

INTRODUCTION

In introducing this work, I am tempted to echo the words of Richard G. Moulton, written some ninety years ago. Moulton begins *The Literary Study of the Bible* by noting that ‘an author falls naturally into an apologetic tone if he is proposing to add yet one more to the number of books on the Bible’.¹ Since then, the number of works devoted to the study of the Bible has grown in a way in which Moulton could hardly have imagined. So there is all the more reason to want to justify offering another study, particularly one devoted (on the face of it) to only twelve verses of one New Testament letter. Yet Eph 5:21-33 has been, and continues to be, an important text in the history of the Christian churches,² and its study raises some significant questions regarding the task of the interpreter.

A. THE INTERPRETATIVE DEBATE

There exists an ongoing debate regarding this significance of this passage within both popular and scholarly Christian literature. As one might expect, the positions taken have much to do with the participants’ views of the authority of the Bible and its role within Christian life. In these matters, of course, there exist deep divisions within the Christian world, a discussion of which would take us well beyond the scope of the present work. However, even in matters more strictly exegetical, the discussion seems to have reached a deadlock, with a comparatively limited number of positions dominating the field.

¹ Richard G. Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible: an Account of the Leading Forms of Literature Represented in the Sacred Writings* 2nd ed. (London: Pitman, 1906), p. iii.

² As an example of its current significance, one might note the use of this text in the recent discussions in the Catholic Church regarding the ordination of women to the priesthood. For an analysis of this discussion, see my article ‘Analogies, Metaphors and Women as Priests’ (*Pacifica* 7 [1994], pp. 47-58), where some of the conclusions of the present study first appeared.

(a) *The Defence of Patriarchal Order*

A first group of interpreters argue that Christians are obliged to accept what we might call a 'patriarchal' view of the relationship of husband and wife. A representative work in this tradition of interpretation is Stephen B. Clark's study *Man and Woman in Christ*, which includes an extensive discussion of the Ephesians passage.³ It is true that in his exposition of the passage Clark avoids an attitude of uncritical praise.⁴ He acknowledges, for instance, that 'Eph 5:22-33 is not a short treatise on marriage', but rather 'concern[s] the order between husband and wife in marriage and view[s] marriage only from that aspect'.⁵ Nonetheless, he suggests that the passage is an important one: because Eph 5:21-33 'considers the purpose of marriage and compares Christian marriage to the relationship between Christ and the church', it ranks alongside Matt 19:3-9 (and its parallels) and constitutes 'a significant New Testament statement of the place of marriage in God's plan'.⁶ That plan calls for 'the wife's subordination to her husband and the husband's love of his wife'.⁷ Indeed Clark argues that the two phrases 'because you fear Christ' (v 21) and 'as to the Lord' (v 22) lend a particular 'note of seriousness and obligation' to the command to subordination.⁸ They imply that

the husband has authority over his wife not simply because of nature and not simply because of some social custom, but because Christ has delegated that authority to him, so that when the wife subordinates herself to him, she is obeying Christ. The husband is the representative of Christ. ... The husband is a human being, but he bears the Lord's authority in this relationship. Thus, Paul takes what could be a natural subordination and situates it within the order of the Christian community, an order that Christ stands behind.⁹

³ Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: an Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1980), pp. 72-87.

⁴ Compare Clark's rejection (*ibid.*, p. 72) of the claim that Eph 5:22-33 is 'the great New Testament passage on marriage, containing everything a husband and wife need to know about a successful marriage'.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

A similar approach to the interpretation of Eph 5:21-33 is argued in George W. Knight's study, 'Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church'.¹⁰ It is true that Knight's conclusions are also qualified. For he notes, first of all, that the command directed to wives in v 22 does not imply any fundamental inequality between Christian men and women; rather, he writes, 'it is an appeal to one who is equal by creation and redemption to submit to the authority God has ordained'.¹¹ He draws a parallel with relationships of authority within the church at large: 'Just as certain men can be given authority in the church, implying no superiority for them or inferiority for those subject to them, so also wives may be asked to submit themselves to their husbands without any suggestion of inferiority / superiority'.¹² Secondly, he argues that 'Paul does not ask every woman to submit to every man'; he is not suggesting that 'every relationship between a woman and a man is one of submission and headship'.¹³ But Knight is also clear that the passage demands that 'where leadership is an ingredient of the situation, as in marriage, the woman should submit to that leadership (headship) of the man',¹⁴ the same order being demanded in the church as a whole, where leadership is also required.

