

Why the 'Woman as the Weaker Vessel' Teaching is Wrong

I Peter 3:6-7 has been used throughout history to teach male authority and female subservience in marriage and society. After all, did not Peter refer to the wife as the “weaker vessel?” And did he not admonish wives to follow the example of Sarah who obeyed her husband and called him lord?”

Although modern evangelicals tend to be soften their comments on this passage, many still agree in essence with the 17th century exegete, Matthew Poole, who explained the “weaker vessel” phrase as meaning, “Weaker than the husbands, and that both in body and mind, as women usually are. Weak vessels must be gently handled . . . it is a part of that prudence according to which men should dwell with their wives, to have the more regard to them because of their infirmities, bearing with them and hiding them.” Based on this same notion that the woman is handicapped by a weaker emotional and mental constitution, I have heard modern charismatic preachers tells women that God placed them under the authority of men for their good and safety.

A Weaker Status in the Culture

However, a more careful examination of this passage will reveal that Peter is not referring to a weaker frame or constitution of the woman, but to a weaker status in the culture of the day. A closer look will also reveal that Peter is not affirming a male hierarchy in marriage but is calling for mutual respect and partnership.

“Weaker vessel” in this passage is not referring to an intellectual or emotional weakness as has been often argued, but to the woman’s weakened position in first century Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures. This is borne out by the fact that

the word “weaker” in this passage is translated from a cognate form of the Greek word *asthenei*, which means to be powerless and without strength. It is not limited to someone who is of a weaker essence or frame, but can refer someone, such as a prisoner, whom society has deprived of freedom and opportunity. This larger meaning is borne out by *Thayer’s Greek English Lexicon*, which includes the meaning of the word as “one who abstains from the use of his strength” and “one who has no occasion to prove his strength.”

Peter is thus referring to a cultural weakness wherein the wife/woman is marginalized and not given the opportunities to fully express her gifts and abilities. In fact, in first century Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, women were often treated like slaves and children and considered the possession of their husbands. That this is the meaning Peter has in mind is confirmed by the instruction he gives to husbands in the latter part of the verse.

Husbands are to Revere & Honor their Wives

Since the wife is, culturally speaking, the “weaker vessel,” Peter instructs the husband to give special “honor” to her. The word “honor” that Peter tells husbands to give their wives uses is a translation of the Greek word *timē* that *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* defines as “to honor, revere, venerate,” and as “the honor of one who outranks others.” Peter is here telling the husbands to treat their wives the very opposite of how the pagan culture treats their wives. Whereas the wives are treated as property and children in pagan homes, Peter tells the Christian husbands to treat their wives with the honor and respect they would show a boss or supervisor at work. They are to minister the opposite spirit.

What did Sarah Really Call Abraham?

At this point someone will surely ask, “But what about the fact that Peter tells the wives to follow the example of Sarah

who obeyed Abraham and called him “lord?” First of all, the New Testament translators have tried to alert us of the diminished authoritarian content of this word by translating it in all lower case letters, *i.e.*, “lord.”

In the Old Testament there are three different ways in which the translators utilize this word; (1) LORD (all caps), (2) Lord (1st letter cap) and (3) lord (all lower case). “LORD” is the translation of the personal and covenant name of God—YAHWEH—and is never used of anyone but God. It is the name that Third Commandment says is not to be taken in vain, *i.e.*, is not to be used in a light, empty or frivolous manner.

“Lord” is the translation of the Hebrew word *adonai* when it is used in ascribing respect and honor toward God. When *adonai* is used as an expression of respect or honor between human beings it is translated as “lord,” and carries a meaning such as “sir” or “ma’am.”

Indeed, the word that was used by Sarah in Genesis 18:12 was the Hebrew *adonai*, which is why it is translated with all lower case letter as “lord.” The use of *adonai* was a common way of expressing honor and respect to another person in Biblical times, without implications of subordination. For example, Aaron called Moses *adonai* (Numbers 12:11); Jacob called Esau *adonai* (Genesis 32:40); David called Saul *adonai* (I Samuel 24:8); and Hazael, who became king of Syria, called Elisha *adonai* (II Kings 8:12). In all these cases it is translated in all lower case letters—“lord”—because in such cases it does not indicate nor imply the superiority on the part of the one being addressed nor the inferiority on the one who is speaking.

The Faith of Sarah

In the latter part of 3:6 where Peter is addressing the wives, he says to them that they are Sarah’s daughters (spiritual

offspring), *if you do good and are not afraid of any terror*. When we look at the life of Sarah one thing we see is that she was a woman of courage who never showed any signs of fear. In contrast, Abraham showed fear on more than one occasion and at least twice put Sarah in jeopardy of being abused by a pagan ruler because he was afraid he would be killed if they knew that Sarah was his wife.

Nothing is said about Sarah being afraid, which is probably why she accommodated Abraham in his fear and cooperated with him in his little scheme by saying that she was his sister (she was his half-sister). Because Sarah trusted God and did not fear, God protected her and rebuked the king, threatening him with death, who had taken her into his harem (Genesis 20:1-7). We know that Sarah was a woman of faith for in the Hall of Faith of Hebrews 11, Sarah is included along with Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Gideon and others, and the caption about her begins with the words, *By faith Sarah . . .* She was not afraid and became a Mother of Nations.

