

Reconstruction of the Greco-Roman Household

Reconstruction of the Greco-Roman Household: [How Christianity radically changed the way the home functioned](#)

The Word of God is filled with divine principles that are able to help us in every aspect of our life; from spirituality, to ethical and moral (2Pet. 1:3-5). Some of its most valued teachings are its principles on the family. Timeless passages such as Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and 1Peter 3 have been in discussion for years. People in modern society often read these passages in the New Testament with a bitter taste in their mouth. There is a tendency to think that they are not applicable to us today, because they were written in a male dominated culture.

In other words Paul and Peter were women hating chauvinistic pigs; as a result, their writing reflects the dominate view of that time. In light of recent research, it is known that the format in which Paul presented these principles was a commonly used form, which we refer to as “the household codes”. A household code is a New Testament passage on the family unit that is presented in a format similar to Greco Roman teachings on household management (Aune 196).

In Aristotle’s writings, the house was a type with the empire and government being the antitype, going from least to greatest. They believed that if someone wanted to effectively govern the empire they would first have to master the principles of good household management (Aristotle Politics 1.2).

If one wants to grasp these priceless passages one must understand the dynamic of the Roman home during the first few centuries. This would include: defining what constituted a household, defining the role of the head of the house, and examining what the roles and obligations for some of the other members of the house were. Upon finding the answers to these valuable questions, one can see that the household codes of the New Testament presented a radical change in Christian’s relations to other members of their house.

It is a common practice to read into the New Testament from ones own cultural perspective. When the word “house” or “family”, is used most people have the tendency to think spouse, children, and immediate kinship. However, in the first century Greco-Roman culture this was not the case. According to Aristotle the house in their cultural setting would have included slaves, stewards, children, husband, wife, and other adults under the authority of the head of the house (Aristotle “*politics*” 1.3). The diversity of household members can be witnessed in Jesus’ parables: Mark 13:32-36, Mat 21:33-41, Luk 16:1-9. In Luke’s Gospel the rich man had a steward “*oikonomos*”(16:1-9), This steward had certain financial responsibilities, and was more than likely a member of the household (Swason 3874). This adds a greater degree of understanding of passages such as Acts 16 where the jailer and his entire household, received the word, believed, and were baptized. From the previous, historically information it would be implied that the jailer’s household included not only immediate family, but slaves and freedmen (Vr 31-34).

Each household was ruled by a male householder (called the *paterfamilias* in Latin). The Greek equivalent to the Latin phrase "Pater Familias" is "oikodespot?s". It is translated as "householder" four times, "master of the house" three times, and "goodman" once (Mt 10:25; 13:27; 20:1; 21:33; Mk 14:14; Lk 12:39; 13:25; 14:21). The other Greek equivalent to this phrase is "Kurios Tas Oikias", which means master of the house (Swanson 3867). The Master of the House had certain religious obligations. His household was a center of worship. All members of his house were participants of the household cult and joined in various pagan rituals. He also held the authority to enforce worshipping of certain gods, or to forbid the household from engaging in certain religious activities (Osiek pg 82-83).

The Roman law that was compiled around 451 B.C. granted complete authority "*Pater Potesta*" to the head of the house. Everything in the household was said to be "under his hand." This meant his wife, children, slaves, animals, and land were under his near total control with him possessing the power of life and death over those in the household ("Law of 12" Table IV Law I), and could have a child born deformed put to death (Table IV law III). The preferred method would have been child exposure. This is when a child is abandoned to the elements to die; either by lack of nutrients or being eaten by an animal (Keener "*Family & Household*" 2.7).

There was a great deal of emphasis placed on education and discipline, which was the job of the father. According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus children could be subject to a great deal of harsh treatment if deemed necessary:

"But the lawgiver of the Romans gave virtually full power to the father over his son, even during his whole life, whether he thought proper to imprison him, to scourge him, to put him in chains and keep him at work in the fields, or to put him to death, and this even though the son were already engaged in public affairs. It also appeared that the same authority held over children was that of slaves" (*Rom ant.* 2.27.1).