To discover what lies behind this order of authority and submission, Knight refers the reader, first to 1 Corinthians 11, and from there to Gen 2:21-24.¹⁵ These passages suggest, he argues, that 'the order of creation of man and woman and the fact that woman was created to help the man (and not vice versa) demonstrate that God had established man as the head over the woman by this divine action and its inherent intent. Paul thus affirms that male headship is a divine appointment'.¹⁶ What this means is that 'redemption in Christ undergirds and commends the wife's submission to her husband according to God's design at creation rather than, as some

¹⁰ George W. Knight, 'Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church' in John Piper and Wayne Grudem (eds), *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: a Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), pp. 165-78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

feminists claim, overturning a submission rooted only in the fall'.¹⁷ It follows that, 'because the headship of the husband is established by God, the husband who fulfills that role does so as a servant of God, and the leadership given to him in this role expresses God's authority in the marriage'.¹⁸

Knight's final position is therefore unequivocal: he writes that 'the order Paul is speaking of here (submission and love) is not accidental or temporary or culturally determined: it is part of the *essence of marriage*, part of God's original plan for a perfect, sinless, harmonious marriage'.¹⁹ Indeed, even the very order in which the commands are given is significant, for the New Testament writers 're-affirm the role relationship God established by creation before they deal with how men and women should conduct themselves in this relationship. *The divinely instituted form must come first, before one talks about how to live within it.* This is a permanently significant lesson'.²⁰

(b) *The Rejection of Patriarchal Order*

A second group of interpreters agree with their conservative colleagues that Eph 5:21-33 offers Christians a hierarchical view of the marriage relationship, but reject this interpretation as unworthy of the modern believer and (in many cases) a perversion of the original Christian ideal. One of the most influential works in this tradition is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her*, which describes itself as a 'feminist theological reconstruction' of Christian origins.²¹ In company with many interpreters, Schüssler Fiorenza traces the increasing 'patriarchalization' of church life during the New Testament period. She notes that earlier interpreters have argued that this movement towards masculine hierarchy was 'historically unavoidable', on either theological or sociological grounds.²² Her aim is to challenge this assumption and to offer an alternative reading

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 176.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 171 (italics original).

²¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: a Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1983).

²² Ibid., p. 83.

of early Christian history, one which ‘presupposes and is based on the equality of *all* Christians’.²³

Schüssler Fiorenza’s historical reconstruction begins with the ‘Palestinian Jesus movement’, which – she argues – understood the mission of Jesus ‘as that of the prophet and child of Sophia sent to announce that God is the God of the poor and heavy laden, of the outcasts and of those who suffer injustice’.²⁴ This mission of Jesus gave rise to a distinctive form of Christian practice, a ‘discipleship of equals’, marked by ‘one and the same praxis of inclusiveness and equality lived by Jesus-Sophia’.²⁵ Something of this ethos continues to characterize the earliest Christian missionary movement, where all believers ‘are equal, because they all share in the Spirit, God’s power; they are all elect and holy because they are adopted by God, all without exception’.²⁶ For Schüssler Fiorenza the affirmation of Gal 3:28 is a ‘key expression,’ not of the later Pauline theology (in the context of which it is found), but rather of this earlier, egalitarian movement.²⁷

However, with the work of the apostle Paul the original Christian ethic begins to suffer modification. While in some respects Paul accepts the vision of Gal 3:28, he also modifies it: through his discussion of celibacy, ‘his use of the virgin-bride metaphor for the church’, and ‘his figurative characterization of his apostleship as fatherhood’, he ‘opens the door for a reintroduction of patriarchal values and sexual dualities’.²⁸ The post-Pauline New Testament tradition continues this process, now out of a concern to minimize the tension between the church and the surrounding society. For the Christian vision of equality soon ‘caused tensions and conflicts with the dominant cultural ethos of the patriarchal household’.²⁹ This in turn gave rise to pagan accusations against Christianity, alleging that by attracting and welcoming women, slaves and young people, the new faith destroyed the social order of the household.³⁰ In the household code of 1 Peter we see a concern to defend the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 135.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 199.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 235-36.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 251.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 263.

faith against such accusations by reproducing ‘the patriarchal pattern of submission’.³¹

Schüssler Fiorenza claims that the process of adaptation to prevailing cultural norms is visible also in the letter to the Ephesians. In contrast to the Colossian household code, which was primarily ‘interested in the patriarchally appropriate behavior of slaves’,³² the Ephesian passage ‘elaborates upon the relationship of husband and wife’.³³ By choosing to make the relationship between Christ and the Church ‘the paradigm for Christian marriage’, the author of Ephesians ‘reinforces the patriarchal marriage pattern and justifies it christologically’.³⁴ It is true that the comparison with Christ and the Church modifies ‘the husband’s... position and duties’ by comparing his love with ‘Christ’s self-giving love for the Church’.³⁵ Nonetheless this modification ‘does not have the power, theologically, to transform the patriarchal pattern of the household code’.³⁶

Schüssler Fiorenza thus situates Eph 5:21-33 within a process whereby Christian life is being gradually remodelled on the basis of an increasingly ‘patriarchal’ pattern. However, while the passage witnesses to a departure from the early Christian ideal of equality and reinforces prevailing social norms, it does so only with regard to the household. Those norms are not yet applied to the Church: ‘the author does not develop the patriarchal domination-subordination relationship in terms of the whole community’.³⁷ It is only in the Pastoral letters, that we see ‘the beginnings of patriarchalization not just of the Christian household but also of the church as “the house of God”’.³⁸

(c) *The Reinterpretation of ‘Patriarchal’ Passages*

A third group of works adopt what may be regarded as an intermediate position. These interpreters stand on the side of the defenders of patriarchal order insofar as they hold to a traditional view of

³¹ Ibid., p. 262.

