Submission and violence: exploring gender relations in the first-century world

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ABSTRACT
Any claim of understanding the context of the New Testament writings must attend to gender relations in the first-century Mediterranean world. Depictions of such relations are often presented unrealistically, ignoring certain historical sources and favouring inappropriate theoretical models. This study constructs and interprets aspects of the mentality underlying first-century interaction between men and women. Generally speaking, gender relations in antiquity seem to reveal an inherent tendency towards violence. They clearly were fundamentally hierarchical. A distinct narcissistic and egocentric motivation can also be detected. The New Testament perspectives on gender relations both reflect and interact with this context.

1 INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND ‘BACKGROUND’ STUDIES

In our attempt to understand these texts one of our most important efforts must be to expand our referential framework regarding the world of the New Testament in such a way that it will approximate as closely as possible to the milieu in which an informed contemporary hearer/reader would have received those documents (Du Toit 1998:5).

Along with this principle, Du Toit (5–8) warns that a number of problems should not be underestimated when ‘applying’ background information, such as when conclusions ‘are not always based on a comprehensive and penetrating study of all the available primary sources’ (my emphasis) and that we, the modern readers, are also ‘conditioned by our own reading context and...dependent on our own subjective interpretation’.

Furthermore, several dangers lurk when ‘applying background knowledge’, such as an ‘uncritical’ approach or (strongly decried by Du Toit) ‘forcing’ some knowledge onto a New Testament text without taking into account ‘the distinctive character’ of the New Testament texts. The ‘legitimate use of background knowledge is that the biblical text must itself enjoy priority’ (9–10, my emphasis).

Ironically, such ‘prioritising’ is exactly an uncritical approach to history, as it is a way of making nonsense of the importance of context. There is definitely a need for a
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different way of thinking about text and context. I propose that text and context be seen not as 'entities' to be attached or related to one another, but as configurations of each other. As there cannot be a text without a context any suspicions of 'uncritical' readings or 'forcing' contexts onto texts are related to questions of point of view and of values. A text should not be regarded as the reflection of a historical setting, but rather as part of a larger discursive complex where text and culture(s) are understood to be in a mutually productive relation to one another. Our task is 'a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history'.

Furthermore, historical understanding is always interwoven with the present; it is the product of thinking by the historian/interpreter while interacting with ancient texts and artifacts. The problem is not that some are conditioned (by modern concerns) and others not. The fact that we are all influenced by our situation and outlook simply foregrounds the issues of how and to what ends we employ our perspectives.

To the historicist imagination, history is the past, or perhaps the past seen in and through the present; and the historical task is to attempt a reconstruction of the past, including perhaps, the present of that past. 'History includes the future, and that historical task involves as well the construction of what shall be possible.... When we read, we construct our histories, including our futures (McGann 1989:105–106).

2 PICTURING GENDER RELATIONS

Gender relations is a very serious contemporary issue. The democratic ethos has problematised traditional gender roles and social behaviour. Feminist critiques, among others, have uncovered the pervasiveness of male violence towards women. To Christians and others dealing with Christianity a proper understanding of the New Testament perspectives on matters of sexuality, gender roles, male violence, authority in relationships and so forth is of crucial significance.

It follows that some will take Du Toit seriously and turn to that particular volume in order to assist them in understanding something about gender relations in the New Testament world. For instance, one could want to gain a realistic impression of the historical context of the various exhortations that wives should be subject to their husbands (such as Col 3.18 or 1 Pt 3.1), or what was at stake, in terms of social behaviour and consequences with regard to Paul's prescriptions about men and women (e.g., 1 Cor 6, 11.7)?

In the volume Guide to the New Testament two sections relate to questions concerning gender and sexual relations. De Villiers (1998:152) writes that initially the Greeks and Romans 'had a strong patriarchal family system' like a 'miniature state under the absolute authority of the pater familias'. Yet in the home the wife occupied a position of dignity: she could take part in discussions concerning family affairs, receive visitors, and appear in public' (my italics). At any rate, by the first century,

growing 'individualism' had taken root 'with the result that a woman's total subservience was no longer tolerated. This process, however, was a gradual one, and the change did not take place everywhere in the same way' (De Villiers 1998:152). Furthermore, considerable decline in married and family life entered the picture, according to De Villiers (152). Divorce became frequent, material prosperity and the 'Greek influence' which considered marriage a mere 'necessary evil' contributed to this breakdown. Despite this 'decay in marriage' there were marriages founded on love and mutual trust (153).

The aim of the depiction is quite clear: a growing liberation of women and steady deterioration of family life characterise the New Testament context. The subservience mentioned in the New Testament texts, this picture suggests, is basically constructive. The Christians are combating 'moral decline' and have a distinct 'standpoint concerning marriage and the relationship between man and wife' (De Villiers 1998:153). Texts mentioned are Rm 1.24–27; 1 Cor 6.12–20, 7.10–16, 1 Th 4.2–5. No discussion of this 'distinct standpoint' is given, though the implicit message is not difficult to discern: the Christians have a morally superior life-style with 'proper' relations between husbands and wives.

Du Plessis (1998:308–309) writes along similar lines. According to him, the 'custom of concubines' in the Jewish world had fallen into disuse by the first century. He states that the 'tie between man and wife in marriage is so highly rated that the New Testament uses it to illustrate the tie between Christ and his Church (Eph 5.22–33)'. Du Plessis not only assumes that we already know what the characteristics of this relationship are (which should be the point of his essay and the volume of which it is part), but also that such a relationship is a good thing: appropriate and worth emulating. What exactly this 'tie' involves is not analysed nor linked to contemporary (current) values.

Not only are the two discussions referred to reflective of a highly dubious historical portrayal, they represent the kind of historical study that prevents us from critically confronting not only the texts but also from reconsidering our own contexts.

3 'LOVE' IN THE CONTEXT OF ANCIENT DAILY LIFE

At stake is not so much that De Villiers and Du Plessis have it wrong,2 but that they do not really take us into the context of the texts their studies are supposed to deal with.

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2 They do have it wrong; I limit myself to a few brief criticisms: (1) The well-known instability of some senatorial marriages can hardly be an indication of the context of the New Testament texts and even less of a supposed 'general' moral decline. De Villiers's depiction of the decline in Roman family life echoes the suspect views of Carcopino (1940:100) that marriage had degenerated to the point that it had 'become merely a legalized form of adultery'. Much more reliable studies of the Roman family and household are available: Rawson (1986), Dixon (1991), Cohen (1991), Corbier (1991) and Saller (1984). Note that Veyne (1987:46–49) suggests that the
With regard to divorce Du Plessis emphasises that 'Jesus and Paul both refer to God's original intention as regards marriage—it is an indissoluble bond' (1998:311). He notes that both of them (Jesus and Paul) 'keep in mind that man is weak and hard of heart, and they reckon with the harsh realities of everyday life'. It is precisely those 'harsh realities' of daily life, I propose, that will guide us to a better understanding of the historical context of first-century gender relations.

3.1 A world of charms, spells and curses

Pliny Senior writes, 'Indeed everyone fears to be spellbound by curse-tablets' (Naturalis historia 28.19). In this remark we glimpse something which is very substantially part of the social world of the first century CE, and which forms an appropriate starting point for this discussion. After all, whatever Paul (or the rabbis, or whoever) thought the world should be like, our interest is in what the world was like, hence the interest in what Trachtenberg (1939:viii) calls 'folk religion': expressions of 'the common attitude of the people'.

An important resource for understanding first-century 'common attitudes' is the 'magical texts', made up by the magical papyri, charms, amulets and other objects with magical writing. Magoi, 'professionals' who specialised in the practice of magical procedures (μαγεῖα), codified their knowledge in textbooks. These formularies constituted an important resource for understanding first-century 'common attitudes' is the 'magical texts', made up by the magical papyri, charms, amulets and other objects with magical writing. Magoi, 'professionals' who specialised in the practice of magical procedures (μαγεῖα), codified their knowledge in textbooks. These formularies constituted an important resource for understanding first-century 'common attitudes'.

The itinerant 'evangelists and prophets' selling sacrifices and spells (Plato Republica 2.364b), the 'wise and learned among the Persians' (Cicero De divinatione 1.23.47), the 'astrologers and magicians' (supposedly) expelled from Italy by senatorial decree in the year 16 CE (Tacitus Annales 2.32) or 19 CE (Suetonius Tiberius 36, cf 63), the 'profession' denounced by Pliny Senior for its fraudulent yet powerful and emotional hold on 'a great part of the world' (Naturalis historia 36.1-18), the potent yet bungling fools portrayed by b.Sanhedrin 101a, Middrash Rabbah 1.9, and Philo (De vita Mosis 1.92). Most of them were probably men; though women specialising in 'Thessalian arts' (Lucian Dialogi meretrici 4.4) and 'old ladies' capable
tain detailed recipes for spells for various circumstances that a magos, an apprentice or a scribe could copy, inserting the names of clients at the appropriate points. The recipes also often include detailed instructions for specific behaviour to accompany the written spell; these spells were not only written and spoken but also performed.

The use of such magical textbooks were clearly widespread. Well-known is the account in Acts 19.19, where some of those who practised magic arts (tau apgieye) in Ephesus brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all in response to their conversion.

Suetonius (Augustus 31) tells us that Augustus burned more than 2,000 soothsayers' books, but also that the emperor wore a seal skin amulet to protect him against thunder and lightning (Aug 90). Lucian relates how a certain Arignotos dealt with a haunted house by reciting from 'Egyptian books' (Lucian Philopseudes 31). Some of the longer papyri in the Preisendanz collection (1973; 1974, cited as PGM) are such textbooks (e.g., nos 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 12, 36), working copies from which incantations were transcribed. These 'textbooks' contain spells for every occasion, sometimes even optional wordings for the same recipes. The terminology used is vague and generic allowing the magos to tailor a spell to the specific needs of the client.

