both as self-imposed and inflicted by another. The implication drawn from the citations consulted is that persons in subjection were expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the expectations of the authorities governing them.[1] Thus, one in subjection was to be deferent both in attitude and action. Such behaviour assured good standing with the established order and served to minimize retaliatory or restrictive measures.

Sensitivity and compliance to first century authority figures by persons in subjection proved essential because as Philo stated, rulers who are too gentle are 'powerless to set right anything that is wrong' for the persons 'subject' (τῶν ὑποτεταγμένων) to them hold them in rather low esteem. Therefore, a strong leader must not be too indulgent but rather must choose what is 'advantageous in preference to what is agreeable'.[2] In Philo's day, as is true in the present, that which is deemed advantageous all too often is determined by those who have power whether that power be exerted in the home or on the battle plain. To be subject in classical times, then, involved compliance to the wishes and desires of the forces in office. To act otherwise was to make oneself vulnerable to punishment and recrimination.

Complementing the use of ὑποτάσσω in Ephesians 5:21–33 is that of κεφαλή. While κεφαλή is defined in numerous classical and biblical references as 'that which is uppermost', 'the head of a man', 'on one's head', 'a crown', 'a source', etc., the definition

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[1] For an excellent discussion of the use of ὑποτάσσω in classical and biblical literature see *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. Υποτάσσω, by G. Delling. Additional classical sources reviewed not cited in *TDNT* include Didorus Soculus *History* 1.55.10; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Roman Antiquities* 4.88; Epictetus *Discourses* 3.24.72; 4.4.2; Epistle of Aristeas 11; 266; Herodian *Histories* 7.2.9; Josephus *Jewish War* 2.433; Marcus Aurelius Antoninus *Meditations* 1.17.3; Onasander *The General* 1.17; *Oracula Sibyllina* 3.12; *Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae* 199.10; 654.7; Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.26; *On the Creation* 84; *On Husbandry* 47; *The Decalogue* 168, 171; Philodemi *Volumina Rhetorica* 2.204.12; 2.206.26; 2.207.30; Phrynichus Comicus 59; Plutarch *Nicias* 23.4; *Pompey* 64.4; Polybius *Histories* 3.13.8; *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 3.64.19, 21 (cited by volume, page, and line); and *Sylloge Inscriptonum Graecarum* 880.10–11; 905.15.

[2] Philo *On Husbandry* 47. (English translations of classical references are based on the text of the *Loeb Classical Library* unless otherwise noted.)

most suitable to the context of the passage under consideration is that of 'one entrusted with superior rank, authority or power'. Surprisingly, few references ascribe this definition to κεφαλή, indicating that the metaphor was new in Paul's day.[3] Its newness, however, probably made it more lively and therefore more trenchant. As Aristotle said in reference to metaphor, '[people like] what strikes them and are struck by what is out of the way.'[4] The implication of Aristotle's statement is that metaphors, particularly new ones, are mentally titilating, an effect resulting from juxtaposed words and ideas acting upon the intellect. Consequently, κεφαλή may well have had a shock effect upon the recipients of Paul's Ephesian letter, captivating their attention and illiciting their interest.

Although the use of κεφαλή in classical literature denoting one endowed with power or authority is limited, at least four examples stand out where the term suggests just such a meaning.[5] First, in Homer's description of the bitter conflict between the Trojans and Achaeans, the opposing generals were referred to as 'equal heads' (κεφαλὰς) who 'raged like wolves' against each other.[6] Neither side would even consider retreat, and 'Strife [sic], that is fraught with many groanings, was glad as she looked on.'[7] In this quote, 'equal heads' is a direct reference to the commanders of the Trojan and Achaean armies. In the ensuing battle, neither the Trojans nor Achaeans could gain an advantage because their respective leaders were equally matched in their competence and skill.

Centuries later Plutarch used κεφαλή in his account of the dissension between Vindex and Nero. According to Plutarch, Vindex invited Galba 'to assume the imperial power, and thus to serve what was a vigorous body in need of a head (κεφαλήν) meaning the Gallic provinces, which already had a hundred

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3 Observe that in addition to Paul, three other first century writers, Plutarch, Philo, and Josephus, also used κεφαλή metaphorically in reference to leaders.