³² Ibid., p. 269.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 269-70.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 270.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 268.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 279.

biblical authority and are therefore reluctant to reject what seems to be the clear teaching of a New Testament passage. But they part company with their conservative colleagues insofar as they also want to argue for a more egalitarian view of the relationship of wife and husband. Their way out of this apparent dilemma is to *reinterpret* Eph 5:21-33 in a such a way that they can deny that its ethic is hierarchical, or at least minimize its patriarchal flavour.³⁹

Representative of this tradition of interpretation is Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty's *All We're Meant to Be*,⁴⁰ which has become a widely read and influential book in evangelical Christian circles. Scanzoni and Hardesty suggest that Christians ought not to view marriage as 'a functional arrangement with rigid roles and fixed duties assigned on the basis of sex', but rather as 'a living relationship between two equal partners'.⁴¹ They argue that the pattern presented in Ephesians 5 'was intended not to exalt husbands to the position of gods or kings but rather to draw our attention to the *way* Christ loved the church'.⁴² In support of this position, they argue that—at the time Ephesians was written—a message of female subjection and male authority would not have been new (and therefore would not have been required).⁴³ What *was* new (and therefore the focus of attention) in this passage was the transformation of the 'headship / subjection pattern', in the light of the example of Christ.⁴⁴ The pattern found in Eph 5:21-33, 'if allowed to work itself out over history..., could not help moving in the direction of egalitarianism and democracy in the home'.⁴⁵

A more radical reinterpretation of Eph 5:21-33 comes from those who suggest that the usual interpretation of the word κεφαλή ('head') in Eph 5:22-24 is mistaken. These authors suggest that the use of this word does *not* imply the authority of husbands over their wives. Two works may be taken as representative of this position:

³⁹ Many of these commentators fall into the category of those whom Piper and Grudem (*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, p. xiii) call 'evangelical feminists': 'they do not reject the Bible's authority or truthfulness, but rather give *new interpretations* of the Bible to support their claims'.

⁴⁰ Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

an essay by Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen entitled ‘What does *kephalē* mean in the New Testament?’⁴⁶ and the more detailed study by Catherine Clark Kroeger entitled ‘The Classical Concept of Head as “Source”’.⁴⁷ These works reject the common assumption that the Greek term had the same connotations as does the English word ‘head’, and argue that the metaphorical use of κεφαλή to indicate ‘authority over’ is not found (or is rarely found) in the Greek sources which predate the New Testament. The Mickelsens suggest that the term is used in Eph 5:22-24 to indicate the union of wife and husband,⁴⁸ while Kroeger suggests that it served ‘to make both husband and wife part of the same body, dependent upon each other for their very existence’.⁴⁹ The sense of the word κεφαλή is clearly a critical issue for the interpretation of Eph 5:21-33, and a section of chapter five of the present work will be devoted to a closer examination of these arguments.

(d) *Ambivalent Evaluations*

A fourth group of interpreters are deeply ambivalent in their evaluation of this passage. An example of this approach is provided by Ben Witherington’s work *Women in the Earliest Churches*.⁵⁰ While Witherington refuses to endorse without qualification the traditional reading of the passage, he does not seek to deny that Eph 5:21-33 sets up a ‘patriarchal’ idea of marriage. He does argue that the way in which the passage models ‘Christian marriage on the pattern of the relationship of Christ and the Church’ was in fact ‘Paul’s deliberate attempt to reform the patriarchal structure of his day, a structure he inherited, adopted and adapted’.⁵¹ But he also

⁴⁶ Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen, ‘What does *kephalē* mean in the New Testament?’ in *Women, Authority and the Bible* ed. Alvera Mickelsen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), pp. 97-110.

⁴⁷ Catherine Clark Kroeger, ‘The Classical Concept of *Head* as “Source”’ in *Equal to Serve*, ed. Gretchen Gaebelein Hull (London: Scripture Union, 1987), Appendix III (pp. 267-83).

⁴⁸ Mickelsen, ‘What does *kephalē* mean?’, pp. 108-9.

⁴⁹ Kroeger, ‘Classical Concept’, p. 282.

⁵⁰ Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 54-61.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55. Schüssler Fiorenza (*In Memory*, p. 270) also concedes that reform of the patriarchal ethic may have been the intention of the author of Ephesians, but she emphasizes the fact that Ephesians in the end fails to achieve such a reform.

admits that the attempt was not entirely successful. As Witherington writes, '[p]aradoxically... the effect was also to ground that revised patriarchal structure involving the husband's headship in the eternal relationship between Christ and the Church. This serves to give an ongoing and permanent theological rationale for the husband's headship and wife's submission'.⁵² Witherington implies that we need to appreciate both the reforming intention behind this passage and the limitations of its argumentation.