A significant aspect of this 'folk religion' was curse tablets—the 'dark little secret of ancient Mediterranean culture' (Gager 1992b:3), yet undeniably part of the 'cultural koine, the universal religious discourse of the ancient Mediterranean world' (Gager 1992a:243). These curse-tablets, defixiones or xatadesmoi, are inscribed pieces of lead, usually in the form of thin sheets, intended to bring supernatural power to bear of powerful devotiones and maleficia (Apuleius Metamorphoses 9.29) must have been common. Betz (1982:161, 169) shows that the professional magician 'belongs to the phenomenological type of the "craftsman" who were concerned with the preservation of their traditions'. On how to recognise a magician see Morton Smith 1978:83–93 and the account of the magician Thessalos (J. Z. Smith 1977:234–237). The magoi in Mt 2.1–11: Delling 1967, Hengel & Merkel 1973:143–153.

Various metals are highly significant in the world of ancient magic. A bronze sickle or scythe must be used to cut magical herbs; an iron one must be avoided (Ovid Metamorphoses 7.227, Pliny Nat hist 24.12, 103). Sounds from bronze instruments prevent the moon from being drawn down or eclipsed (Plutarch Moralia 944b, Ovid Metamorphoses 7.207–8, e.g.) but bronze needles are very useful in magic (PGM 4.321–2, 7.442, 36.236). By and large, 'gold and silver were reserved for protective amulets and for medical spells to cure various diseases and infirmities' (Gager 1992b:31 n 11). PGM 4.2145 calls for the use of iron for a spell to obtain oracles, wreck chariots and undoing other people's spells. The use of lead, especially lead alloys, for magical documents—'the vast majority of surviving tablets'—must be significant; see Gager 1992b:3–4. The characteristics of this metal (coldness, pallid death-like colour, weight) led to its association with the chthonic forces (i.e. earthly, netherworldly powers) and its appropriateness for forceful magic (Martinez 1991:2–6). Ancient astrologers associated lead with Kronos/Saturn, an ill-boding planet capable of harmful or evil influence (see, e.g., PGM 13.1027–1034; Cicero De divinatone 1.85). PGM 7.397 explicitly instructs to 'borrow' lead from a cold-water pipe—probably the idea is to steal the metal, adding 'power' to the effectiveness of the curse. This brief discussion is germane as it shows (1) the 'strangeness' of ancient thinking about natural phenomena and (2) the all-pervasiveness of 'magical' thinking.
against persons and animals. Though other materials were also used—ostraca, limestone, gemstones, papyrus, wax, various metals and ceramic bowls—lead and lead alloys remained the primary material used on which to express desires to enlist supernatural aid in bringing other people under the control of the person who commissioned or personally inscribed the tablet.

Today we tend to underestimate both the extent and the importance attached to 'magic' in antiquity. Far from a minor 'aberrant' feature, magic was simply part of the worldview, a fact of life. The question was not so much whether magic was real, but more about whose magic one encountered. It is sometimes emphasised that the magical spells are a complement to the more elite (and urban) texts conventionally used to reconstruct ancient life-worlds. This is true, in a sense, as these charms and spells often do reflect the non-aristocratic social worlds. Yet, the literary tradition clearly confirms that both the scribes/magicians who copied the spells from handbooks and the persons who commissioned them came from all walks of life. The pervasiveness of ancient magic should not be minimised.

Magic is not just something 'in' the environment into which the Old Testament and the New Testament were 'born' (so Yamauchi 1983:169), supposedly an unsavoury part of the biblical 'background'. Magical beliefs and practices constituted much of the world that the ancients lived, including the early Christians.

A notable magical practice relevant to our inquiry is the 'love spell' or erotic charm. Curse tablets, by and large, reflect forceful magic, 'that which seeks to influence the attitudes, actions, or circumstances of one against his/her will; thus love charms fit this category. They generally demand that the beloved endure great misery until he/she fulfills the lover's desires' (Martínez 1991:2 n 7).

The truth is that it made little difference who you were—man or woman; Greek, Roman, Jew or Christian; commoner or aristocrat; unlettered peasant or wise philosopher. In matters of the heart, as in many other affairs of daily life, anyone could play the role of client or target. For there was no one who did not fear the power of defixiones (Gager 1992a:245).

One such magical formulory (PGM 4.296-466, cf Betz 1986a:44-47) illustrates

7 Magic 'was not a separate technology, opposed to religious practice. To the ancients, magic was distinguished from respectable rites and prayers by the malevolence of its intentions and the murkiness of the materials which it used' (Fox 1986:36).

8 Chronologically the evidence covers all periods of antiquity, and geographically comes from all the Roman provinces. Magical practices provide remarkable insight into the Mediterranean mentalities of antiquity. About Jewish magic Levine (1970:343) notes that: 'What we have is a common idiom and mentality, and little typological distinctiveness.'

9 'Magic' was the great meeting ground and melting pot of the cultural and religious traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity. It is for this reason that, one way or another, students of the 'world' of the New Testament need to deal with Morton Smith's description of extensive syncretism as context for earliest Christianity; see 1973:220-237; 1978:passim; 1986, and 1996. Several complex problems are involved here (on which see Graffert 1999:158-168, Brooten 1996:109-113; Benavides1997 provides a cross-cultural analysis); best dealt with by acknowledging that a clear distinction between magic and religion in the ancient Mediterranean sources cannot be made.

10 Αφλοροκατάδεσμος. Martínez 1991:8-16 provides a corrected text. A number of 'versions'
this social practice. The recipe is designed to bind a woman to a male—the man is the petioner. The client is to make two figures of wax or clay, a male one armed like Ares\textsuperscript{11}, holding a sword in his left hand, threatening to thrust it into the right side of the neck of a kneeling female figure with her arms tied behind her back. The formulary instructs that specific magical words should be written on particular parts of the female figure and then, using thirteen copper nails, to pierce various body parts saying, “I Pierce [the various body parts] of so-and-so, so that she will think of no one, except for me, so-and-so, alone”. The recipe continues by instructing the petioner to take a lead tablet and write the same saying on it, to say it out loud, and to bind the tablet to the figures, tying it with 365 knots and saying, “Abrasax\textsuperscript{12}, hold it fast”. The lead tablet is then to be placed at the tomb of a person who has died before her or his time or who has died a violent death. The idea was that the spirit of such a person was not at rest and, as a sort of roaming ghost, could be counted on to carry out such wishes.\textsuperscript{13} The tablet had to be placed before sunset as these ‘spirits’ came ‘to’ their graves during night time. Next to the tablet, the petioner was to put seasonal flowers and to recite a specific saying.

Erotic spells like this make up about a quarter of the extant binding spells. They clearly resemble curse tablets (the majority) in that they describe the binding and tormenting of the persons towards whom the spells are directed. All these spells work with constraint (πατέξεως) for the purpose of forcing the actions and sentiments of others according to one’s own desires. Ostensibly, the love charms differ from curse of the formulary are known (at least 10), all 2nd-3rd century documents. Petropoulos 1988:217–222 shows that the techniques appearing in these texts must have existed long before Hellenistic and Roman times. One of the oldest love charm tablets comes from Pella in Macedonia and dates from 375–359 BCE (Gager 1992a:85 n 24).

\textsuperscript{11} Traditionally, the god of war (of all deities!), or rather, of the war spirit. Though his love-affairs (who can forget the scene of Hephaestus catching Ares and Aphrodite in flagrante delicto?—Nomer Od 8.266–369) could have contributed to the symbolism, the figure’s posture and explicit reference to his weapon suggests the overwhelming aggression and destructive fury associated with Ares. Studies of the Ares-mythology: Schachter 1996, Burket 1985:169–170. Deities were usually invoked or adopted with regard to their major spheres of influence, and for their perceived character (Schachter 1992:54–56).

\textsuperscript{12} Abra\textit{sam} or Ab\textit{rasax} is one of the most common of all \textit{voces mysticae} and was used to address a deity with solar connections. On amulets the deity is usually represented with snakes as legs, an armoured torso and a cock’s head. The numerical equivalent of its name was said to equal 365, the days of a year and a common magical number as it signifies the concept of totality in various contexts. In Aramaic magic Abra\textit{rasax} is the first among the angels directing the sun (Naveh and Shaked 1985:36). See further Betz 1986a:331, Martinez 1991:10 n 40.

\textsuperscript{13} The phrase is ἀπόφευκα τοῦ θανάτου. Those who die violently (θανάτος) are a special case of those who died before the fulfilment of their fates (ἀπόφευξις). These included unborn babies, children or youths, and those who died unmarried (τὸν θανάτον οὐκ ἔχοντες) or without offspring (τὸν θανάτον ἄβιος). ‘Because of the premature or unnatural circumstances of their deaths the souls of ἀπόφευξις and θάνατος did not escape to the stars or underworld, but remained near their graves, longing to re-inhabit their bodies. Because such souls were consigned to this world, they were accessible spiritual agents for magic’ (Daniel 1975:255).
tables in that their goal is to attract the passion and devotion of individuals. She must, according to our example, love the petitioner (φιλούσαν με), and stay inseparable from him (αχώριστος μου μείνα). Another spell (Papyrus Michigan 15 §§12–13) demands that a woman named Kopria should love Ailourion ‘with all her soul, with all her spirit, with unceasing and unremitting and constant loving affection, …with a divine love (ἐγωτι θείω)’.

Though more comprehensive, the example quoted is quite typical of ancient love charms (in addition to PGM see the examples edited by Daniel 1975 and Sijpesteijn 1977; cf Petropoulos 1988; Gager 1992a:85–115; Winkler 1991). These love charms raise disturbing questions. Note, for instance, how this ‘love’ should manifest itself: The νεκυδαίμων (spirit or godlet of the dead person) is commanded:

Do this, bind her for the entire time of my life and force [her name] to be subject to me, [petitioner’s name] and may she not be rebellious towards me for one moment of all time (κοίνον, κατάδικαν εἰς τὸν ἄπαντα χρόνον τῆς ζωῆς μου καὶ συνανάγκασον τὴν δείνα ὑπεργοῦν εἰκαί μου, τῷ δείναι, καὶ μὴ ἀπονοματάτω ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ ὀραν μίαν τοῦ ζιώνος —PGM 4.380–384).

I would like to draw attention to three (interrelated) aspects: the violence implied (and even explicitly suggested) by these texts, the logic of reality assumed (i.e., the ‘given’ness of superiority and inferiority, hence of domination) and the shocking egocentrism displayed.

3.2 The naturalisation of violence

Many of the details of these love spells are remarkably violent, even sadistic (from our point of view). A figurine of a female in bondage14, made and pierced according to the recipe provided by PGM 4.296–329, graphically illustrates the ancient practice and forces us to think about cultural differences.

