

“For the Husband is the Head of the Wife:” An Exegetical and Hermeneutical Application of Eph 5:23

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Introduction

Family disintegration in the contemporary times is a matter of great concern to almost all. It becomes increasingly an object of concern when the Bible is cited though misconstrued as an authority to back up acclaimed misnomer. In an age when mankind has become so enlightened and when the demography of man's superiority over woman is on sociological decline¹, one sees that family cohesiveness is everyday challenged. Culturally, especially in African understanding most men still find it difficult to accept the fact the way it is. They still see women as subordinate, weaker sex and unequal to men². Some husbands see themselves as the men of the house, whose words are final and must be obeyed. Most believe that they are the head of the women citing Eph 5:23 as a backup. In the face of the least resistance from the wife or children, the result is obvious: Crisis, Exchange of words, Fighting and in some cases family breakup. It is understandable that most African society is patriarchal but even in matrilineal cultures, the story is not so much different. It is not the intent of this research to defend the justifiability or non justifiability of patriarchy or matriarchy. One reading this work with the intention of getting a thesis in defence of women may be disappointed since much has been done by most feminists in that regard. The paper is not poised to develop a new theory in sociology. It confines itself in the main to a critical study of Paul's concept of *kephalē* in Eph 5:23 with a view to deciphering whether it is a connotation of superiority or of functionality. The thought foundation of the research is the incipient crises in today's family life especially in husband-wife relationship in which many twist Paul's thought to make him into a twenty-first century egalitarian or magnify elements of subordination in his thought in order to justify themselves. In order that the paper does not just seem to be an abstraction, it is interpreted within the context of its pericopé – Eph 5:21-33 with strict limitation in scope. Attempt is also made to dig into the background of Paul's understanding of the position of women in order to have firmer clue to his deposition in the text under study. Since Paul is a New Testament author, references are made to the positions of women in the ministry and life of Jesus so as to see whether Paul was just taking a contradictory position. His position in his other letters is also referenced in order to give a proper interpretation of his teaching in the text studied. An exegetical study of *kephalē* is made in order to open the intent of the author. This is followed by evaluation and conclusion.

¹ It is not only in family life that we witness a change in trend. Whiteley observes that the greatest single secular problem in the world today is the rise to power of those previously underprivileged because of race, social or economic status, or sex. In South Africa for instance, race is a burning problem within the Christian church. Analogous problem in England is excessive privilege attached to social stratification. In Sweden the matter of female ministers has led to considerable heartburning (D.E.H. Whiteley: *The Theology of St. Paul*(Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 222.

² Explaining the causes of divorce in African marriage system, Mbiti noted that barrenness is the primary cause but mostly in cases where the woman is the cause of the problem. If the man is impotent, his brother or relation can always bear children for him through his wife. If the woman is infertile, the man simply takes another wife and can even send the first one away (J.S. Mbiti: *African Religions and Philosophy*{London: Heinemann Educational books Ltd, 1975} 145-146).

1. Historical Background to Paul's Understanding of the Position of Women

The status of women in the OT varies according to periods and social circles. This is clear from the literary genre such as OT laws³, Proverbs⁴ and historical writings⁵. Before the exile, women were active in social and religious life. Postexilic period posited them as relegated to the inferior position⁶. Despite the patriarchal and androcentric nature of the OT times, many passages still view women at a very high esteem. We have stories of such great figures such as Sarah and Hagar, Rebekkah and Rachel. Zipporah and Miriam were close associates of Moses. Women such as Tamar, Rahab and Dinah facilitated the occupation of the Promised Land. The stories of Naomi and Ruth and the trustful acceptance of God's will by Hannah all indicate the exalted position of women in the OT understanding. They were even saviours of Jewish people and participated in the politics of societal leadership⁷. Women appear alongside men in public assemblies⁸ and annual festivals⁹. E. Bosetti eliciting pastoral symbolism of the OT thinks that women even served as co-pastors in the OT¹⁰. Examples are Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Miriam, David and Abigail. All these suggest the existence in the OT, certain basic equalities between men and women. The change in attitude that greeted the post-exilic period and especially the second Temple times is not unconnected with centralized worship at the Temple that brought with it regulations that favoured men over women¹¹. Again also Acher observes that in the post-exilic Jewish society, "the older system of the extended patriarchal family gave way to the nuclear family"¹² necessitating an increasing rigidity towards women limiting them to domestics. Paul being a true and well grounded Jew, one wonders whether he was simply influenced by the thoughts of the later times such that he totally neglected even the more readable parts of the Pentateuch. This paper takes this to be least convincing. There is need to further thoughts on other possible sources of Pauline thoughts.