Within this group of interpretations the extensive study of the New Testament *Haustafeln* by Marlis Gielen may also be mentioned.⁵³ This major work seeks to situate the ethics of the household codes within the historical context of first-century Christianity, and to explore what these passages tell us about 'die Auseinandersetzung des Urchristentums mit Normen seiner gesellschaftlichen Umwelt'.⁵⁴ Since such a 'coming-to-terms with' (or 'setting oneself apart from') one's social environment is a task for Christians in every age, the author wishes to understand to what extent these passages can be helpful for the fulfilment of this task.⁵⁵ She makes the point that the norms they contain cannot be uncritically accepted, since the 'household' of today is very different from that of the first-century and has quite a different role to play within society.⁵⁶

With regard to Eph 5:21-33 Gielen notes that the analogy between wife and husband and the Church and Christ is constructed on the basis of an existing patriarchal conception of 'household management'.⁵⁷ It is assumed that the dominant partner is the husband. In this sense it might appear to be bound to a particular time and place.⁵⁸ The difficulty is that, insofar as the author of Ephesians took over the sense of κεφαλή from 1 Corinthians 11, Eph 5:21-33 grounds the order of the household in the creation account of Genesis 2. For this reason its ethic can appear to be timeless.⁵⁹ Gielen

⁵² Witherington, *Women*, p. 55.

⁵³ Marlis Gielen, *Tradition und Theologie neutestamentlicher Haustafelethik* Bonner Biblische Beiträge 75 (Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain, 1990).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 546.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 560-1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 254, 276.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 564.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 258. Some pages later (*ibid.*, p. 276; cf. also p. 561) Gielen notes that the author of Ephesians takes over the patriarchal image of marriage from prevailing ideas

concludes that as modern readers we can no longer accept either the (patriarchal) terms of the analogy between Christ and the Church nor the particular exegesis of Genesis 2 which underlies it. Nonetheless the exhortations contained in this passage (to subordinate oneself and to love) can still be applied to marriage, provided these are understood with reference to both partners.⁶⁰ Such an interpretation would take its cue from 5:21 and 5:30.⁶¹ We will return to her analysis, particularly that of v 30, since it anticipates some of the conclusions of the present study.

B. THE PRESENT WORK

Given the number of studies which have been devoted to the New Testament ‘household codes’, and despite the lively debate about the significance of these codes for the modern Christian, it is surprising how few of the existing studies have attempted to read the passage within the context of the letter as a whole.⁶² Generally it has been considered enough to classify Eph 5:21-33 as one of the New Testament *Haustafeln* and to discuss all these passages as though they constituted a single phenomenon. This tendency – to assign passages to a particular genre and then discuss the genre in general terms – is the temptation facing scholars whose interests are form-critical. It is easy to overlook the uniqueness of a particular work by seeing it as merely an example of a genre.⁶³

of household management, and gives that image of marriage a timeless dignity.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 567.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² In a similar manner Marlis Gielen (*Haustafelethik*, p. 239 n. 99) notes the absence of studies of the relationship of this passage to the rest of the letter, particularly from the point of view of its depiction of the relationship of Christ and the Church.

⁶³ We may echo in this context the words of James Muilenburg (‘Form Criticism and Beyond’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 [1969], p. 5), who – noting the limitations of Old Testament form criticism – writes: ‘There has been a proclivity among scholars in recent years to lay such stress upon the typical and representative that the individual, personal, and unique features of the particular pericope are all but lost to view’.

(a) *Ephesians 5:21-33 in Context*

Among the commentators who have studied Eph 5:21-33 in its immediate literary context, there is a tendency to see significant theological links between this passage and the rest of the letter. In explicating these links commentators pay particular attention to the use of the term *μυστήριον* ('mystery'). In a 1966 article, for instance, J. Cambier notes the importance of interpreting this passage in the context of the letter as a whole,⁶⁴ since 'l'images employées ici doivent s'éclairer par référence à l'ensemble de la lettre'.⁶⁵ Similarly, with regard to the *μυστήριον* of 5:32 he writes: 'on comprendra mieux la notion de mystère exposée en 5,22-33 si on la replace dans le cadre doctrinal de Ep.'⁶⁶ Cambier's conclusion is that in Eph 5:21-33 'les époux sont invités à vivre (à continuer), dans leur état propre et à leur manière, le mystère que le Christ réalise en son Église'.⁶⁷ In a similar manner J. Paul Sampley suggests that through the use of the term *μυστήριον* 'the unification of all things is thus extended by the author of Ephesians even to man and wife as one flesh'.⁶⁸ He writes: 'Whereas the language about the incorporation of Gentile and Jew into the body of Christ remains more universal and therefore more general, 5:21-33 is the author's specific application of the theme of unity to the smallest unit into which the church may be divided'.⁶⁹ Much the same conclusion is arrived at by Andreas Kostenberger, who writes that 'the *μυστήριον* [of Ephesians] is the ground for the restored relationship between husband and wife, much like [*sic*] it is the ground for the restored relationship between Jews and Gentiles'.⁷⁰ Thus married couples ought to see themselves 'as part of the global eschatological movement to-

⁶⁴ J. Cambier, 'Le grand mystère concernant le Christ et son Eglise: Ephesiens 5,22-33' *Biblica* 47 (1966), pp. 43-90 and pp. 223-42.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶⁸ J. Paul Sampley, *And the Two Shall Become One Flesh: a Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21-33* SNTS Monograph Series 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 96.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁷⁰ Andreas J. Kostenberger, 'The Mystery of Christ and the Church: Head and Body, "One Flesh"', *Trinity Journal* 12NS (1991), p. 84. Thus Kostenberger assimilates the sense of *μυστήριον* in 5:32 to that of its other uses in the letter. One might wonder—in passing—in what sense the relationship between Jew and Gentile can be said to be 'restored' in Christ.