Both Winkler (1990:96–98) and Gager (1992a:81–83) have argued passionately (so to speak) that we should not interpret the violence depicted by the love magic literally; that the abusive practices portrayed are best considered as something positive—the imagery is constructive symbolism and just ‘therapy’ for a troubled person.15 In con-

14 The figurine, dating from late 2nd/early 3rd century CE, is in possession of the Louvre museum. Illustration in Gager 1992a:98, fig 13. It was found inside a clay vase, together with a rolled-up lead tablet (about 11cm²) containing a love charm modelled on the contents of PGM 4.296–434. The tablet (Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum 1717; Horsley 1981:33–36) informs us that Sarapammon has had the text inscribed to secure the love of Prolemais. The δαιμόνιον Antinoos, assisted by all the divine demons of the underworld, is to see that she is not to have any pleasure with any other man, nor to eat, drink, sleep or find contentment until she comes to him. ‘Drag her by the hair, tear her inside, until she does not reject me …and I have Prolemais …obedient for the rest of my life, loving me, desiring me, telling me her thoughts’ (lines 24–27).

15 Brooten (1996:99–103) is also critical of their anachronistic apologies for this ‘magic violence’, and prefers ‘to take these women and men [the ancients] at their word’ whilst being cautious...
contrary to them, I want to argue that we should take the ancients seriously, and give careful attention to the violence and domination inherent in these texts. Precisely by focusing on the violence we gain entry into their cultural logic and achieve perspective on some important realities of ancient gender relations. Consequently, I also admit a further interest: proper attention to these facets in the context of the early Christians force us to confront related issues at the very heart of our symbolic universes: values and assumptions that not only allow violence and abuse, but maintain and often even promote them.

The point is not to deny that marriages were happy and harmonious, or that men and women in the Roman world did not have fond feelings, loyalty and often deep love towards each other. At stake, I am arguing, is a 'cultural logic' that leads to serious problems in relationships despite love and emotional ties.

The depiction of violence in ancient love magic is related to other indications of gender violence in antiquity which, in its turn, is reflective of the extent of violence in the Roman world. In the Roman world, we should never forget, violence was everywhere, supposedly always under control but definitely always on display (cf Dupont 1992:244). 'Punishment of the innocent seems to have been a policy of expediency founded on fear and compounded with indifference' (Lintott 1968:44).

Roman tradition tolerated and even encouraged violence in political and private disputes, and both the law and constitutional precedent recognized the use of force by individuals... Moreover, it was reinforced by the Roman cult of expediency in matters where physical coercion of people, whether legal or illegal, was involved (Lintott 1968:4).

The Roman empire as a social institution is the manifestation of such values. From a socio-political point of view the Roman way of maintaining order is simply 'institutionalised terror' (Wells 1984:284). It is within such a setting that one realises

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16 Besides many indications from the literary traditions, there is also extensive epigraphic evidence of husbands and wives expressing such emotions. A single example: '...to Gargilia Eusfraxia...well deserving but not deserving this (benefacti set sic non merenti)’ (Leon 1960.237). Benefacti (‘in grateful memory’) was a common memorial phrase.

17 The point I am making deals with the assumption that in such actions and expressions one can glimpse something of a possible mindset. With regard to the Roman world, one must suspect that violence became 'more than a symptom of other disturbances, but rather a disease itself...' (Lintott 1982:11). Both Dupont and Lintott, strictly speaking, discuss conditions during the Republic, but it is precisely these attitudes that not only allowed the development of the empire, but also enabled its progression and then maintained it. Augustus' making of 'an interrelated system' (cuncta inter se conexa, Tacitus Annales 1.9.6) was a matter of armies and taxation, i.e., a matter of force. The Empire had a brutal military origin and basis: Lintott (1993:191) and Wengst (1987:11-44). Stier (1975) gives a description of the Pax Romana as an armed peace, but attempts to justify Roman violence on the basis of superiority (!) of cultural achievement and as a way to diminish 'barbaric' and 'low' cultures. Horsley (1993:20-58) provides a useful overview of the violence (overt and covert) inherently part of the imperial situation.
that violence probably suffused basic human relations—man-woman, husband-wife, parent-child—as well.

There are many specific clues to suggest underlying violence in gender relations. In Roman culture, sexuality and humour are discourses of aggression, convincingly shown by Amy Richlin (1992). It is obvious that a good deal of verbal humour, including parody and some puns, depends on the presence of hierarchies of power. The converse relationship is more difficult to detect: humour, even nonsense, is a sort of training mechanism for keeping members of a society attuned to its norms. Richlin's detailed analyses point us to the conclusion that 'aggressive fantasies, of which much sexual humor is a subset, serve not only to reinforce but to exacerbate already existing aggressive tendencies' (1992:211). With regard to the Roman world of about 150 BCE to 150 CE, and including a good deal of Greek references, it is clear that sexual humour 'reinforces and promulgates aggressive and oppressive behavior on both the individual and societal level' (:211).

There are other indicators. Valerius Maximus, probably a teacher of declamation during Tiberius' reign, in his Memorable deeds and words (which was meant as a handbook of illustrative examples for 'the advanced stage of the élite Roman's education' (Wardle 1998:14), hence illustrative of typical moral and philosophical assumptions), invokes the ancient story of Egnatius Mecenius who

beat his wife to death with a club because she had drunk some wine. Not only did no one bring him to court because of this deed, but no one even reproached him, for all the best men thought that she had deserved the punishment for her example of intemperance. Any woman who desires to drink wine immoderately surely closes the door to all virtues and opens it to all vices (Facta et dicta memorabilia 6.3.9).18

Even more chilling is the account by Augustine of how his mother meekly suffered regular beatings at the hands of his father, and continued to serve her husband 'as if he were her master'.

She knew well enough that an angry husband should not be contradicted either in deed or even in word. But when he had calmed down and seemed receptive, she used to give him an explanation for her conduct, if by chance he had been offended for too slight an occasion. Many women, whose husbands were actually more mild-mannered than hers, bore the scars of beatings on their disfigured faces. But when, in conversations with friends, they criticised the behaviour of their husbands, my mother gave them a serious warning—though phrased as a humorous remark—about their gossiping, advising them that from the moment they had first heard the so-called matrimonial tablets read aloud, they should think of those tablets as the instruments by which they had been turned into slaves, and that, mindful of their status, they should not be insolent toward their masters. (Augustine Confessionem 9.9).

The picture unfolding distinctly reveals that there was an ever-present substratum of violence—or at least the threat of violence—in gender relations. Violence, to these

18 The text consulted is Constant 1935. The reference was found in Bloomer 1992.
people, was a natural extension of living and doing. 'We have no need of a maid, except one to weave, grind, cut wood, do her spinning, sweep the house, be beaten'.

We can now return to our love charm (PGM 4.296–466). The instructions are that, besides writing magical phrases on various body parts of the female figurine, it must also be pierced with copper nails, one into the brain, two each into the eyes and ears and two into the pudenda (among others), so that 'she may remember no one but me' (321–329). What is being enacted here is symbolic violence, the (armed) male figurine clearly threatens the female. The client is visualising how the woman he desires will be forced to fulfil his wishes. He calls on 'superior' power—a power who cannot be called to justice—to do what he wishes to do, if only he had the means and opportunity. The mechanism is ferocious compulsion, the ghost and its cohorts are to torture the woman. Obviously she is to have no sexual enjoyment with any other man (351–352), but she must be made to suffer considerably: 'unable either to drink or eat', she is not to feel any affection (μὴ στέγασί) and with no peace of mind she must 'not find sleep without me' (354–355).

Violence as a value pervades this mentality. Note how the god of the dead is also threatened: if it accomplishes what the client wishes, 'I will quickly allow you your repose' (384). The client does not merely call on 'superior' power, the ghost is forced to fulfil his wishes.

Violence, in this mindset, is clearly instrumental. In other words, the concern is not whether such things (violent abuse of a woman to achieve sexual fulfilment) were actually done—though such terrible deeds, as among all cultures, did sometimes happen—but the unquestioned, explicit acceptance of the possibility and merit of violence. Violence is simply a completely acceptable means to ends, even when it comes to love between men and women (or between parents and their children).

We can almost speak of a 'naturalisation' of violence in antiquity. The simple fact must be faced: these people found the adversarial context and language of binding spells suitable to their erotic experiences. It is therefore imperative that we do not limit ourselves to a mere search for directly visible forms or moments of violence. Precisely the relative lack of obvious and/or observable physical assault can be an indication of the powerlessness of the violated (cf Schrijvers 1983:56).

Violence as a value pervades this mentality. Note how the god of the dead is also threatened: if it accomplishes what the client wishes, 'I will quickly allow you your repose' (384). The client does not merely call on 'superior' power, the ghost is forced to fulfil his wishes.

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gedachten—in dit geval: de angst voor en het anticiperen op mogelijk geweld—die bij voorbaat haar inschikkelijkheid verzekeren, zonder dat een man daar iets voor hoeft de doen (Römkens 1980:291).

When it comes to the so-called ‘Jewish’ contexts of the earliest Christians we can establish indications of a similar mindset.

The Old Testament texts portray a number of extremely abusive attitudes towards women. It is not without reason that Trible (1984) wrote about ‘texts of terror’.21 The ancient Near Eastern martial values are inscribed in the Hebrew Bible: a capacity for violence is often seen as synonymous with manliness and violence against a feminine object is, at several points, a focus of masculine identity. In various Old Testament traditions the sacred, violence, war and gender are categories constructing each other. There is, consequently, often an effective association of military exploits with sexual ability; sometimes the same symbol would possess a double reference with exactly these associations (Hoffner 1966:327). Manhood in such contexts entails the capacity to exert violence, and, conversely, ‘woman’ signifies one who succumbs to violence (cf, e.g., Jer 51.30, 50.37; Nah 3.13; Isa 19.16).