Lohse¹³, Martin¹⁴, Schrage¹⁵ and Schweizer¹⁶ in their study of the origin household code in Pauline writings maintain that it was mediated to early Christianity from Hellenistic Judaism.

³ According to OT laws women are legally dependent upon men. Cf. Exod 20:17; 22:22-24.

⁴ Proverbs picture women as a mother who instructs and nurtures (Prov 1:8; 6:20); a wife who looks after his husband interests (Prov 12:4; 19:14) or an adulteress who endangers men (Prov 2:16; 5:3).

⁵ While some writings picture women as mothers and wives who are under men (2Kgs 11,2), harlots (1Kgs 3), prophetesses (Judges 4:4-16), wise women (2 Sam 14:2) it is important to note that the creation story in Gen 2:18,23 emphasize the concept of equality of both sexes.

⁶ M. Noth, *The Laws in the Pentateuch and other Studies* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 8.

⁷ Bathsheba assisted in the establishment of the Davidic dynasty (2Sam 11,1-12,25; 1Kgs 1,11-2,27). The treacherous plots of queens Jezebel (1Kgs 16:29-21:29) and Athaliah (2Kgs 8:26) demonstrate the active involvement of women in leadership in the OT.

⁸ Exod 35; Deut 29:9; 31:12-13.

⁹ 1Sam 2:19; 2Kgs 23:21.

¹⁰ E. Bosetti, *Yahweh Shepherd of the People: Pastoral Symbolism in the Old Testament* (Middlegreen: St. Paul's Publications, 1993) 17.

¹¹ Cf. J. B. Segal, "Elements of Male Chauvinism in Classical Halakhah", *Judaism* 24 (1976) 226-244.

¹² L.J. Acher, "The Role of Jewish Women in Graeco-Roman Palestine", A. Cameron – A. Kuhrt ed., *Images of Women in Antiquity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983) 273-287.

¹³ E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) 154-157.

¹⁴ R.P. Martin, "Haustafeln" *NIDNTT* 3 (1975) 928-932.

¹⁵ W. Schrage, "Zur Ethik der neutestamentlichen Haustafeln" *NTS* 21 (1975) 1-22.

¹⁶ E. Schweizer, "Traditional Ethical Patterns in the Pauline and Post-Pauline Letters and Their Development (lists of vices and house-tables)", *Text and Interpretation*. FS M. Black, ed. E. Best and R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge: CUP, 1979) 195-209.

One may not deny outright the influence of Hellenistic Judaism on Pauline thoughts but it will be wrong to draw the curtain there. Balch¹⁷ as well as Thraede¹⁸ and Verner¹⁹ argue convincingly that, since the texts focus on authority and subordination it relates to larger topic of the state and is traceable to classical Greek Philosophers. It is noteworthy that Aristotle in his introduction to his discussion of family life says:

Now that it is clear what the component parts of the state are, we have first of all to discuss household management, for every state is composed of households. ... The investigation of everything should begin with the smallest parts, and the primary and smallest parts of the household are master and slave, husband and wife father and children; we ought therefore to examine the proper constitution and character of each of these three relationships, I mean that of mastership, that of marriage ..., and thirdly the progenitive relationship.²⁰