ward “summing-up all things in Christ” (Eph 1:9).⁷¹

These are tantalizing hints, which—if they can be proven—would have important implications for a Christian view of marriage. However, such claims need to be tested, and not just with reference to *μυστήριον*, but also with reference to the other terms which link these verses with the rest of Ephesians. Before this can be done, we need to undertake a close reading of the passage itself. In suggesting that wives ‘be subordinate’ to their husbands and that husbands ‘love’ their wives, how does the author argue? What reasons does he give? We may then ask how his argumentation in this passage relates to that found in the rest of the letter. We will see that the argumentation of this passage is a form of argumentation from analogy. To draw an analogy between the relationship of wife and husband and that of the Church and Christ, the author of Ephesians uses a number of key terms, *κεφαλή* (‘head’) and *σῶμα* (‘body’), *μυστήριον* (‘mystery’), and the language of unity or ‘oneness’. Since these are important terms elsewhere in the letter, the body of the present work will concentrate on the use of these terms, both in this passage and in the rest of the letter.

(b) *Alternative Forms of Exegetical Study*

Before embarking on this analysis, it may be useful to indicate what the present study is *not* attempting to do. In particular, there are two approaches to the interpretation of Eph 5:21-33 from which this study ought to be distinguished.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 93. See also Michael Theobald, ‘Heilige Hochzeit. Motive des Mythos im Horizont von Eph 5,21-33’ in Karl Kertelge (ed.), *Metaphorik und Mythos im Neuen Testament* Quaestiones Disputatae 126 (Freiburg: Herder, 1990), p. 253 and Luke Timothy Johnson (*The Writings of the New Testament: an Interpretation* [London: SCM, 1986], pp. 370 and pp. 378-79). Johnson (ibid., p. 370) writes that ‘when the author of this letter speaks of “mystery” (3:3-4; 6:19) he refers first of all to the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in God’s plan..., but he can also apply the word “mystery” to marriage’. Later (ibid., pp. 378-79) the same author suggests that this means that ‘the relationship between husband and wife... symbolizes the mystery of unity in plurality and makes it present within the community’. Therefore, ‘as the church is the sacrament (i.e., the effective sign) of the world’s possibility as a place of peace and reconciliation, so is marriage a sacrament to the church of what it should effectively become’. These readings of Eph 5:32 will be called into question in part three of the present work.

(i) *The historical-comparative approach*

One way of approaching the interpretation of this passage would be to conduct what we might call an ‘historical-comparative’ study. Such a study would investigate what behaviour was generally expected of married couples in the Greek and Roman worlds,⁷² in order to compare this with the ethical stance of Ephesians.

Historical-comparative studies of related New Testament passages have been undertaken in recent years by David Balch and David C. Verner, the first with an interest in the first letter of Peter, the second with an interest in the Pastoral Epistles. In his 1983 work *The Household of God*⁷³ David Verner carries out an extensive examination of the nature of the Greek and Roman household. He remarks that in both Greek and Roman society

the household was conceived as a patriarchal institution, whose male head (*κύριος*, *pater familias*) exercised sweeping, although not entirely unrestricted authority over the other members. These members fell into three main categories, namely wife, children, and slaves. In each category the primary structural relationship was one of subordination to the authority of the householder.⁷⁴

Verner carefully traces the changes which took place between the classical period and the second century of the Christian era, noting that during this period women enjoyed a gradual increase of social freedom and became more able to exercise control over their lives. However, he also argues that, despite these ‘dramatic changes... in the social and legal status of women’, ‘the old values, premised upon a stricter and more consistent patriarchalism, continued to have wide approval’.⁷⁵ In particular, ‘the patriarchal household and conventional sex roles had come to be associated on a symbolic

⁷² There have been some extensive studies of the place of women in the classical and Hellenistic world in recent studies. Two important texts are Sarah B. Pomeroy’s *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1975), and Jane F. Gardner’s *Women in Roman Law and Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1986). For a more recent study of the involvement of women in religious movements in the ancient world, see Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁷³ David C. Verner, *The Household of God: the Social World of the Pastoral Epistles* Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 71 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), pp. 27–81.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

level with the preservation of an orderly and stable society', so that 'people whose behavior defied the traditional values in this area risked the charge of political subversion'.⁷⁶

It is against this background that Verner investigates the situation of the church communities to which the Pastoral Epistles were addressed. He notes the diversity of these communities, and the likelihood that there had arisen within them 'a major conflict over the role of women in domestic life and the life of the church'.⁷⁷ Faced with certain emancipatory tendencies, the author reacts by 'promoting an image of the church that legitimates the established hierarchical structure'.⁷⁸ In particular, he 'conceptualizes the church as a great household with its many and diverse ranks of servants and its οἰκοδεσπότις firmly entrenched in his patriarchal authority'.⁷⁹

David L. Balch's 1981 study is a little closer to the interests of our own, in that his concern is not so much with the structure of the church, as with the instructions given in 1 Peter regarding the behaviour of women. Like Verner, Balch surveys the position of women in Greek and Roman society. He, too, notes that 'women made some political gains in the first centuries B. C. and A. D., and their legal and economic responsibilities increased significantly'.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, a large part of his study is devoted to outlining the tradition, dating from the time of Plato, of discussions of 'household management'. These discussions continued well into the era of the New Testament writings. Even among the apparently more 'liberal' Stoic philosophers these discussions reflect the continuing belief that a well-run household was one in which wives (as well as children and slaves) were subordinate to their husbands.⁸¹ The same belief is to be seen, as Balch's study makes clear, behind Greek and Roman criticisms of the behaviour of women who had attached themselves to oriental religious cults.⁸²

Reading the instructions to wives in 1 Peter in the light of this

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 185.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 186.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 182.