Many Old Testament narratives and traditions exemplify a sort of mentality of which we need to be critically aware. Specifically, they contributed to the ambience, so to speak, of first-century Jewish cultures. Naomi Graetz gives a useful, brief summary:

The texts...in the Bible and the midrash do not talk about actual battering of women; however, they do create a metaphor for viewing women as objects of violence. ... [T]hese texts... [show] that the values that are implicit in them can lead to a climate of social convention that tolerates real battering (Graetz 1998:15).22

Even more pertinently, a number of scriptural traditions manage violence against women (or at least structures violence to be inflicted upon women). I do not claim that first-century persons actually literally implemented Old Testament laws and customs—it is in fact a question how, precisely, or in some cases even if, biblical law was practised. What is relevant is the fact that Old Testament ‘discourse’ belonged (and still belongs) to a larger authoritative discourse. Discussing the Deuteronomic...

21 Trible discusses the stories about Hagar, Tamar, the unnamed women of Judges 19 and the daughter of Jephta. Her feminist hermeneutic seeks ‘to redeem the time’ by recounting these stories by means of literary criticism in memoriam, searching for a remnant theology that challenges the sexism of scripture within these outrageous traditions (cf Trible 1984:2-3).

22 These values relate to a series of assumptions ‘about women as “other” or alien’ which justify force as a form of social control: ‘women are of a lower order, their biological differences set them apart, make them inferior. In addition, women are often seen as the cause of all human suffering, as responsible for the fall from grace and disrupting the relationship with God’ (Graetz 1998:10). These values are, at points, also visible in various NT traditions; e.g., 1 Tim 2.13, 2 Cor 11.3. The effect of such teachings are devastating with regard to real female victims: ‘... making the victims of rape, incest or battering feel guilty and responsible for their victimization has its religious roots in the scriptural teaching that sin came into the world through Eve... [T]he victimized and not the victimizers are held responsible’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994:xiv).
war laws, Washington (1997:344) notes the 'sermonizing appropriation of the legal tradition' in the present form of Deuteronomy, and its effect: 'the inculcation of values and the creation of identity [more] than the juristic imposition of rules'. The Deuteronomic war code (Dt 20–21) exerts a profound effect on gender categories in the sphere of influence of the Hebrew Bible, not only valorising violence but indeed producing violence (Washington 1997:345–362).

In rabbinic tradition gender relations does not, comparatively speaking, receive a great deal of attention, as is to be expected. In the Mishnah's system, for example, women are essential and central but not critical. A woman is only of interest for the Mishnah when she becomes, and when thereafter she ceases to be, holy to a particular man: when she enters and leaves the marital union. These transfers of women are the dangerous and disorderly points in the relationship of woman to man, hence that is where and why women form a component of the six-part realm of the sacred, as envisioned by the Mishnah. Women are just another part of the sages' universe of which the focus is the God-man relationship. Earth (agriculture), the cult, women are all components of the 'matter' made holy or marked as profane by the will and acts of God and of man (who is like God). 'Mishnah's [system of women] is a system of sanctification through the word of God and through that which corresponds to God's word on earth which is the will of man' (Neusner 1979:87). Women, for the designers of Mishnah, 'mean no more, and no less, than albatrosses, rocks, trees, or study of Torah' (Neusner 1979:95); they are an anomalous problem to the handful of sages imagining how things should be. From the point of view of these men women are abnormal and men are normal, and a system is necessary to regulate the irregular (cf Neusner 1979:96). The Mishnah portrays a woman as completely passive—she is an object upon which man and God act.

Violence against women do get some attention. For instance, the rabbis rule in the case of the man whose wife gets injured. Who injures her is not analysed in the Mishnah (Baba Qamma 8.1), though the Talmud applies the ruling to the case of a wife beaten by her husband (y.B Qam 32a, 89a–b, note the formulation in t.B Qam 9.14; and later medieval interpretations discussed by Frishuk 1990:147–148). In such cases, damage money is held for the woman and real estate is purchased, which belongs to the woman but her husband retains usufruct. Of course, if the injured woman is a freedwoman or married to a proselyte 'no penalty is incurred' (m.B Qam 5.4); no money can change hands because she does not belong to a proper husband.

Clearly, violence towards women could not have been unusual. In the Babylonian Talmud the sages feel that, among other things, what distinguishes them from the 'amme ha'areš (a sweeping indication of fellow Jews who do not accept rabbinic perspectives)25 is the fact that the commoners beat their wives (b.Pesahim 49b).

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25 The 'amme ha'areš participated in synagogue life, came from all walks of life and did not constitute a closed association. See Oppenheimer (1977:18–22); Freyne (1980:287).
It is commonplace to assert that Jewish tradition teaches that a husband should act respectfully and caring towards his wife. This is true, in the sense of such instructions being included in the lists of the supposed duties and obligations incumbent on husbands compiled by conventional scholarship. Should he act otherwise, various moral and legal sanctions are imposed upon him. What must be emphasised, however, is the setting for such 'respectful' behaviour: of the wife is expected to behave servilely and subservient to her husband. In the striking words of Abigail, wife of king David, 'I am his slave to command; I would wash the feet of my lord's servants' (1 Sam 25.41). We need to look deeper, not so much at individual acts of abuse, but in search of attitudes of terrorising, of unspoken assumptions about the validity of instrumental violence, a mentality that accepts violence as reasonable.

It is noteworthy that both Frishtik (1990:133ff) and Graetz (1998) document that in later tradition some rabbis allowed wife beating, while a few others actively promoted the activity. Frishtik also gives attention to psychological violence, a far more pervasive abuse that has always been present. (Both authors emphasise the duality of attitudes among the sages, and that generally speaking, rabbis did not remain indifferent to severe mistreatment but enacted laws and awarded civil compensation for injuries).

However, such references to abuse are merely incidental to the argument developed in this article. There was an underlying presence of intimidation in relationships and households; such violence—whether actually committed or just threatening—was common and acceptable, and for that reason the rabbinic literature need say very little on the subject (cf Graetz 1998:73–91).

In the Mishnah the mentality of violence as instrument, especially with regard to women, can be detected. This is best illustrated by the sotah, the suspected adulteress. The Mishnah tractate Sotah is an interpretation of Numbers 5.11–31, and it is important to note from the beginning that it is not about what the woman actually did, but about her husband's suspicions. A wife suspected of being unfaithful is to be brought before a priest; she is then forced to drink a magic potion which will result in certain physical consequences. The man's suspicions immediately places the woman in a liminal state of ambiguity, 'positioned at a seam between sexual, ceremonial, and political order and disorder; between holiness and defilement; between access to and

24 See, for examples, Gafni (1989), Falk (1978) and Safrai (1976). I must emphasise that the texts quoted by these scholars are all prescriptive rather than descriptive of early Jewish women's reality. Rabbinic texts in particular are first and foremost concerned with those occasions when women threaten to violate the categories of holy society, so carefully imagined by the rabbis; cf Kraemer (1992:104–105).

25 There is no tradition concerning the sotah, a man turning from his wife, and, most significantly, not even the possibility of a woman's jealousy affecting any sacred order. The traditions dealing with the sotah beg the question, why there is such a preoccupation, even cruel obsession, with women's fidelity. Note that the biblical text concludes, 'No guilt will attach to the husband, but the woman must bear the penalty of her guilt' (Num 5.31).
the unattainability of truth' (Haberman 2000:12). The suspicion about her makes her vulnerable, the decision of someone else leaves her open and defenseless. Disabled, she now is a target—she is in the terrible kind of situation with the capacity for violent behaviour. It is precisely such an uncertain situation delineated by apprehension, exposure and vulnerability which will unequivocally show whether those around her consider violence a means to resolve things. This is exactly what we have glimpses of.

The material origins and purpose of the sotah-ritual obviously relate to male jealousy, which in many cultures throughout history has bestowed unimaginable punishment upon suspected adulteresses (cf Alder 1992:269). The biblical text, the Mishnaic interpretation, the Tosefta and Talmuds operate with a unilateral male prerogative to decide to enact the degrading ritual on a woman. Both the biblical and mishnaic texts objectify the suspected woman. She is depicted as the passive object of the man's action.

The mishnaic scholars elaborate considerably on the biblical text. After confrontation and warning (m.Sotah 1.1-4), her garment is grasped and ripped, she is undressed, her hair loosened, her breasts ogled. The assault on her concentrates on her thighs and vagina. Women are explicitly directed to witness the attack so that they will be instructed to behave lewdly (m.Sotah 1.6). The Tosefta includes Rabbi Judah's stipulation that her jaw is to be forced open with iron tongs if she refuses to drink the potion.

In a sense, the sotah-ritual is just a fictional text. The rabbinic canonisation of detailed formulations of this ritual could never be executed after the destruction of the Temple (and it is doubtful whether it was done even before that). Yet, precisely this speculative context of the ritual emphasises the content and power of a mentality, the 'preeminence of the text over the act' in the words of Haberman (2000:37).

Like the violence symbolised and utilised by the love-charms, the abuse of the sotah is not an unfortunate coincidence or a harmless expression of some misunderstanding. The words of the ritual concerning the sotah may have never been actually executed, but words—even when referring to imaginary acts—not only, or even primarily, say; they also do. These texts do things: they construct and reproduce social relations within communities. They reinforce current cultural norms and propagate them for the future.

Similar to the love charms, the rabbinic imagination about the sotah clearly reveals a world of relationships constructed by domination. When we connect the indications from a great variety of sources, we can discern a way of thinking: for these people

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26 It should be noted that part of their 'reconstituting' of the biblical text is an attempt at circumscribing excessive unregulated male power over the sotah.

27 The reference is to the illocutionary force of language, as explicated in speech act theory. See Austin 1962:4-11, 94-107. All discourse is simultaneously action, creation and signification, instances of doing/making/meaning events and of things done/made/meant. Cf Hernadi (1988).
male-female relations is something expressed by control. Implicitly or explicitly they view others, and particularly women, as inherently manipulable. By force, when ‘necessary’.

The texts analysed promote all an atmosphere of intimidation. Intimidation is part of the ‘mindset’ framing their actions, decisions, expectations. The violence and objectification of women in these texts primarily serve to influence male audiences’ views of women.

For example, by the time of the compilation of the rabbinic documents, the so-called ordeal therein had long ceased. The coherence of the picture that these texts paint—the violence and humiliation to which a suspected adulteress is subjected—suggest that the texts are “doing” more than merely preserving the historical recorded. ... That is, true violence or an actual ordeal or humiliating ceremony was not necessary: none of these texts encourage actual physical violence, whether physical abuse of the adulteress or marital rape. ... Rather, these texts convey underlying values and a violence of language that both husbands and fathers would have taken to heart, influencing their behavior toward wives and daughters. ... Men who read these texts were left to feel more secure with their current, asymmetrical social relationships. ... These texts need not have even been transmitted to women in order to scare them; they “worked” as soon as they were said, read, and assimilated by their audience (Satlow 1996:294–295).