The discussion of household ordering and management retained this Aristotelian outline down into the later Roman period as evidenced in the writings of such wonderful authors like Josephus²¹. It therefore follows that by the time of Paul's writing, proper household management was generally regarded as a matter of social and political concern and that any upsetting of the traditional hierarchical order of the household could consider a potential threat to the order of society as a whole. One can then assume that Paul and indeed other NT authors took up the theme of household management in order to respond indirectly to accusations against Christians as a rebel group against the state. In fact, it is necessary for the authors to really give a teaching on the ordering in the Christian family since most believers saw themselves as members of a new group whose ethics of life are not fully in conformity with the existing society. That they did not depart from the acceptable order in the society could be conjectured to be simply because historically, what was obtainable in the Roman world was similar to the Jewish world. Ordinarily therefore, there was no seeming pastoral need to depart from the attendant culture as that would also strengthen the new male converts. In the words of A.T. Lincoln,

Whatever the original reason for the introduction of the code into a letter ... it remains true that, given the dominant ethos about the household in the Greco-Roman world, the specific content assigned to the domestic duties would be bound to have a bearing on believers' relationship to the norms in their surrounding society²².

The household code of Ephesians can be seen as part of the process of stabilizing communal relations in the Pauline churches²³.

¹⁷ D.L. Balch, "Household Codes". In *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament*, ed. D.E. Aune. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988) 25-50.

¹⁸ K. Thraede, "Zum historischen Hintergrund der 'Haustafeln' des Neuen Testaments", *Pietas*. FS B. Kötting, ed. E. Dassmann (Münster: Aschendorf, 1980) 359-368.

¹⁹ D.C. Verner, *The Household of God: The Social World of Pastoral Epistles* (Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1983).

²⁰ Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1253b.

²¹ He believes that the Law upholds man's and therefore calls on women to be obedient not in humiliation but so that she may be directed. Cf. Josephus: *Ap.* 2.24 § 199.

²² A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990) 359.

²³ M. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 102-122.

It is the conviction of this paper that Paul did not just write from the blues. He must have been influenced by his strict Jewish background and then the Hellenistic culture he encountered and in which milieu he wrote.

2. In the Jesus' Ministry vis-à-vis Paul's Teaching

Paul severally referred to himself as 'apostle of Christ Jesus'²⁴. If he is an apostle and truly he is, then his thought progression must be in line with the master whose apostle he is, namely, Jesus. From the gospel records, women enjoyed preeminent position in the life and ministry of Jesus. They were never regarded seriously as subordinates. They were active participants. This is provable from the chart below:

Name	Significance	Reference
Mary of Nazareth	At the invitation of the Archangel Gabriel, she accepted her vocation to be the mother of Jesus. she visited her cousin Elizabeth in her early pregnancy, prayed in solidarity with the poor (the Magnificat of Luke 1:46-55). She gave birth to Jesus and got him consecrated to the Lord. She escaped to Egypt to protect Jesus from Herod. She assisted Joseph in searching for Jesus after he got lost for three days. She prompted her Son to perform his first miracle of nature at Cana. She was a the foot of the cross and was present at the Pentecost.	Matt 1:16-25; 2:11.13-23; Luke 1:39-56; 2:3-19, 21-24, 39, 42-51; John 2:1-12; 19, 25-27; Acts 1:12-14; 2:1-4
Mary of Magdala	After Jesus exorcised her of seven demons, she became a patroness of Jesus and his apostles. She stood at the cross with other holy women. She brought spices to anoint the body of Jesus after burial. She was a primal witness to the resurrected Messiah. She was commissioned to announce the resurrection to the apostles. Her proclamation, 'I have seen the Lord' became foundational for the Christian faith.	Matt 27:55-56; 28:1; Mark 15:40-47; 16:1-11; Luke 8:2-3; 24:1-11; John 19:25; 20:1-18
Martha of Bethany	She was the sister of Mary and Lazarus. She was a patroness and disciple of Jesus who proclaimed him to be 'the Messiah, the Son of God' and witnessed the raising of Lazarus from the dead.	Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-44; 12:2.
Mary of Bethany	The sister of Martha and Lazarus. She was at Jesus' feet as a disciple while Martha continued with the duties of hospitality. She anointed Jesus feet with perfumed oil.	Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-44; 12:3-8.
Joanna, wife of	She was the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward. She was a disciple of Jesus and also patroness of Jesus	Luke 8:1-3; 24:9-10

²⁴ This is evident in his introduction to most of his letters. Cf. Rom 1:1; 1Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1; 1Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Tit 1:1.