⁸⁰ David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: the Domestic Code in 1 Peter* Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 26 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1981), p. 139.

⁸¹ See Balch's Appendix V (*Wives*, pp. 142-9). Plutarch's views on the relationship of wife and husband will be discussed when we look at the meaning of ὑποτάσσεσθαι in chapter eight.

⁸² Balch, *Wives*, pp. 65-80.

background, Balch suggests that these have a strongly apologetic intent. He writes that 'the author of 1 Peter exhorted the recipients of his letter to the behaviour outlined in the code with the intention of encouraging conduct which would contradict ... Roman slanders'.⁸³ A similar intention – it may be noted – can be seen in the Pastoral Epistles,⁸⁴ particularly in the letter to Titus (2:5), where we read that wives should 'be subordinate to their own husbands, so that the word of God may not be blasphemed' (2:5; cf. 1 Tim 5:14).⁸⁵

A similar study could be carried out with reference to Eph 5:21-33. It would analyse and evaluate these instructions in comparison with what was generally expected of women (in particular) in the Greek and Roman world. Against this background, it would also seek to discover if the author of this letter was responding to some particular crisis or (perceived) threat to the established order. Such a study would certainly be possible, but it would not be easy. For while most of the New Testament letters are clearly occasional, written to deal with a particular situation or a particular set of concerns, the tone of Ephesians is quite different. As Andrew Lincoln notes, the letter 'simply does not contain references to a specific setting or problems'. 'Therefore', he writes, 'other external data cannot be brought to bear in the same way as with other letters to build up a more detailed picture of the particular situation being addressed.'⁸⁶ The task of reconstructing the situation from which Ephesians arose is further complicated by doubts concerning the authorship, the dating, and even the destination of the letter.⁸⁷

It should also be noted that, even if a historical-comparative study were to be attempted, its first task would be a careful reading of Eph 5:21-33 itself, to understand the manner in which the author of the letter constructs his case.⁸⁸ The existing literature lacks a

⁸³ Ibid., p. 119.

⁸⁴ Verner (*Household*, p. 182) also notes that 'the church, as represented by the author of the Pastorals, values highly the good opinion of the larger society'. Therefore there is a 'concern that women and slaves not give occasion by insubordinate behavior for the Christian faith to be blasphemed by outsiders'.

⁸⁵ Cf. Balch, *Wives*, p. 92.

⁸⁶ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* Word Biblical Commentaries (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), p. lxxiv.

⁸⁷ As will become clear, because the present work is what we might call a strictly 'intratextual' study, its argument is unaffected by decisions regarding authorship, dating, and destination.

careful study of this passage, one which reads these verses in the context of the letter as a whole, *and* which shows sensitivity to the nature and functioning of metaphorical language.⁸⁹ Hence the present work. The analysis which follows will, therefore, remain stubbornly within the text of Ephesians, focusing its attention on the nature and the structure of the argumentation by which these injunctions are sustained. Even so, it will not be able to ignore the historical context from which this letter emerged. Something of that context will be investigated when studying the sense of the 'head' and 'body' metaphors (in chapters five and six), and the use of the verb ὑποτάσσεσθαι (in chapter eight). The final chapter of the work will reflect on what these verses tell us about the intention of its author, and will evaluate the degree to which this intention has been consistently carried out.

⁸⁸ It has become something of a commonplace in recent biblical study to remark that a careful reading of the text on its own terms ought to precede any historical analysis. But the point had already been forcefully made in a work which now seems well ahead of its time. In his book *The Literary Study of the Bible*, Richard G. Moulton writes: 'Historic and literary study are equal in importance: but for priority in order of time the literary treatment has the first claim. The reason of this is that the starting point of historic analysis must be that very existing text, which is the sole concern of the morphological [literary] study. ... this existing text cannot be truly interpreted until it has been read in the light of its exact literary structure' (pp. viii-ix).

⁸⁹ There have been some studies of the metaphorical language of Ephesians as a whole and of this passage in particular, but there are no works which take into account the extensive discussions of metaphor which have occurred over the last fifty years among philosophers and linguists. One of the earliest studies to show an interest in metaphor was J. Albani's 'Die Metaphern des Epheserbriefes' *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie* 45 (1902), pp. 420-40, which includes a brief study of the use of the terms σῶμα and κεφαλή, comparing and contrasting the use of these terms in Ephesians with their use elsewhere in the Pauline letters. Werner Straub's work, *Die Bildersprache des Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1937) traces the development of the image of the 'body' through the whole of the *corpus paulinum*. Ernest Best's *One Body in Christ: a Study in the Relationship of the Church to Christ in the Epistles of the Apostle Paul* (London: SPCK, 1955) studies the use of the 'body' image in Ephesians, and (in a way which anticipates some of the conclusions of the present study) notes the tensions which arise from the use of the image. Richard Batey's *New Testament Nuptial Imagery* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971) surveys the New Testament use of the images of 'bride' and 'bridegroom' in the light of the Old Testament, Rabbinic and Hellenistic use of the same imagery. Daniel von Allmen's work *La Famille de Dieu: la Symbolique Familiale dans la Paulinisme* *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 41 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981) devotes some pages to a very helpful study of our passage, noting in particular the complexity of its argumentation.