Sarah respected Abraham but she was not afraid of him and had no qualms about confronting him when the situation called for it. One stark example occurred at the celebration for Isaac at the time of his weaning. During the festivities Sarah saw Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar, mocking and scoffing. She proceeded to inform Abraham that he must get rid of Ismael and his mother, *for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac* (Genesis 21:10).

Now, Abraham loved Ishmael and Sarah's demand was very painful to him. The Scripture says her ultimatum was very *displeasing* or "very distressing" to him *because of his son*. Nonetheless, God took Sarah's side in the situation. He spoke to Abraham and said, *Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called*.

The word "listen" in this verse means to listen with the

intent of carrying out what has been said. God actually ordered Abraham to obey Sarah in the situation. It was not a matter of who had authority over whom; it was a matter of what was right in the situation. God was, in effect, saying to Abraham, "If you want to remain in the center of my plan and purpose, you must do what Sarah has said, for she is right." The right thing is not always the easy thing and Abraham, to his credit, did the right thing even though it was very painful for him.

Sarah's Co-Equal Status with Abraham

The evidence shows that Sarah was a strong woman who loved and respected her husband, but was not in any way fawning or subservient toward him. Her very name is derived from the Hebrew word *sar*, which means "prince" or "princess," indicating that she was from a royal or aristocratic family. This is confirmed by the fact that personal pronouns are used when Scripture speaks of her departure with Abraham from Haran to go into the land of Canaan. Genesis 12:3 says that Abram took his wife Sarai and all *their* possessions . . . and the people whom *they* had acquired in Haran. In other words, it was not Abraham's possessions and servants, it was *their* possessions and it was the people whom *they* had acquired in Haran.

One maid servant that Sarah had acquired was the Egyptian named Hagar. It was Hagar whom Sarah gave to Abraham to be a surrogate mother for her when she was unable to bear a child. When Hagar conceived and began to treat Sarah with contempt, Sarah dealt harshly with her and Hagar ran away. God, however, spoke to Hagar and instructed her to return, saying, *Return to your mistress and submit yourself under her hand* (Genesis 16:9).

Notice that God did not tell Hagar to return to Abraham, but to Sarah. He also referred to Sarah as Hagar's "mistress," a word that is from the Hebrew word *ghebeer* meaning "master" or "lord." God Himself recognized Sarah's place alongside Abraham

in the household and that Hagar was Sarah's responsibility, not Abraham's.

By the way, the Bible is not here advocating slavery. Slavery came into the world with sin and the fall, and the Biblical writers merely describe things as they are in a fallen world. God instructs Hagar to return to Sarah and submit to her because in the fallen condition it was the safest thing for her at the time and the only way for her to see God's plan unfold for her and the child she was carrying.

God treated Sarah as an equal with Abraham. This is borne out by the fact that when God renewed the covenant with Abram and changed his name to Abraham he also changed Sarai's name to Sarah, thus make her a mutual partner with Abraham in His plan them and their posterity. Terence Fretheim, Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, says, "Sarah is a made a co-participant in the divine promises given to Abraham regarding a son and his descendants. She has a promise in her own right, not simply through Abraham."

Peter was very aware of this aspect of Abraham and Sarah's relationship which is why, after admonishing the husbands to give honor to their wives, he reminds them that their wives are equal co-heirs with them in the grace of life, and if they do not treat them as such their prayers will be hindered (I Peter 3:7).

Sarah's Example – Whose Daughters You Are

The point here is that Sarah was not a meek, fawning subordinate wife. She was a woman of stature, faith and courage. She respected her husband but was not afraid of him and had no qualms about challenging him when the situation called for it. She was the kind of wife described by Jewish rabbis in their commentary on Genesis 2:18 where God said He would make the man a *helper comparable* to him, a translation of the Hebrew phrase *ezer neged*.

In the *Chumash*, a Jewish commentary on the *Torah* that is widely used in schools and synagogues throughout North America, the commentators say that the word *neged*, that is translated “comparable” or “meet,” literally means “against.” The rabbis insist that God said He would make the man a “helper against” him. They go on to say;

Many have noted that the ideal marriage is not necessarily one of total agreement in all matters. Often it is the wife’s responsibility to oppose her husband and prevent him from acting rashly, or to help him achieve a common course by questioning, criticizing, and discussing. Thus the verse means literally that there are times a wife can best be a helper by being against him (*The Chumash*, Stone Edition, 13).

To summarize, in I Peter 3:6-7 Peter is merely encouraging Christian wives, who would be aware of their new status “in Christ,” not to despise their non-Christian or imperfect husbands. At the same time he exhorts husbands to respect and honor their wives and to remember that they are coequal-heirs of the grace of life.

When all is said and done, Peter’s exhortation brings a levelling and mutuality to the Christian home in the midst of a pagan culture where the woman was treated as a slave or a child, and where Christian women might tend to despise their “unspiritual” husbands. His utilization of Sarah as an example communicates with force that God is looking for women of faith, courage and character who will respect their husbands but not fear them. Husbands are to treat wives with the sort of honor and respect that they show to a boss or superior in the work place. These were revolutionary instructions for husbands and wives in the first century and are still so today; but if put into practice, they have the power to transform any marriage.

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