However, a good teacher would understand the differences between children and address them accordingly; whether to use fear, praise, rebuke (Quintilian *Inst. Orat.* 1.3.6-7). There also appears to be certain restrictions to prevent a father from acting without cause and in rage. Some writers spoke out against excessive discipline; though they appear to be only the minority. Quintilian points to the fact that flogging may have been a regular practice for disciplining a son, but he himself disapproves of it and believes it will only make the child more rebellious (*Inst. Orat.* 1.3.13-14)

From viewing the previous ancient sources we see that the child had to render complete obedience to the father. The father was to instruct, discipline and could use extreme measures if necessary. Since the child was equal to a slave until he reached a certain age, the child would have been viewed as property. There is not much deviance in the N.T. in comparison to the cultural norm of how children were to respond to their parents. However the book of Ephesians presents a different view on the relationship between father and son: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (6:4). This would have been completely out of the norm considering the fact that they lived in a time fathers had legal rights to treat children harshly, and was not uncommon to see fathers resort to violence to discipline a child. But, as Christian fathers the standard is changed as a

result of the Spirit filled life (5:18). The proper mode of instruction should be one of leading by example (Vr 4). Paul addresses a mutual obligation in how both parties relate to each other, as he addresses sons and fathers. This builds upon the theme from the start of this passage in verse 21 "Submit to one another".

This theme of mutuality is also present in the relationship of husband and wife

Within this Greco-Roman culture. Marriage was viewed as a legal and social contract between families; for the promotion of the status of each, the production for legitimate offspring, and the appropriate preservation and transfer of property to the next generation (Osiek 42).

In Greco-Roman culture, (primarily Roman) women were inferior to men. Consider the ancient historian Dio Cassius remarks "take vengeance on those who are in revolt against us, to repel those who insult you, to conquer and rule all mankind, to allow no woman to make herself equal to a man" (Cassius *Roman History* 50.28.3).

The wife was considered the property of her husband. As far as family property is concerned the wife herself did not own anything. Everything she or her children inherited belonged to her husband (Prabhakar "*The Role of Women*"). Aristotle stresses the clear disadvantage of the female compared to the male. He believes that women are defective "males" and thus struggle with a significant handicap (*Hist. An.* 775a4-17). (Meyer "*Women*"). That attitude toward women can also be seen in the Greek philosopher Demosthenes statement: "we have courtesans for our pleasure, prostitutes for daily physical sue, wives to bring up legitimate children and to be faithful stewards in household matters" (Kruse "What is family").

However in the Christian house the relation between husband and wife is now redefined and restructured. Verse twenty one asserts that there is a mutual submission within the home of Christians (Eph 5:21). Submission within this context has to do with the meeting of each other's core needs, and their obligations to each other. This is evident in "however" conjunction of verse 33 as he addressed the wife's need for love and the husbands need for respect. In contrast to the feminist view, it is implied that there are differences between male and female. These differences are not viewed as negative inferiorities; instead, they are viewed as the beauty of God's diverse creation as each person works in an interdependent fashion. Paul proceeds to explain exactly how verse the mutual submission of verse 21 is to look in the home. As Paul expounds upon this verse he addresses the wives obligation to submit to the husband. While this may seem harsh, it will duely noted that the majority of Pauls instructions are to the husbands. He commands husbands as the head to lead by example, to love their wives in a sacrificial servant way that models Christ life, to treat the wife with extra special care and attention, and to set her high above all(v 25-28).

In the first book of Corinthians Paul asserts that each party belongs to each other and has obligations to fulfill each others need in the marriage. Once again, a dramatic shift is presented, primarily for the husband (7:1-4). The cultural norm would have subjected the wife only to the ownership of her husband; however here Paul redefines the roles and relationships within the household. Completely going against the grain in a society where the women were of little value other than procreation and pleasure. Likewise, Peter offers wisdom as he redefines the home.