(ii) *Ephesians 5:21-33 within the corpus paulinum*

There is yet another way in which the interpretation of this difficult passage might be approached. This would be to compare its instructions with similar passages elsewhere in the *corpus paulinum*, to see if any development of thought (towards a more 'patriarchal' or a more 'egalitarian') ethic could be discerned. A careful study of the argumentation of each passage would be needed, so that the ethical positions they embodied could be compared. One might expect this to be an extremely useful line of enquiry, although one to which a single book could hardly do justice. For not only would the relevant passages need to be studied in some detail, but any comparison between the argument of Eph 5:21-33 and that of similar passages elsewhere in the *corpus paulinum* would raise difficult questions of authorship, priority, and literary dependence. The present work will merely indicate (in the occasional footnote) some of the directions in which such a study might lead.

C. AN OUTLINE OF THE WORK

The study which follows is divided into three parts, each having a distinct aim. Part one is a critical survey of some recent writing on the nature and functioning of metaphorical language, for (as the rest of the work will show) we need to understand the use of the 'head' and 'body' metaphors in Ephesians in order to interpret this passage correctly. This first part will, therefore, lay the groundwork for the analysis and commentary of the following two sections of the work. The reader whose immediate concern is to know what the present study has to say about Ephesians may wish to begin with chapter three and return to these chapters at will.

Part two of this work is more directly exegetical. Chapter three is devoted to a careful analysis of Eph 5:21-33, an analysis which seeks to uncover the structure of the author's argumentation. Chapter four analyses Eph 5:21-33 from the point of view of its use of analogy, and examines the relationship between its 'head' and 'body' metaphors and the 'model' which underlies their use. Chapters five and six take a closer look at the use of these metaphors, both in Eph 5:21-33 and in the rest of the letter. In a similar manner, chapter seven examines the use of the other key terms found

in this passage (namely *μυστήριον* and the language of ‘oneness’).⁹⁰

Part three of the study turns from exegetical analysis to hermeneutical concern: these chapters address the question of the way in which this passage ought to be interpreted. Chapter eight looks first of all at the ambiguity of the metaphor of the ‘body’, and the constraints which this places on the interpreter. The same chapter will examine the relationship of the ethical instructions of Eph 5:22-33 to similar instructions found in v 21 and elsewhere in the letter. Chapter nine will offer some conclusions: by suggesting (negatively, if you like) how this passage should *not* be regarded, and then (more positively) by offering a new interpretation.

D. THE DEMARCATION OF THE PASSAGE

The first task facing the interpreter is the identification of the passage to be studied, and it is appropriate to devote some time to this task before drawing these introductory remarks to a close. I have spoken of Eph 5:21-33, but are we justified in studying these verses in (at least provisional) isolation? Do they form a unit which may be analysed on its own? As Jonathan Culler notes, the attempt to demarcate any text is in one sense a ‘frame-up, an interpretive imposition that restricts an object by establishing boundaries’.⁹¹ Nonetheless, it must be done. The critical question concerns the criteria to be used in the selection of a passage.

The criteria to be used in marking out a passage for analysis will be determined by two factors. These are (a) a preliminary judgement regarding the nature of the material to be studied, and (b) a consideration of the type of analysis which is to be attempted. It is the second criterion which will be of particular significance in the demarcation of Eph 5:21-33. A form-critical study of these verses, for instance, which sees them as an example of the genre of ‘household codes’ will need to include the injunctions which follow,

⁹⁰ In this respect, this part of my study differs from that of J. Cambier (cf. ‘Le grand mystère’, pp. 226-33), not only in its conclusions, but also in its method. For Cambier chooses to examine the links between this passage and the rest of the letter through examination of a number of key themes, whereas this study will concentrate on the use of key words.

⁹¹ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 196.

namely to children and parents and to slaves and masters, for it is these three groups who constitute the ‘household’.⁹² However, for the study which we are about to undertake (which is a study of the argumentation of these verses) we will limit ourselves to what George Kennedy calls a ‘rhetorical unit’.⁹³ Such a unit corresponds to what I would call a ‘complete argument’, one in which a topic is introduced, dealt with in some way and brought to a conclusion. A brief examination of these verses will suffice to show that Eph 5:21-33 does indeed form such a unit and therefore merits separate analysis.