Chuza	and his apostles. She was among the first to witness the resurrected Lord.	
Mary, wife of Cleopas	She was the sister of Mary, Mother of Christ, wife of Cleopas (Alphaeus) and the mother of James the younger and Joses (Joseph). She stood at the foot of the cross and accompanied Mary of Magdala to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, where they encountered angels who announced to them that Jesus had risen.	Matt 27:55-61; 28:1-10; Mark 15:40-47; John 19:25.
Sussana	A patroness and disciple of Jesus, she was listed among those healed from demons and other infirmities by Jesus.	Luke 8:1-3
Samaritan woman	This woman is unnamed in the scriptures. The Eastern Church remembers her as St. Photini. She met with Jesus at a well in Sychar. Offering her 'living water', Jesus revealed his mission as the Messiah to her.	John 4:1-28.42
Salome	One of the witnesses to the death of Jesus and the empty tomb.	Mark 15:40; 16,1
The unnamed woman sinner	She burst in on a banquet to wash Jesus' feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair. Jesus assured her that her sins were forgiven because she loved much.	Luke 7:36-50
Peter's mother-in-law	She was ill with fever in Peter's house. Jesus cured her and immediately, she rose and began to perform service for them.	Matt 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39

It is therefore evident from the chart above that women were not relegated by Christ. If it could be recorded that they took active part in the very important aspects of the ministry of Jesus and even followed him around and provided for his needs, then most probably there were many other things they did that were left unrecorded. Since this is the case, it would be unthinkable that Paul with all his zeal for Christ would depart so radically from the part toed by his master. Again, if he repudiated Peter's unscrupulous attachment to some Jewish practices like eating with the gentiles, then he would not have gone so low as to be attached unqualifiedly to just Jewish culture of men's inequality with women. The man who disdained the dangers and fought to see that the non-Jews shared equal rights with Jewish Christians would not be so myopic to uphold strict inequality in his teaching and writings. There is therefore, probably something more to Paul's coinage of *kephalē* in his belief that man is the head of the woman!

3. Exegesis of Ephesians 5:23

The verse under consideration is a continuation of the instruction laden sentence that started in verse 22. It is necessary to note an observation on the primary verb 'to submit' used in verse 22 which gives reason to the husband being the head of the wife. In order words, wives must submit because the husbands are the head. The submission is because of the position of the husband as

the head. It will be too hasty and superficial to attach the meaning of superiority to ‘head’ because of the verb ‘to submit’. Lincoln²⁵ argues that although the verb ‘submit’ has been supplied for the sake of the English translation, it is most likely that the best Greek text has no verb and was dependent for its sense on the participle in the previous verse. His reasoning is attested in the readings in some mss²⁶. This paper purposefully limits its purview strictly to an analysis of the key word *kephalē* as used in the passage and cognate passages. Textual criticism of the entire pericopé and analysis of other words in the passage are left to more amplified volumes.

Schlier notes three significant denotations of *kephalē* in secular usage. It denotes

- i. what is supreme, first or extreme.
- ii. It denotes what is prominent, outstanding or determinative.
- iii. It refers to the whole man, the person²⁷.

In the LXX it is used to render the Hebrew word *rô's*²⁸ for texts indicating ruler or head of a society.

In the Hellenistic and Gnostic circles, it is used to refer to the head as that which is part of the body. It has element of superiority and unity with the body at the same time²⁹.

Paul's bent towards his strict Jewish background, namely, the OT and the unitary sense of *kephalē* in both the Hellenistic and Gnostic circles all added to his coinage of the term to push on a decisive theological message and thus he did not just say that the man is the head, he goes further to compare it with Christ's headship of the Church. In other words, an understanding of Paul's idea that man is the head of the wife presupposes a perfect understanding of Christ's headship of the Church.