After addressing the wives submission (3:1-6), Peter asserts that the husband is to be considerate to the wife, and treat them with precious honor. Peter presents wives as equally valuable in the eyes of God, and also sharing in the gift of salvation. The previous instructions were so crucial that if the husband failed to comply then his relationship with God would be endangered and his prayers could be hindered (3:7).

In spite of a feminist view point that the church in the first centuries were male dominated and chauvinistic, it is observed that male of the house experienced the most dramatic change as he had to restructure and redefine what it meant to be the head of the house, as well change his concept of true leadership. This is evident as we viewed the family as a unit, the role of the Head of the House, and the functions of other members of the house. Furthermore, the household code was a basic formula which presented the ideal structure for the home. The N.T uses this format but presents the structure in view of the Gospel rather than the cultural norms of the day. The N.T. writers did not simply do away with the basic roles of the family, rather they restructured on how each was to function in relation to each other. The household of God presented a radical change in the social status and interrupted cultural norms and truly turned the world upside down. In Gods scheme of redemption he not only restored mankind's relationship with God; he also reconstructed the household so that it could return back to God's original design.

Bibliography

Works cited for world civ 2 final

Aristotle "*Politics book 1*" trans. Benjamin Jowette <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics>.

Aune E. David. *The New Testament in its Literary Environment: Library of Early Christianity*
vol 8. Philadelphia PA. Westminster Press. 1987.

Cassius Dio "[Roman History](#)" the Loeb Classical Library edition Vol. V. trans. Earnest Cary
<http://penelope.uchicago.edu>, 1917

Dionysius. "[The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus](#)" trans. Earnest Cary of
The Loeb Classical Library Edition. Vol. I <http://penelope.uchicago.edu>. 1937

Gaius *The Institute of Gaius* Trans. Edward Poste. Oxford press. <http://web.upmf-grenoble.fr>.

1904

Kruse W. Michael. "*Recovering the Biblical Image*". [Kruse Kronicle](#)

www.krusekronicle.typepad.com May 10, 2007

Kruse W. Michale. "*What is a Family?*". Kruse Kronicle.

ww.krusekronicle.typepad.comMay 17, 2007

Keener . S. C. "family and households" Dictionary of New Testament Background. Craig A.

Evans.Stanley Porter Downer GrovelL. I.V.P 2000

MacDonald Y. [Margaret](#). "Colossians" Colossians and Ephesians: Sacra Pagina

Vol 17 [Daniel J. Harrington](#) Collegeville, MN. The Liturgical Press. 2000

MacDonald Y. [Margaret](#). "Ephesians" Colossians and Ephesians: Sacra Pagina

Vol 17 [Daniel J. Harrington](#) Collegeville, MN. The Liturgical Press. 2000

Meyer C. Jørgen "*Women in Classical Athens In The Shadow Of NW Europe*"

<http://www.hist.uib.no/antikk/antres/Womens.html>

Osiek Carolyn Families in the New testament world :households and house churches. David L

Balch. Louisville,KY.John Knox Press. 1997

Prabhakar K. Rao *The Role of Women In Christianity*. Faith Commons

http://faithcommons.org/the_role_of_women_in_christianity. April,27 2007

Quintilian "Institutio Oratoria" trans. H. E. Butler Loeb Classical Library edition,

<http://penelope.uchicago.edu>, Vol. 1920

Swanson , James Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains. Oak Harbor,WA.

Logos Research Systems Inc.1997.

Stambaugh E. John, The New Testament in its Social Environment:Library of Early Christianity

Vol 2 David I Balch, Philadelphia,PA. John Knox Press, 1986.

Saller, P. Richard "*Pater Familias, Mater Familias, and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman*

Household". Classical Philology, Vol. 94, No. 2. pp. 182-197. Apr., 1999,

The Law of 12 Tables The Civil Law I, trans. S. P. Scott. Cincinnati, OH. <http://web.upmf->

*Replace with
your logo*

Bible Study Material

free bible study lessons, outlines for you to enjoy
<http://amessagefromthelord.com/biblestudymaterial>

grenoble.fr/Haiti/Cours/Ak/. 1932