4 Aristotle Rhetoric 3.1405b2.15–20.

5 In addition to the four citations to which allusion is made, see Aristotle On the Cosmos 6 (397b10) where 'τῆς . . . συνεκτικῆς αἰτίας κεφαλαιωδῶς' refers to 'that cause', i.e., God who has created all things and holds the world together. Note also Babarius' discussion of leadership where he personified the head (κεφαλή) and tail of a snake in conflict over which one would lead. Eventually the rational part of the snake, the head, succumbed to the irrational, self-willed tail. The tail dragged the whole body along in blind motion and subsequently fell into a pit. Having learned its lesson, the tail relinquished its authority back to the head in an attitude of submission and supplication. See Babarius *Fable* 134.

6 Homer *Iliad* 11.72.

7 Ibid.

thousand men under arms, and could arm other thousands besides.'⁸ As with Homer, Plutarch applied κεφαλή metaphorically to depict a strong and decisive leader who commanded respect and allegiance. The leader in this case was Galba.

A third illustration where κεφαλή refers to one of superior rank is found in the writings of Josephus who described the relationship between David and Saul. Josephus stated that whenever Saul was assailed by evil spirits David would 'stand over the king (κεφαλῆς) and strike strings and chant his songs.'⁹ Such practice was said to soothe Saul's tormented mind and body.

Perhaps one of the most descriptive references to κεφαλή is one taken from Philo. In writing about the reign of the Ptolemies, Philo cited the achievements of Philadelphus which 'almost outnumbered those of all others put together, and as the head takes the highest place in the living body, so he may be said to head (κεφαλὴ) the kings.'¹⁰ Philo, thus, exalted Philadelphus to a status above that of other Ptolemic rulers.

Like the Greek classicists, the authors of Scripture also employed κεφαλή to denote rulers or heads of society. In the Septuagint, the translator of Judges wrote: 'the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon . . . shall become head (κεφαλὴν) over all the inhabitants of Gilead (Jdg. 10:18). Subsequently, Jephthah was selected by the elders of Gilead as 'the man' who would be the Israelites 'head (κεφαλὴν) and captain' in their struggle against the Ammonites (Jdg. 11:11). In a different vein, David was quoted as saying to the Lord, 'you have delivered me from the attacks of my people; you have preserved me as the head (κεφαλὴν) of nations' (2 Sa. 22:4). In the New Testament God is said to be the head (κεφαλή) of Christ, Christ the head (κεφαλὴ) of man, and man the head (κεφαλὴ) of woman (1 Cor. 11:3). Elsewhere, Christ is referred to as head (κεφαλή) of the Church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 2:10, 19).

While the preceding references may seem limited, they nevertheless help to substantiate the use of κεφαλή to depict persons presiding in authority over others.¹¹ It was to such rulers

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⁸ Plutarch *Galba* 4.3.

⁹ Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 6.166. See also Jewish *War* 3.54; 4.261.

¹⁰ Philo *Moses II* 30. See also *Moses II* 290–91; *On Rewards and Punishment* 114, 125; *Preliminary Studies* 61; and *Special Laws* 184.

¹¹ Contrast the conclusion of A. and B. Mickelson, who in their article entitled 'The "Head" of the Epistles', *CT* 25, 1981, 23, state that κεφαλή suggesting 'superior rank . . . does not appear in secular Greek of New Testament times.' S. Bartchy goes even further writing, 'the fact is that, in ordinary Greek usage ancient and modern, the word κεφαλή never means "head" in the sense of director, boss, decision maker.' See his article 'Power Submission, and Sexual

that people in submission were to obey and subordinate themselves.

Paul's application of κεφαλή and ὑποτάσσω to the institution of marriage was appropriate for his readers because the roles of first-century husbands and wives were commensurate to those of authority figures in relation to their subject. Accordingly, Plutarch graphically describes husbands as benevolent dictators whose desires were tended by observant and devoted wives. As might be expected, Plutarch urged wives to live submissively, sublimating their own interests and needs in deference to those of their husbands. Plutarch's model clearly is patriarchal in nature with husbands presented superior in rank and authority over their wives.[12] Indeed, Plutarch insisted 'that control ought to be exercised by the man over the woman.'[13] Admittedly, that 'control' was not to be exercised 'as the owner has control of a piece of property, but, as the soul contends with the body, by entering into her feelings and being knit to her through good will.'[14] While Plutarch's premise at the outset seems commendable, the fact remains that in his schema 'goodwill' was expressed by husbands at the expense of their wives' needs, feelings, and beliefs.