Violence (or the menace of violence) is a strategy of intimidation in the service of (male) domination. We tend to think of marital violence as a domestic affair and force in general as the product of individual deviance, confined to pathological or exceptional behaviour. This is wrong, as Kate Millet (1970:43) makes clear: ‘control in patriarchal society would be imperfect, even inoperable, unless it had the rule of force to rely upon, both in emergencies and as an ever-present instrument of intimidation’ (my italics).

To reiterate: not every husband in the Roman empire was beating his wife.28 Yet, there was a callousness, a casual, ‘normal’ approval of violent behaviour towards women. Suetonius’ narration of the abuse of Agrippina (wife of Germanicus), for instance, is so straightforward, so cavalier that his use of the word ‘cruel’ is almost incongruous:

As punishment for her severe protest he [Tiberius] ordered a centurion to give her a good flogging, in the course of which she lost an eye. Then she decided to starve herself to death and, though he had her jaws prized open for forcible feeding, succeeded (Suetonius Tiberius 53).

I want to direct attention to the substrata of violence, aggression and harassment in ancient discourse dealing with male-female relationships. We are all aware of the

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28 Not much is available in terms of direct evidence. In Rome, physical punishment of women was either extremely rare or extremely unmentionable. Although custom allowed a father, husband, and sometimes male agnates the power of life and death over a married woman, very few cases, if any, are recorded in which adultery was punished by death. And the Romans did not make jokes about wife beating—though...the elegaic poets found fighting with their mistresses
infamous inferiority terms used in ancient texts with regard to women; what we urgently need to acknowledge is that such terms and attitudes had a material aspect, an embodiment that must be disturbing to our contemporary sensibilities.

Why did women act in such submissive and lowly manners? What happened when the reserve in speech, act and gaze was not kept up? Roman aristocratic women had access to money and power—but within very clear limits. Livy (34.1–8) notes that 'women's servitude is never terminated while their males survive', but even then they would not enjoy the freedom they could enjoy 'for they abhor the freedom that loss of husbands and fathers provides'. The lack of choice for women, and the threats limiting those choices, are neatly left out of the speech.

Some women were publicly honoured—some even greatly—but our understanding of gender relations should not be limited to these honourings. Often these acknowledgements of women were of them as wives, mothers and sisters, that is, to exalt the men to whom they were appendages. More revealing of the problem are those women not within the 'proper' boundaries. The plight of women outside of direct male control is also relevant in grasping the essential aspects of ancient gender relations. The attitudes towards widows, freedwomen, concubines, female slaves and the childless reveal a stark, callous callousness, shot through with the violence of neglect and disdain. It was easy, commonplace and implicitly acceptable to disregard (at best) and/or violate (often) these women. The fate of the poor widow was 'eines der härtesten Schicksale, von dem eine Frau betroffen werden konnte' (Brox 1969:185).

Great numbers of young girls ended up in slavery due to exposure (Rousselle 1988:51; Boswell 1988:53–171). Concubines were widespread, as was the sexual use of female slaves (Pomeroy 1975:191–197). Why, incidentally, should references to Roman matrons be more relevant than the relations with concubines to picture attitudes towards women? Or consider the Roman dole—which was explicitly instituted and maintained to benefit free men and boys (the imperial grain dole could support only one man, cf Pomeroy 1975:202–204).

The underlying connection, I propose, is the objectification of women which correlates with a belief in instrumental violence. The love charm and its pierced figurine turn out to be very revealing windows onto the ancient social world and its strange
erotic' (Richlin 1992:219).

29 The extent of the population of destitute women were staggering at times, and quite high at best. Bishop Cornelius of Rome, writing to Fabius of Antioch in 251, reports that 'more than fifteen hundred widows and persons in distress' are part of the complex structure of the congregation 'supported by the grace and loving-kindness of the Master' (I e, the church) (Eusebius Hist eccl 6.43.11). The sheer numbers of women outside of direct male control, the plight of most of them and the wealth of some, presented the early Christians with both opportunities and great challenges. Cf 1 Tim 5.3–16; Bremmer (1995); Methuen (1995).

30 'Men were not brought up to believe that it was virtuous to refrain from sexual intercourse. Boys learned to lust after the household's female slaves, always available for their pleasure' (Rousselle 1992:319).
mindset. To allow any violence, even simulated, symbolised or ritualised, just makes it that much easier to accept actual violence; to not only live with it, but to condone it and to allow it to thrive. Atrocities come by far too easily. Violence simply breeds violence.

Of course there are alternatives to violence as an ‘instrument’ for achieving ends. To borrow from Hannah Arendt, great effects can come about through participatory acting, that is ‘where people are with others and neither for nor against them—that is in sheer human togetherness’ (Arendt 1958:180).31

3.3 The chain of being

Ancient magic made sense to a certain worldview, and some of the basic assumptions of such a worldview can readily be illustrated from the love spell. The crucial assumption built into the binding spell is that the structure of reality is like a huge, vertical chain. Sanders (1993:140) provides a brief description of this view:

...there is a Great Chain of Being, in which everything is linked to something else, above and below it. The manipulation of certain common elements (e.g., garlic, goat’s urine and grass) would influence the Beings next higher on the Chain, and so up the entire Chain to the deity. The correct manipulation of the lower elements, together with the right incantations and the use of the right names, would make the higher deity perform one’s desires.

Such a view may seem fairly innocuous; just another way that some people may look at nature. But the great chain of being is more than an element of the thought of first-century people: it is a cultural model that concerns kinds of beings and their properties and which places them on a vertical scale with ‘higher’ beings and properties above ‘lower’ beings and properties. Ancient magic is an instance or manifestation of the hierarchical worldview of antiquity. The great chain is in fact intimately entangled with their system of values and fundamental to their thinking. Worryingly, it is still part of our thinking, I hasten to add, and we barely notice it.32

Once again we should translate this way of thinking into material terms: higher and lower in its essence is about better and worse, inferior and superior, the master and the slave. The great chain is a scale of forms of being and consequently a scale of the properties that characterise forms of being: hard is above soft, active is better than passive, taller is superior to shorter, (male) reason is better than (female) instincts, and

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31 Arendt writes about ‘true’ political action which must be viewed as the opposite of violence, coercion or rule. In her rendering, the sharing of words and deeds by diverse equals, whose acting together generates a power quite different from the forceful ability to impose one’s will which we normally identify with political power, should be our ideal. I believe we can extend Arendt’s rethinking of political concepts to a useful critique of power in other forms of human relationships. See also Arendt (1986).

32 There is a useful discussion of the ‘Great Chain’ as a fundamental way of conceptualising experience and its epistemological impact (i.e., as a conceptual ‘mapping’ of thought) in Lakoff and Turner 1989:165–213.
so on. This chain of being is much more than just a matter of 'mere' metaphor and its most frightening aspect is the absolute sense of hierarchy. There is a belief that a distinct order of things exists: a clear and knowable scale of rank in the universe.

It follows that the social structure will correspond to such a conviction and women are placed in a secondary and subordinate position at all periods of their lives. The great chain 'metaphor' operates not merely to characterise the nature of the levels of 'reality' but in fact to create them.

Consequently, consider the **embodiment** of that ancient point of view. It is not simply a matter of men having 'authority' over women. This 'authority' had a distinct and powerful **materiality**: 'real' humans with 'proper' bodies above 'inferior', not fully humans with 'improper' bodies.

The Law says woman is in all things inferior to the man. Accordingly, she must be submissive, not for the sake of humiliation, but that she may be governed (ἀλλ’ ἐν δικαίωσει), because God gave the authority (τὸ κράτος) to man (Josephus *Contra Apionem* 2.201).

Note how her humiliation is neatly sublimated to enhance male domination (and to actually increase her subjection!). Similarly Philo, who like other Jewish thinkers elaborates on women's subordination as a consequence of the Fall, emphasises that to be male is to be rational and superior:

By just looking at the plain facts one will know that virtue is male, since it causes movements and affects conditions and suggests good conceptions of noble deeds and words ... the female, like one's mind, must be activated by another and trained and helped, and in general part of the passive category, which passivity is its sole means of survival (Philo *De Abrahamento* 102).

How can one reach agreement with one's wife, asks the 'king' in the *Letter of Aristeas*:

By recognising that womankind are by nature reckless and energetic in the pursuit of their own desires, easily liable to sudden changes of opinion due to poor reasoning powers, and [that] their nature is essentially weak. It is necessary to deal wisely with them and not to provoke strife (*Letter 250–251*).

For the purposes of this study the focus is not so much the issue of patriarchy, but on the mindset that operates with the assumption/perspective that some humans (mostly males), are more 'advanced' along the great chain. They, thereby, **must** have more of the positive attributes (as determined by themselves). This way of thinking is

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33 In his *De opificio mundi* Philo explains how the first man had been growing into the likeness of God until woman was made, she then started the 'wrongs and violation of law' and 'wretchedness in lieu of immortality and bliss' (151). Cf Sirach 25.13, *Rabbah Genesis* 30.1, *Rabbah Deuteronomy* 6.11; impact of these convictions summarised by Archer (1990:263). Analysis of the myth: Lerner (1986:184–188, 194, 197, 201).

34 Actually patriarchies. Hausen (1986) clearly shows the importance of differentiating between various historical manifestations of patriarchy.
exploring gender relations in the first-century world

well illustrated in Cicero's discussion of domination and subjection, in his De republica. There is, for Cicero, a natural inequality among people:

...if a free people chooses the men to whom it is to entrust its fortunes...then certainly the safety of the state depends upon the wisdom of its best men, especially since nature has provided not only that those men who are superior in virtue and spirit should rule the weaker, but also that the weaker should be willing to obey the stronger. (1.51)

To be fair, there are for Cicero different kinds of domination. Yet there is a structure of thought in his argument, a way of perceiving 'reality' and not just government, or monarchy: 'For there is no doubt at all that nature has granted dominion to everything that is best—to the manifest advantage of the weak. And that, surely, explains why God rules over man, why the mind rules over the body, and why reason rules over lust and anger...' (3.37). The incarnations of hierarchical thinking are simply endless.