One is prone to believe firmly that in preferring *kephalē*, Paul connotes more than just rulership or beginning or else he would have used *archē*. Six passages provide us with Christ as the head: Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:10; and 2:19. Lattke is of the view that Pauline motif of the subjection of the cosmos and of Christ's exaltation over everything determines the cosmic-ecclesiological *kephalē* Christology of Eph 1:22³⁰. In the passages cited above, the term *kephalē* first refers to Christ, the exalted Lord as the head of His Body, the Church. From Eph 4:15ff and Col 2:19 we get the sense and meaning that from this Head the body grows up to this Head so that the Body and Head together grow “into mature manhood” of Eph 4:13 or “into one new man” of Eph 2:15. Schlier comments on this that:

The schema itself makes it clear that we have here more than a figurative application of the relationship of the human body to Christ and the church. We are in the sphere of the Gnostic redeemer myth as a development of the aeon conception. To describe Christ as the Head of the Church against this background is to emphasise the unity

²⁵ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 351.

²⁶ ̂46 B Clement, Jerome, Theodore

²⁷ H. Schlier, “*kephalē*” in *TDNT* III 673-678.

²⁸ It must be noted that though the LXX has this translation, it is always contextual as some passages have *archē*, instead of *kephalē*, example is Isa 41:4 LXX.

²⁹ Schlier, “*kephalē*” 677.

³⁰ M. Lattke, “*kephalē*,” in *EDNT* II, 284-286.

between Christ and the Church ... The Head is not present without or apart from the body, nor the body without or apart from the Head³¹.

Thus, Christ is the Head of the Church not by subordination or wielding powers but in unbreakable continuum directing the growth of the body to Himself. The *kephalē* connotes life in fulfilment. It follows from this understanding that man is the head of the wife not through subordination but in fulfilment of function, namely, to see the wife as one body with himself, loving and caring for her as he would his very self. By likening the headship to Christ's, the spiritual hierarchy dismantles the social hierarchy. The *kephalē* combines mutuality with wilful obedience³² for a common and unitary growth.

Evaluation and Conclusion

This research did not deny elements of subordination in Pauline thought. The position of the paper is that Paul is a practical man. His teaching is adapted to his own age. Due to passing conditions and changes in time, it becomes difficult to attach eternal validity to a particular thought due to the passing conditions of a former century. The subordination of women in Paul's thought is simply socially and timely conditioned. If he lived in a different culture and civilization, he would have employed different analogies. It is not a subordination in servitude but in functionality hence his referencing it to the relation between Christ to God and the Church to the Lord. The author of Ephesians rightly views the family as the subunit or microcosm of Christian society. In a society where asceticism was of a very strong attraction³³ MacDonald is convinced that Paul extolled marriage in Ephesians as denigration to ascetic attractions³⁴. It was also a response to combat the menace of sexual immorality prevalent and threatening Christianity in the Asia Minor society³⁵. In order to achieve his purpose, he borrowed from his Jewish background as well as also from the philosophical thoughts of the times to communicate his theologically laden message. Since the society thrives through separation of powers and checks and balances, the family, a microcosmic society and God's household must also have separation of powers for there to be marital unity. The unity is an instance of the church's unity and *ipso facto* is also an instance of the cosmic unity at large mirroring God's universal purpose³⁶. The author of the Ephesians coined *kephalē* in relation to man in marriage not to express man's superiority and woman's subordination but to express the superb example of the mutual submission that is necessary in marriage through loving headship and voluntary submission as expressed in the relation between Christ and the Church. It is the submission of this paper that when Paul refers to the man as the head of the wife, it is not headship in the sense of ruling, directing and controlling but

... to the function of providing unity i.e. nurturing the body and directing its growth and life. The husband is the head of the wife not only because of the authority God has given to him but, as shown by the comparison with Christ, by virtue of the fact that he is vitally interested in her welfare. He is her protector³⁷.

³¹ Schlier, "*kephalē*", 680.

³² Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 361.

³³ Paul combated ascetic tendencies in Col 2:16-23.

³⁴ M. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 118-119.

³⁵ Eph 4:19; 5:3-6, 12, 18 present sexual immorality as a serious threat to Christianity.

³⁶ J.P. Sampley, *And the Two Shall Become One Flesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971) 149.

³⁷ G.H. Graham, *An Exegetical Summary of Ephesians* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1997) 483.