Male domination in marriage was as evident in Jewish society as it was in the Greco-Roman world. Among the Jews, women generally fulfilled their marital roles in deference to the dictates of their husbands.

> The wife's first duties were household duties. She had to grind meal, bake, wash, cook, suckle the children, prepare her keep (b. Ket. 58b), to work the wool by spinning and weaving (M. Ket. v. 5). Other duties express her servile relationship with her husband; but rights over her went even further. He laid claim to anything his wife found (M.B.M. i.5—in this she resembled a Gentile slave, . . .), as well as

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Identity Among Early Christians', *Essays on New Testament Christianity* C. Wetzel, ed. (Cincinnati, 1978), 78.

[12] Plutarch *Advice to Bride and Groom* 138–146. Note that certain marriage contracts protected wives by prohibiting husbands from marrying a second wife, having children by another woman, having a concubine, or doing anything which would prove embarrassing, insulting, or detrimental to the marriage. See *Select Papyri* 1; 2; 3.

[13] Plutarch *Advice to Bride and Groom* 142E. 33. The conclusion of Plutarch regarding the roles of husbands and wives was posited earlier by Aristotle in *Politics* 1.2.12 (1.1254b. 13–15) and 1.2.21 (1.1255b. 19–20) where he stated 'the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject . . . and the government of a household is monarchy since every house is governed by a single ruler.'

[14] Plutarch *Advice to Bride and Groom* 142E.33.

any earnings from her manual work, and he had the right (because of Num. 30:7–9) to annul her vows (M. Yeb. x.1). The wife was obliged to obey her husband as she would a master—the husband was called *rab*—indeed this was a religious duty (CA 2.201). . . . In case of danger of life, the husband must be saved first (M. Hor. iii. 7)—unless the wife's chastity was threatened).[15]

The effect of such a life-style upon Jewish women must have been demeaning and frustrating. It is little wonder that in the providence of God Paul addressed the issue of marital authority in his Ephesian discourse.

The foregoing review makes evident the parallel between the marriage system of the first century, both Greek and Jewish, and the application by Paul in Ephesians 5:21–33 of ὑποτάσσω and κεφαλή to the roles of wives and husbands. Initially, it seems that the Apostle simply restates in biblical terms the basic marital structure of his society using emotionally charged figures to underscore his point.[16] Accordingly, Paul wrote that wives were to 'submit' themselves (ὑποτασσόμενοι) to their husbands and 'respect' (φοβῆται) them for husbands serve as the 'head' (κεφαλή) of their wives (Eph. 5:21–25, 28, 33). Although Paul wrote that the wife's subjection was conditioned by her husband's love (ἀγαπᾶτε), a love patterned after that of Christ for the Church, the Apostle nevertheless placed the wife under the authority of her husband. The major difference, then, between Paul's view of marriage and that of his culture was the Apostle's understanding of the concepts of 'love' and 'respect' illustrated by the analogy of Christ's relation to the Church. Thus, the Apostle equated κεφαλή to ἀγάπη and Christ's atoning death thereby redefining κεφαλή not structurally with one person dominant over another but Christologically in terms of servanthood, sacrifice, and love. Husbands were to fulfil their roles as 'head' of the household by being servants, expressing their authority and power through selfless acts of love.[17]

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15 J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. H. Cave and C. H. Cave (Philadelphia, 1969), 369.

16 J. R. Beck in his article entitled 'Mutuality in Marriage', *JPT* 6, 1978, 144, traces the patriarchal model of marriage back to the Fall when God cursed Eve consigning her to travail in childbirth and subjection under the rule of her husband (Gn. 3:16).