Rattling the great chain would be a terrible thing. 'What misfortune must befall the city in which women take over from men!' (Cic Resp 4.5). Too much freedom would mean that

...not only are homes one and all without a master, but the vice and anarchy extends even to the domestic animals, until finally the father fears his son, the son flouts his father, all sense of shame disappears, and all is so absolutely free that there is no distinction between citizen and stranger; the school master fears and flatters his pupils, and pupils despise their master; youths take on the gravity of age, and old men stoop to the games of the youth, for fear they may be disliked by their juniors and seem to them too serious. Under such circumstances even the slaves come out to behave with unseemly freedom, wives have the same rights as their husbands and in the abundance of liberty even the dogs, the horses and asses are so free in their running that men must make way for them in the streets. (1.67)

This way of thinking must see the 'many' as the 'weaker' in relation to those few 'superior in virtue' (1.53). Without gradations 'equality' will be inequality (1.43, 53) and so, consequently, justice is what passes for men's advantage. Roman conquest is just, because servitude is advantageous to the provincials, and not only will the lawless be prevented from doing harm, the conquered will actually improve by subjection (3.36).

And so, dominating one's partner is for her own good. The cultural model of the great chain is about dominance. In this cultural model, some forms of being dominate lower forms of being by virtue of divine providence.

35 The context is the 'declaration' by Laelius, one of the most influential passages in Cicero's works. Scipio's enthusiasm, and behind Scipio Cicero himself, knew no bounds for this speech. A number of text critical problems relate to this section; the fragments all reinforce the argument that certain nations and individuals are naturally selected for, and to benefit (!) from, subjection to others.

36 Of course, Romans did not exercise their dominance that easily (things are never that simple). Cicero suggests that 'there should be a censor to teach men to rule their wives' (Resp 4.6).
Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men leads us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can (Thucydides 5.105).

Rabbinic literature is replete with instances where, in an almost casual way, women are mentioned as objects to be handled sometimes at will for the purposes of the sages. A useful resource is the study by Judith Wegner (1988), who shows that, though the sages hesitated to dehumanise women completely, they do treat them as chattel, especially with regard to their sexuality and reproductive capacity. ‘Perhaps the framers of the Mishnah were as much the prisoners of their androcentric world as were the women they controlled’ (Wegner 1988:181).

The idea of the great chain, and its cultural elaborations, has profound social and political consequences. More than describing the hierarchies that happen to exist in the world, it actually prescribes what the hierarchies in the world should be. As a chain of dominance, it must also be a chain of subjugation. The cultural model of the great chain includes the notion that dominance is part of the essence of the cosmos and that to subvert that dominance in any microcosmos is to challenge the correct order of the macrocosm.

Though we can catch glimpses of early Christian egalitarian traditions behind the New Testament texts, the embeddedness of these writings in both material reality and in human consciousness forces us to acknowledge that they support the hierarchical social structures of the time. The problem cannot be dealt with by arguing for the misinterpretation of a few pericopes isolated from their context. ‘The reproduction of oppressive social structures in a religious text shapes an imaginative matrix which underlies all utterances of that text’ (Briggs 1989:137).

3.4 Egocentrism and the extrinsic use of religion

In an instructive study, Allport (1960) distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic religion. Extrinsic religion is religion that plays an instrumental role in someone’s life. It serves and rationalises assorted forms of self-interest; in such a ‘life-economy’ the master-motive is self-interest (and, Allport emphasises, is manifest where religion is most closely associated with prejudice). Intrinsic religion is that sentiment that does not need to use religion as a talisman. Such a religious person is able to take the leap of reciprocity, the ability to perceive that others too have conditions and preferences. Like any other human, a person that practises intrinsic religion experiences fears and anxieties, but considers them normal afflictions of humanity and can therefore be compassionate rather than egocentric. Religious sentiment is then not limited to single segments of self-interest, but it floods the whole life with motivation and meaning.

Allport does not wish to imply that people are wholly intrinsic or wholly extrinsic in their religious outlook (1960:265). It is an interpretive distinction, a way of explaining the historical problem of religion and prejudice which has a ‘pervasive and

37 A point that Lerner (1986) emphasises to be the essence of patriarchy.
apparently permanent character' (Allport 1960:258). That is, the extrinsic-intrinsic variation is a heuristic difference which can help to grasp the material effects of beliefs.

Ancient love magic clearly points to an extrinsic religious sentiment.\(^\text{38}\) In fact, much of ‘religion’ in antiquity—as today—is appallingly self-centred.

Our charm includes a striking prayer worshipping the god, but the praise has a distinct thrust bearing exclusively on satisfying the wishes of the one praying. The prayer (PGM 4.435–461) is directed to the sun god, Helios ‘who creates all things’ (438). He is the ‘blessed one’ who rules heaven and earth and chaos and Hades where people’s daimones now dwell (443–444). One is to pray and ask this ‘unfailing one, the master of the world’ (445) to find the particular demon to be employed (‘from whose body I hold this remnant in my hands’, 448) and force it to perform for the one praying ‘all I want within my heart’ (450). The request is then that this particular demon should be made gentle and gracious, ‘thinking no hostile thoughts toward me’ (451) and not to be angry. Helios is praised so that his authority/power will make the demon a willing servant of the petitioner.

Note how Helios, who ‘arranged all elements’ to suit his laws (440–441), who rules all—including the netherworld demons (443–444)—is at the beck and call of a mortal.

The ideals of personal success for men in the agonistic, duplicitous, self-dramatising cultures of antiquity are well illustrated by the items requested in another prayer to Helios:

Come to me with a happy face [lit. your face gleaming], at the resting-place you choose yourself, granting me, so and so, life, health, safety, wealth, fine children, knowledge, ready hearing, good disposition, sound judgement, good reputation, memory, charm (χαρις), looks, to [appear] beautiful before all persons who see me, and make my words persuasive, you who hear everything without exception, great god (PGM 3.575–581).

Of course self-interest is a very basic facet of being human. In social science it is not uncommon to find models of exchange employed to understand human behaviour. Based on the assumption that parties in exchange relations are totally rational agents, that is, agents whose aim is to maximise their own self-interest, remarkable and interesting models can be devised to describe human interaction. Elster (1989), for instance, has developed a model to explain the social order of societies, and Margolis (1982) a ‘fair share’ model of choice from the view that every agent is actuated by self-interest.

\(^\text{38}\) In ancient prayer, supplication and gratitude blend into one another: ‘...when ancient man “thanked” his human or divine benefactor in word or deed he was most reluctant to do so without also ensuring his future. ... Life was a concatenation of threats and dangers; hardly had a man survived the old year than he started to fear some disaster in the new one. The gods of Antiquity did not have a moment’s rest; they were called upon day in day out. “One must not leave the gods alone, one must tire them”, later theurgy informs us. I cannot help feeling that the ancient gods died of weariness’ (Versnel 1981:63–63).
For the understanding pursued here, however, we need to ask some pertinent questions about what it is to be religious, and more critically, what Christianity is about. It is clear that the complexity and richness that characterise our actions will often not be fairly reduced to 'just self-interest'. Acts of altruism—giving without any expectation of a reciprocal gift—do happen. Edith Wyschogrod (1990) argues that a willingness to forego self-interest is a mark of the saint; for her the saintly dissolution of self-interest is the touchstone of moral existence. Hartsock reminds us of similar behaviour in an association far more accessible than sainthood, namely the mother-child relationship.39

Fact is, many times we do act in self-interest, occasionally in a very self-centred way. Our egocentrism can even develop defense mechanisms to fool one's critical and self-critical faculties. Religion can all too easily become a manifestation not of reciprocity but of self-centred redistribution. Thinking in terms of exchange probably typifies what Fowler delineates as the second stage of the development of faith, represented by the religious ideas of a ten-year-old (elementary school age) when people adopt a view that assesses events in terms of retribution, substitution and transaction (Fowler 1981:138–150). It is childish, selfish and easily leads to 'works righteousness'.

What these reflections are leading us to is to realise one should not only admit value judgement, but also appraise, explain and account for an ethical slant as relevant to the historical study of the New Testament writings. Without some moral assessment, a 'context' is made that is history without a future; it is not a history that relates to us.

Why did the love charm struck me as self-centred? Why should a love-sick person's one-sided obsession be strange? Probably because one considers (at least part) of 'religion', and in our context we are talking about Christianity, to be about the other/Other, and hence about love.40 Love means that I want you to be. In that sense, love is a telling critique of certain religious practices because they have self-interest at heart: 'rational' (i.e., maximised gain) exchange.41

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40 No need to explain the biblical data here. Two influential thinkers (in my opinion) in this regard: Augustine (see, e.g., Schlabach 2000), and Albert Schweitzer. Interestingly Hannah Arendt's dissertation (1996) was concerned with the concepts of love in the writings of Augustine: love as craving, love as a relation between human and Creator and neighbourly love, which is fundamental, the one toward which the other two concepts are oriented.

41 Love is the very antithesis of violence. Violence is like work in that both activities aim at transforming something (ways of applying force, so to speak) but unlike work in that it is not applied to things or entities or systems or information, but to persons. 'Violent action is the application of force not to some ontic constellation but to human beings' (Wyschogrod 1990:84). Denying, ignoring or minimising are all 'forceful' actions. Defining violence besides Wyschogrod (1990:84–86, 134–135) also Arendt (1986:65) and Bloomquist (1989:62–64).
At various points in the biblical traditions we do notice egocentrism and self-interest playing their part. Even more, they often play destructive roles in our religious practices. These impulses must be faced, and we must be willing and prepared to also quarrel with our texts.

4 CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

Let me briefly reiterate some methodological aspects with regard to 'background' as context and the challenges of interpretation.

Horsley (1989:4) notes that in 'the fields of biblical studies and Jewish history there has been a tendency to interpret biblical and other material on the assumption that we could deal with Jewish society by itself'. His point is to underscore the importance of economics and politics; 'culture' is more than 'religion' and customs, it is also about power and exploitation. In the same vein, I want to illustrate that 'context' is much more than a matter of 'applying' information.