With regard to what follows our passage, there exists a clear boundary between this ‘rhetorical unit’ and the next, for Eph 6:1 begins a new section of the argumentation with an address to a new group of people, namely children and fathers. With regard to what precedes, the boundary is not so clear. The critical question concerns v 21: should this verse be included in the passage to be studied? For v 21 is what one might call a ‘Janus sentence’, one which looks both ways. From the point of view of the syntax of these verses v 21 is to be associated with the series of participles which follow the phrase *πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι* (‘be filled with the Spirit’) in v 18. Yet in terms of content v 21 is certainly to be associated with the injunctions which follow, for it introduces the term *ὑποτάσσεσθαι* (to ‘be subordinate’) which is picked up in v 2.⁹⁴

The connection of v 21 with what follows is particularly clear when one chooses that reading of v 22 which omits the verb.⁹⁵

⁹² So, for instance, for Marlis Gielen (*Haustafeltheik*, p. 205), who states that ‘die Abgrenzung der HT [Haustafel] im Eph bereitet ebenso wie im Kol kaum Schwierigkeiten. Sie umfaßt die Verse 5,21-6,9’.

⁹³ George Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press: 1984), pp. 33-34.

⁹⁴ T.K. Abbott (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897; repr. 1985], p. 164) remarks that the ‘connection [of v 21] with the preceding context is, in fact, only in form, that with what follows is in substance’. Similar remarks are made by Markus Barth, *Ephesians* Anchor Bible (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1974) vol. II, p. 608, and Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser: ein Kommentar* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1957), p. 250.

⁹⁵ See also Gielen (*Haustafeltheik*, p. 209) and Schlier (*Der Brief an die Epheser*, p. 250). The first commentators to arrive at this conclusion seem to have been W.J. Conybeare and J.S. Howson (*The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* New Edition [London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1861], vol. II, p. 504), who write, ‘That this [v 21] comprehends all the special relations of subjection which follow (and should be joined with

Verse 22 then reads, ‘wives to their husbands as to the Lord’. On textual grounds this shorter reading seems justified: as Abbott notes, ‘No reason can be found for ... [the verb’s] omission if it had been in the text originally, whereas the reason for its insertion is obvious’.⁹⁶ Important early manuscripts omit the verb, and other manuscripts have not one but two forms of ὑποτάσσειν (a phenomenon which also suggests a later addition). If this reading is accepted, v 22 forms an ellipsis that must be completed by reading the verb of v 21.⁹⁷

That v 21 should be read as an introduction to vv 22-33 is confirmed by two other observations. The first is that, as a number of authors remark, the mention of ‘fear’ in vv 21 and 33 forms an *inclusio*: the repetition of related terms which marks the beginning and end of a passage.⁹⁸ The second is that the grammatical link of v 21 with what precedes is itself weak. For the wording of v 20 suggests that it marks the conclusion of the previous section, leaving v 21 an ‘orphan’ unless it is associated with what follows. Of significance here is the parallel verse in Colossians (Col 3:17). Whatever answer one gives to the question of the literary dependence of the two letters,⁹⁹ Col 3:17 suggests that the phrase found in Eph 5:20 ‘giving thanks... to God the father’ should mark the end of the preceding section of the letter.¹⁰⁰

What relation, then, has v 21 to the rest of this passage? From the point of view of the content of Eph 5:21-33 we may consider v 21

what follows), is shewn by the omission of ὑποτάσσεσθαι (in the next verse) by the best MSS’.

⁹⁶ Abbott, *Ephesians*, p. 165.

⁹⁷ So also Gielen (*Haustafelethik*, p. 242). Roger Fowler (*Linguistic Criticism* Opus [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986], p. 62) notes that ellipsis is a technique which is frequently used to create a more ‘cohesive’ text.

⁹⁸ See, for instance, Rudolf Schnackenburg’s remarks (*Der Brief an die Epheser* Evangelisch-katholischer kommentar zum Neuen Testament 10 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1982], p. 248). Schnackenburg’s commentary has been translated by Helen Heron and published as *Ephesians: a Commentary* (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1991). Unless otherwise noted, reference will be made to the English text in the chapters which follow.

⁹⁹ The close relationship between the two letters has often been noted and the parallel passages may be arranged in a kind of ‘synopsis’ (as in C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: its Authorship, Origin and Purpose* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1951], pp. 280-321).

¹⁰⁰ Similarly Marlis Gielen (*Haustafelethik*, pp. 205-6) remarks that the alteration of the ‘semantic field’ – from liturgical language in the previous verses to the use of ὑποτασσόμενοι in v 21 – also indicates that 5:21 is the beginning of the Ephesian household code.

as the beginning of this 'rhetorical unit'. Yet we have seen that, in terms of syntax, it also links the exhortations to wife and husband with the material which precedes.¹⁰¹ This 'formal' connection is not without its significance (as we will see in chapters eight and nine). Therefore rather than simply including v 21 in our analysis of the exhortation to wives and husbands, we should perhaps consider its role to be that of a 'transition'.¹⁰² Not only does it provide a suitable beginning to the 'household code'; it may also be considered as the first of many 'links' which bind this passage to the rest of Ephesians.

¹⁰¹ These links are exploited in the interpretation of these verses offered by J. Cambier ('Le grand mystère', p. 57).

¹⁰² So Schnackenburg (*Ephesians*, p. 244), who describes this verse as a 'transition from the address to the whole congregation (vv 15-20) to the paracletic for individual Christians'. Similarly Lincoln (*Ephesians*, p. 365).