17 See Bartchy, 'Power, Submission, and Sexual Identity Among the Early Christians', 77; and M. Barth, *Ephesians 4–6* in *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, 1960), 618–19, 714. Note K. Barth's view of headship in which he understood the husband to be the leader and initiator in the marital union who is primarily responsible for the common advance of himself and his wife to freedom and fellowship. See *Church Dogmatics* eds. G. W. Bromiley and

In response to a husband's love, Paul said the wife was to 'submit' herself as a duty rendered 'unto Christ'. Her subjection was to be voluntary, patterned after that of the Church's submission to Christ (Eph. 5:24).[18] Although the act of submission appears to relegate the wife to a position subordinate or inferior to her husband, her attitude should not be one of resentment but of 'respect' (Eph. 5:33). 'Respect' is the expression of honor, esteem, deference or courtesy for another. The word depicts one of the many facets of ἀγάπη. It is not a manifestation of abject fear fostered by submission and obedience to an oppressive chauvinist.[19] One could say that as the husband fulfils his role as 'head' through 'love' and the wife fulfils her role as 'subordinate' through 'respect', the two become servants to one another, uplifting each other as Christ uplifts the Church. Their mutual subjection grows out of their life together in the Spirit, marked by reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21). In such a manner, the two become one flesh (Eph. 5:32), mutually sharing an identity as a married couple, but each maintaining an individual identity as well.[20]

While Paul modified the first century patriarchal model of marriage with its view of 'headship' and 'submission', his conclusions nevertheless are viewed in some quarters with skepticism. The Apostle's hierarchical structure appears oppressive to many because it contradicts what are perceived as the fundamental rights of individuals to maintain autonomy over themselves and equality in cooperate relations. While in principle the Apostle argued that in Christ all people are equal, both Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female (Gal. 3:28), he appears to have accepted the norms and mores of his day for what they were. The effect of his egalitarian principles upon succeeding generations, however, has been revolutionary, particularly upon how men and women today perceive their roles in relation to one another. They tend to regard one another as equals with the consequent result that more and more couples are opting

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T. F. Torrance; trans. A. T. Mackay; T. H. L. Parker, H. Knight, A. Kennedy, and J. Marks (Edinburgh, 1961), 3.4.173–74, 194.

[18] M. J. Meadow, 'Wifely Submission: Psychological/Spiritual Growth Perspectives', *JRH* 19, 1980, 106.

[19] Barth, *Ephesians 4–6,* 609.

[20] See Bartchy, 'Power, Submission, and Sexual Identity Among the Early Christians', 76–80; Barth, *Ephesians 4–6,* 610; Beck, 'Mutuality in Marriage', 146–47; and J. P. Sampley, *And the Two Shall Become One Flesh: A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21–33.* Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, no. 6 (Cambridge, n.d.), 158.

for an egalitarian system of marriage.[21] But is such a system biblical? Did not Paul state that the patriarchal model in Ephesians 5 was the structure Christians were to implement in their marriages? Should not the husband as 'head' be dominant over his wife, and the wife as 'subordinate' be submissive to her husband? At the outset, it might seem that the appropriate answer to these questions is yes. Certainly a literal translation of the terms ὑποτάσσω and κεφαλή commend such an interpretation. Further consideration, however, suggests an alternative response. Could it be that the structure of authority inherent in the patriarchal model cited in Ephesians 5 primarily is culturally based and therefore is not binding upon modern marriages? Following this line of thought, Paul apparently recognized that the social system of his day would not change and prescribed in Ephesians practical rules that would enhance the existent marital system. Presumably, the hierarchical model depicted by ὑποτάσσω and κεφαλή merely served Paul as the only available framework he knew upon which to append his discussion of 'love' and 'respect'. The patriarchal model, then, while relevant for those couples who choose it for themselves, is not necessarily normative for all couples. What is universal are the Christocentric principles of 'love' and 'respect' which married partners express through mutal submission to one another and Christ.

Obviously, it is difficult to determine whether ὑποτάσσω and κεφαλή should be applied literally as a legal guide governing Christian marriages or whether these words more accurately are understood as reflections of first-century culture balanced by precepts timeless in application. Whatever conclusion is reached, one fact is certain, the principles of 'love' and 'respect' are enduring and will enhance all marriages regardless of the marital structure, whether it be open or closed, patriarchal or matriarchal, hierarchical or egalitarian.

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[21] P. K. Jewett writes in his book *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids, 1978), 149, that for men and women to live creatively under God 'calls for on the part of the man to renounce the prerogatives, privileges, and powers which tradition has given him in the name of male headship. And it calls for courage on the part of the woman to share the burdens and responsibilities of life with the man, that in love and humility they may fulfil their common destiny as Man.'