Context is also to glimpse below the surface. It is, methodologically speaking, an intense effort in search of meaning. At the heart of historical understanding, context is an expression of the attempt at conversation—and the evocation of multiple partners including oneself is deliberate—which demands involvement and confrontation.

Reference to social usage does not end exploration of meaning, it is initiated by such reference. Background studies are not for filling in supposedly missing parts of the puzzle but to engage in communication, a complex and involved process.

In addition to 'uncritical' or 'forced' background information which can obscure context, I maintain that the question of attitudes (such as a democratic commitment) determines methods and relevance of interpretation. Because we are part of the contextualising enterprise, because cognition presupposes the principle of relevance, we are forced to confront ourselves. The ideal to be historical, to let others speak—like all other interpretive ideals—turns back on us: our results ask to what interests and purposes our efforts are relevant. One's ethics, desires and attitude to other persons and humankind in general are, in other words, entwined with one's interpretive strategies.

Conventional background studies operate, methodologically, with basically two strategies. Background is conceived as information that stands (1) in contrast to the New Testament, which neatly functions to show the supposed 'uniqueness' of the 'Christian' message, or in cases where contrast cannot be maintained, (2) as parallels which can be relativised by means of 'blame it on...'. See Robinson (1971), Tanzer (1994:329-331) and Plaskow (1993:120). The analysis by Johannes Vorster (1990:108-111) is particularly relevant here.
Either way, we usually find that Jesus and Paul are portrayed as men who stand over against their upbringings and environments, and that the early Christians typically emerge as the heroes of ‘history’. In order to achieve such portrayals this or that is assigned as ‘uniquely Christian’ or ‘derived from the Hellenistic background’ or is a ‘product of Judaism’. In contrast I propose an approach that is aware of the interconnectedness of things. Contextual interpretation goes beyond presentation and description of data. It attempts an entry on to the (disputed) terrain of consciousness: to illuminate (empirically) why people act as they do and what potential space for transformation exists. The challenge for us is to situate oneself at the point in social space from which those others view that space, that place in which their world-vision becomes self-evident, necessary, taken for granted—to paraphrase Bourdieu (1996:33). It is from that space that we need to propose something about meaning and attitudes. Indeed, as Bourdieu (1998) makes clear, it is only through acquiring knowledge of social necessity, that the knowledge of freedom emerges.

The goal is to develop a more qualitative understanding of people’s lives, by entering the world of experience in all those contexts normally assigned to the cultural domain. Exploring social history in its experiential or subjective dimensions should transcend the separation between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ and a more effective way of making the elusive connections between the political and cultural realms could be explicated. It is precisely these ‘insides’ of the structures, process, and patterns of social being—the daily experiences of people in their concrete life situations, which also stamp their needs—that had previously been left out. The effort is not easy, nor unequivocal:

A meaningful ethnography would require at the minimum not only a social object well-defined in space and time but the possibility of interviews, observations, and counting, which our resources cannot provide. Lacking this, I have resorted to the now familiar, though still debatable, notion of a Mediterranean family of cultures whose broad lines of similarity have persisted across the longue durée. The features of this cultural family and in particular its erotic items may well be found elsewhere in the world: I make no claim about a specifically or uniquely “Mediterranean” character in their configuration. Similarly, though I often contrast “us” and “them” as cultural strangers, many of “their” notions and practices may have a familiar ring. That is to say, my working portrayal of a twentieth century “us” is as much in want of qualification as my global picture of an ancient Mediterranean “them” (Winkler 1991:234–235 n.5).

5 NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES

There can be little doubt that in many (and complex) ways the New Testament writings participate in the mindset delineated above. The New Testament documents can-
not be forced into a consistent, unitary, monolithic text; these writings represent multilayered, contradictory (and sometimes indeterminate) sets of traditions. Although they do contain values and visions that can nurture the struggle for transformation and emancipation, such seeds or possibilities of liberation are intricately interwoven with their patriarchal and hierarchical contexts (cf Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:8–11).

Given the attitudes and disposition described as part of the context, we should be wary of the ‘highly rated’ tie between man and wife in first-century marriages and even more careful when the ‘Christian standpoint’ concerning the man-wife relationship is presented on the basis of selected New Testament texts.

To show such interrelatedness with their context, a few New Testament references to the man-woman relationship are discussed.

5.1 Colossians 3.18–19

The Christian household codes (such as Col 3.18–4.1) function as apologetic defences, demonstrating that Christianity is not subversive. Most commentators are hesitant to acknowledge the oppressive nature of these Christian instructions in submission and encouragement of the authority and interests of masters. Not only is the Colossian household code a powerful affirmation of hierarchy, the whole letter explicitly seeks to maintain the great chain of being (1.13, 1.15, 2.10, 2.15, 3.1–2, e.g.). The universal lordship of Christ may liberate from the heavenly powers and authorities, but it surely affirms the patriarchal rule of the masters of this world. It is only by reading Colossians atomistically that ‘progressive’ elements can be detected. Christ may be all, and in all (πάντα καὶ ἐν πάσην Χριστὸς, 3.11) but he is that as head of the church. There may be no longer slave or free man (δοῦλος, ἐλεύθερος), but only so long as the slaves obey in everything (κατὰ πάντα) their masters, serving them as if they were the Lord himself (τῷ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ οἱ υἱοί ὑμῶν, 3.22–24).

Christian wives are to subject themselves to their husbands whilst the men are to love them, moderating their (typical?) harshness. The exhortation has no sense of balance: ὑπακοῦετε is not γαρναίετε. It is just an androcentric text: a patriarch patting himself on the back for not being the worst of patriarchs. Equality or partnership is not in view here, as the reference to the total obedience of children and long exposition of service by the slaves makes clear. It is also excluded by the fact that although


46 Plutarch also urges not to treat women ‘harshly’—something that ‘angry men’ (who, for Plutarch are the same as ‘weak men’) typically do. But then, women, according to Plutarch, are usually ‘more irascible than men’ (due to their ‘softness’), and the suggestion is quite obvious: wives are the convenient recipients of the anger of the men in their households, but this can be explained by their characteristic foolishness (Plutarch Moralia 457A–C/De cohibenda ira 8).

47 There is an ‘ideological link between the submission of women and children and slavery’ (D’Angelo 1994:321).
women also owned slaves, and slaves often had considerable influence, the exhortation does not address them as authorities. This exhortation is about the control to be exercised by the husband/father/master. Consequently, within its context (both historical and literary), the text can only be an affirmation of threat, unmitigated authoritarianism and (male) egocentrism.

The author threatens specifically the slaves quite severely (3.24ff). Although the masters are also warned there is no indication of equality, due to the disjunction in status. What we hear in these admonitions is ‘the voice of the propertied class’ (Judge 1960:60, 71). The powerful warning the powerful is not equal to the powerful threatening the powerless. In the same way Eph 5.21 cannot be a mutual submission; the instruction remains lopsided (proved, immediately, by the ‘be subject as to the Lord’ and ‘be subject in everything’, 5.22–24).

The phrase ‘in Christ’ is not without significance. Lohse speaks for many commentators: ‘...the words “in the Lord” set forth a critical principle which makes it possible to determine which ethical admonitions were considered binding for the community’ (Lohse 1971:156). But it is exactly within its historical context that the phrase cannot—and did not—function as a ‘critical principle’. It served (and still does) as a legitimation. ‘In the Lord’ in this text does not discriminate between kinds of behaviour, it affirms existing practice. Read together, and from the (historical) social space of the text, the instructions ‘submit’, ‘obey’, ‘work’, ‘serve’, ‘give thanks’, ‘justice and fairness (τὸ δικαίον καὶ τὴν ἴσοτητα)’ and even ‘to love’ are all part of a domination rhetoric. The love that binds together in perfect harmony (συνδέσμος τῆς τελειότος) is still to ‘manage’ (παρέχεσθε, cf 4.1) the servile (who is probably trembling with fear, cf Eph 6.5).

5.2 Galatians 3.28

Much is often made of the claim that, according to Paul, in the ‘new’ dispensation, ‘there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Gl 3.28). Fact is Paul did not really believe that there was no longer male and female in Christ. If he did, he could have made use of the argument from the non-circumcision of women. Paul is not wont to show the problems of circumcision; among others he emphasises that circumcision is intolerable because it invidiously discriminates between Jew and Greek.48 He does not observe that circumcision also grossly discriminates between male and female: if there is no longer male and female in Christ, then circumcision can play no role in Christ.49 Paul believed that men and women had separate functions, as in the

48 The key passages are Rm 2 and 4 (cf Hall 1992 section C). The idea that circumcision leads to discrimination between Jew and Greek is principal to Paul’s thinking, shown by Boyarin (1994).

49 An argument that later authors did make use of. In his Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, Justin Martyr argues in Pauline manner that circumcision cannot be a requirement for salvation.
old order, and the place of women was decidedly below that of men. 'Man is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man' (1 Cor 11.7). 'Women should be silent in the meetings. For they are not permitted to speak, but they should be subordinate... If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home' (1 Cor 14.34–35). Even more significantly, though equality proclamations recur in three other Pauline passages: 'There is no distinction between Jew and Greek' (Rm 10.12); 'For in the one spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free' (1 Cor 12.13); and 'There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free' (Col 3.11), only Galatians 3.28 refers to 'no longer male and female'. This is an incidental outburst (or unguarded quotation), nothing more: the thrust of the Letter, its textual world, remains unaffectedly male. Gl 4.31: 'brothers, we are not children of the slave...' is a conclusion of an argument (4.21–5.1) which, if nothing else, is as patriarchal as Exodus 12 (cf Lieu 1994:369). When Paul explains his teaching (1 Cor 11.2), he begins with a structured order of 'heads' as symbols of authority. The head of the woman is her husband, the head of the man is Christ, the head of Christ is God (1 Cor 11.3): in this echelon the woman does not serve as 'head' of anything. In fact, as κεφαλή implies by metonymy the whole person, 'the lowest member of the hierarchy...is further "de-personalized": that is, she stands in relationship to her husband as his "body"' (Corrington 1991:225). Females were to keep their separate and inferior position according to Paul.

