Sarah Called Abraham Lord

Philip B. Payne · German translation: Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf · November 2022 · revised in October 2026

A short explanation of 1 Peter 3 on the relationship of husband and wife in marriage, by Philip B. Payne on Twitter, November 2022

Translated back from the German; Philip B. Payne's original thread (November 2022) could not be located.

What does it mean in 1 Peter 3:6 that Sarah called her husband "lord" and that she is a model for the Christian women Peter is addressing? Does this point to a meaning of headship and authority in marriage? It does not.

> ***1 In the same way, you wives, submit to your own husbands, so that, even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, 2 when they have seen your pure conduct in fear; 3 let your adornment not be the outward kind, braiding the hair and putting on gold jewelry or wearing fine clothes, 4 but the hidden person of the heart, in the imperishable adornment of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious before God. 5 For this is how the holy women of old who put their hope in God also adorned themselves, submitting to their own husbands: 6 as Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord; you have become her children if you do good and do not fear any terror.*** *(translated from the German Elberfelder Bible)*

Peter's reference to Sarah here is really interesting, because there is only one place in Holy Scripture where Sarah calls Abraham her lord, and that is when she laughs at the divine visitors' prophecy that she will have a son:

"Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?'" (Genesis 18:12). At first glance, this is a strange text for Peter to cite as an example for us to follow.

Some people have suggested that Peter is not referring to Genesis but to the book "Testament of Abraham." I have recently looked into this idea. I think it is doubtful that Peter had access to the Testament of Abraham; it was probably not written until the first or second century. Moreover, none of the references to "my lord Abraham" stands in a context of obedience that would explain Peter's reference. So I believe we must find our answer in Genesis 18. But first, some important context from 1 Peter!

Peter is giving advice to Christian wives married to non-Christian husbands at a time of great hardship and suffering for Christians. Peter has addressed many ways in which Christians are to live within the existing social structures of a hostile world.

(This does not mean that he approves of all these social structures!) ***When he comes to marriage, the reason he gives for wives' submission is not that women are inferior or subordinate or have a different role.***

In a world where women did not have the option of simply walking away, and where a husband could order his wife to renounce Christ, the women could win their pagan husbands through their quiet witness to Christ. So what does Genesis 18 have to do with this? When Sarah speaks of pleasure or de-

light, she means sexual relations with her husband that could lead to the joy of a child. Since Sarah conceived Isaac, she clearly took part in this process with Abraham and obeyed the prophecy.

This suggests that Peter is assuring Christian wives, who might be afraid of conceiving a child with a pagan husband in that culture, that they need not fear it. This recalls Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:14: "Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy."

Neither 1 Peter nor the Abraham/Sarah story is suited to establishing a norm for a hierarchical marriage. Peter is giving pastoral advice to Christian women in a difficult situation (and, as we must note, in a culture that gave them no options).

In verse 7 Peter turns to Christian husbands married to Christian wives and speaks for the first time of a specifically Christian marriage.

Indeed! In the Bible Abraham is told to obey Sarah, but never the other way around. For Abraham's obedience to Sarah in Genesis 16:2, the Septuagint uses the same word that 1 Peter 3:6 uses for Sarah's obedience.

> ***2 And Sarai said to Abram, "See, the LORD has kept me from bearing children; please go in to my servant; perhaps I will be built up through her." And Abram obeyed the voice of Sarai.***

In 1 Peter 3:7 Peter turns to Christian husbands with Christian wives ***and calls on them to submit to their wives.*** It is important that there is no main verb in this verse. Translations have handled this in different ways.

> ***7 You husbands, in the same way, live with them according to knowledge, as with a weaker vessel, the female, giving them honor as those who are also co-heirs of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.***

Some have even translated the prepositional modifier "kata gnōsin" as if it were a verb, for instance as "be considerate." "Kata gnōsin" is not a verb. And it does not mean "be considerate."

Peter writes: "You husbands, in the same way …" This "in the same way" (homoiōs) without a main verb tells us that the sentence borrows a verb, so to speak. It calls for something parallel to the preceding commands.

Each of the three preceding sections begins with the command to "submit," using the same verb: "hypotassō." The only command the context supplies is "to submit," and "to submit" once more fits 3:7 perfectly.

The close parallel between "wives, in the same way [homoiōs], submitting to their husbands" and "husbands, in the same way [homoiōs], submitting" naturally implies: "husbands, in the same way, submitting [to their wives]."

But what about the fact that the wife is the "weaker vessel"? That could mean several things:

First, women are on average physically weaker than men. Husbands should not use this strength to their own advantage but rather treat their wives with consideration and respect.

Second, it could refer to the weaker social standing of women in that culture, which made them more vulnerable. Peter's instruction to "honor them" uses the Greek word that expresses social status.

To underline the seriousness of the command to submit and to honor, Peter even adds: “so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” Mutuality in marriage matters to God.

Peter's vision of a typically Christian marriage is one of mutuality, in which spouses love one another, honor one another and submit to one another, recognize each other as co-heirs, and build each other up in the faith.

German translation: Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, Augsburg, November 8, 2022