5.3 First Peter 3.1–7

The household code in 1 Peter does not include children and parents. The discussion begins with a demand for submission to human governors (2.13–17), then demands from slaves to be obedient even to hard and unjust masters (2.18–25), and asks Christian wives to submit themselves to their husbands, even when these men are not Christians (3.1–6). A single sentence admonishes Christian husbands to 'understand' (κατα γνώσιν) their wives (3.7) because that will bring greater effect to their prayers(!). David Balch (1981:66–76, 82–84) shows that certain religious groups (such as Judaism and the cults surrounding Dionysus and Isis) were criticised by Greco-Roman authors, particularly when such associations attracted women and slaves. Their criticism included allegations of immorality and attempts to subvert Roman political and social authority. If we accept that during the first and second centuries the behaviour of

Justin argues 'the fact that females cannot receive circumcision of the flesh shows that circumcision was given as a sign, not as an act of righteousness. For God also bestowed upon women the capability of performing every good and virtuous act. We see that the physical formation of male and female is different, but it is equally evident that the bodily form is not what makes either of them good or evil. Their righteousness is determined by their acts of piety and justice' (Justin Dialogus cum Tryphone 23.5). Justin's arguments against circumcision appear in §§16–24, 29, 41, 46.
some Christian slaves and Christian women was a source of discomfort and anxiety to their communities, it seems plausible to assume this context for 1 Peter.

That is, the household code in 1 Peter is, in a way, a defence by claiming—through the exhortations—that the (Christian) households are indeed in order, and their wives and slaves properly submissive to their husbands and masters. The Letter is a sort of apology for the subversive effects of Christianity (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:260–266). ‘Maintain good conduct among the gentiles so that should they speak against you as lawbreakers they may see your law-abiding behaviour as good citizens and glorify God on the day of visitation’ (2.12). Read thusly, the comment that those husbands who do not obey the word ‘may be won without a word’ (ἀνευ λόγου κειδηθήσονται) carries extra poignancy.

It is quite understandable that some Christian leaders chose the way of accepting society’s patriarchy as a missionary strategy and survival mechanism. However, with hindsight—which of course pseudo-Peter did not have—we must be very careful and hesitant to acknowledge such an approach.50 Other options were possible: rejection of societal norms (something that the Book of Revelation proposes), criticism (such as Cynic παρωνία, ‘boldness of speech’) or modification (such as female households and/or asceticism). It is true that given the threat of persecution to the household, the author is recommending the lesser evil, in that women and slaves should be kept in their place. But we dare not be apologetic about this text and forget that he still chose evil. In fact, it is precisely a long history of ‘lesser evils’ that adds up to some of the greatest horrors committed by humans.

The severity of what is being advocated by 1 Peter should not be overlooked. The women are to ‘let nothing terrify’ them in their submission. The author is quite explicit: the burden of the tension between Christian community and Greco-Roman household/householder is to fall squarely on the wives and slaves (the least protected of society). Should wives and slaves toe the line, suffer quietly, the difficulties for the heads of the household will be alleviated and their troubles be minimised...

Even with regard to the Christian husbands the ‘to live with understanding’ and ‘to honour them’ is just reinforcement of hierarchy and authority. Reference to service and suffering is completely lacking: ‘The distinctiveness of Christian faith and religion is maintained only insofar as slaves and wives must be prepared to suffer for being Christians’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:261). What the men need to understand is that the women are the weaker sex (ἀποθέστερον σειόν, 3.7). The discrimination is violent: by nature all women are the same and there is, for all of them, only one correct way to live (cf 1 Tim 2.9–15).

50 ‘However, this strategy for survival gradually introduced the patriarchal-societal ethos of the time into the church. As a result, in the long run it replaced the genuine Christian vision of equality, by which women and slaves had been attracted to become Christians’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:266).
Most remarkable about 1 Peter is its connection between the suffering of Jesus and the suffering of slaves (and women, as the text clearly suggests with its parallel structure, 1 Pt 2.18–3.6). The author’s sentiment is easily understood: suffering leads to positive outcome—here, eternal life, the arrival of which is to be expedited by suffering, 5.10. Suffering is a blessing in disguise (a morally reprehensible view). With 1 Peter the situation is not that of a master winning and dining his servants. No, these slaves are to accept their deserved(!) beatings patiently as well as the undeserved(!) beatings (2.20).

What would a deserved beating be? ‘You say, Rufus, that your rabbit has not been cooked well, and you call for a whip. You prefer to cut up your cook, rather than your rabbit’ (Martial Epigrams 3.94; cf Pliny Nat 9.39.77). Juvenal depicts a wife suspicious of her husband sleeping with a household slave:

If her husband turns his back on her in bed at night, his secretary suffers. ... Some women hire a torturer on a yearly salary, who whips [the female slave] while she [the wife] puts on her makeup, talks to her friends... He lashes while she looks over the columns of the account book... (Satirae 6.475–476, cf 6.480–484, 490–493).

What would a deserved beating be? Seneca, sarcastically, argues against anger, ‘It would be a grand achievement, I suppose, to send some poor slave to prison! Why the hurry to inflict a whipping immediately or have his legs broken at once?’ (De ira 3.32.1).

You can take him [a lesser man, such as a slave] in chains and expose him to anything you see fit to have done to him—even so, it can often happen that too strong a blow dislocates a joint or leaves a sinew caught in the very teeth which it had just broken. Bad temper has left many [masters] crippled, many disabled, even when the victim was submissive (Seneca De ira 3.28.3).

The materiality of ‘a gentle and quiet spirit’, of ‘hope in God’ and ‘adornment’ by submission, ‘to do right (ἀγαθοποιεῖσθαι)’ and let ‘nothing terrify you’ (1 Pt 3.4–6) is indeed terrifying.

5.4 Patriarchy and Scripture

The above discussion is illustrative, limited to but a few texts and certainly not all relevant perspectives were brought to bear. Yet, if one considers Scripture relevant for one’s life of faith, considerable rethinking of biblical authority is needed:

The insight that the Bible is not only a source of truth and revelation but also a source of violence and domination is basic for liberation theologies. This insight demands a ... paradigm of biblical interpretation that does not understand the Bible as archetype but rather as prototype. ... “While both archetype and prototype ‘denote original models’, an archetype is ‘usually constructed as an ideal form that establishes an unchanging pattern’ ... However...a prototype is not a binding, timeless pattern, but one critically open to the possibility, even the necessity of its own transformation” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984:61; she cites Rachel DuPlessis).
I view the context of the New Testament with the conviction that patriarchy is an evil. With regard to male-female relationships, and specifically to love, patriarchy precludes intimacy. ‘Real intimacy can be grounded only in the contextual, unique, and particular, and in self-awareness. And intimacy is virtually impossible in systems of domination and abuse’ (Brock 1989:51).

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS: SUBMISSION, VIOLENCE AND ANCIENT TEXTS

This study is not a comprehensive investigation into the context of first-century gender relations. It is not about recovering the voices of the women and the subjugated (which should be an important part of such an investigation) and it is not about the resistance and subversions of women (of which there were many). This article is first and foremost a critique of a bad way of doing ‘background’ studies and the effect such historical depictions can have on understanding texts.

A love charm is used to open a window on some of the assumptions underlying ancient gender relations: the powerful and dangerous interconnections of domination, hierarchy, violence and a magical worldview. With such perspectives the New Testament authors lived, and their writings reflect and interact with them in various ways.

I emphasise some issues emerging from this study.

(1) The Guide to the New Testament, vol 2: the New Testament milieu should be used with considerable reservation when it comes to contextualising the New Testament perspectives on gender relations. The studies therein depict a milieu that carefully obscures complicity with hierarchical domination and intimidation. It is a presentation that will only facilitate the continuing objectification and subjection of women.

(2) Fatum (1989:63), writing about feminist criticism and biblical exegesis, notes that when it comes to authoritative traditions, such as the New Testament, ‘the common basis seems to be the supposition that Christian faith and biblical religion and spirituality are in themselves neither suppressive nor misogynistic’.

As long as Christian faith and self-identity remain intertwined with the socio-cultural regime of subordination and its politics of meaning they cannot but reinscribe physical and ideological violence against women and the weak. Theological and religious discourses reinscribe the inferior object status of women and reinforce rather than interrupt the victimization of women and children if they do not question but reproduce the socio-cultural inscriptions of “femininity”. True, Christian theology overtly condemns oppressive forms of exploitation and victimization... Nevertheless, Christian proclamation of kyriarchal politics of submission and its attendant virtues of self-sacrifice, docility, subservience, obedience, suffering, unconditional forgiveness, male authority and unquestioning surrender to God’s

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51 The literature discussing this is vast. For the doubtful, one can learn much from the essays in Brown & Bohn (1989).
will covertly advocate patriarchal practices of victimization as Christian revelation and faith-tradition (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994:xviii).

We cannot claim to construct context, to attempt historical understanding without involving ethical and other principal issues—among others reflecting on what one’s traditions are all about.

(3) The first-century world (and it is embarrassing yet necessary to emphasise) including the New Testament and early Christianity, is a foreign world where they did things very differently.

I think it important to stress what we might call the “strangeness” of the Greco-Roman and Jewish-Palestinian worlds in which Christianity originated. Until we recognize the gulf between them and us, we cannot cross it in any meaningful way nor begin to make sense, in our own terms, of their alien experience. ... I merely reaffirm that one of the cardinal purposes of the student of early Christianity must be to pursue this distinction, for without doing so, [one] may find oneself with nothing more than the odd pieces of a puzzle which cannot be fitted together, half of them being modern and half ancient (Countryman 1980:211–212).

(4) We need to face the fact that versions of the great chain still exist as a contemporary if unconscious cultural model compromising our understanding of ourselves and our world. The influence of the great chain cognitive model on our beliefs and conduct is not merely a historical matter; it is a contemporary ‘reality’ constraining our social, political and religious behaviour. For whatever reason, it seems that the great chain metaphor is widespread and has strong natural appeal. This is frightening as the implication is that those social, political and ecological evils induced by the great chain will not disappear quickly, easily or of their own accord.

(4) The final issue that our exploration of context raises is the vestiges of violent discourse. We are required to notice the extent to which people can be severely under siege by violent institutions and values, even when peace or harmony or cooperation seems present. Violence and abuse are disturbing markers of our cultures. Intimidation is very much a reality in our lives. Particularly the women and the poor among us will know how that, besides real danger, the threat of force still lurks everywhere.

WORKS CONSULTED


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