

## Husband-Wife Dynamics in 1 Peter 3:1-7: A Contextual Application to the Hema Marriage Culture in Northeastern DRC

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### Abstract

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This study examines husband-wife relationships in the Greco-Roman context through an exegetical analysis of 1 Peter 3:1-7. It compares ancient dynamics with the cultural traditions of the Hema people in the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, showing how socio-cultural values shape the understanding of Scripture's teachings on marriage. The discussion begins with an analysis of the patriarchal family structure in Greco-Roman society, in which the father's authority was firmly established on both legal and social levels. 1 Peter 3:1-7 encourages wives to live respectfully and urges husbands to honor their wives as co-heirs of God's grace, emphasizing respect in their husband-wife relationship. The study then examines matrimonial practices among the Hema, in which unions are often established through family alliances and reinforced by the payment of a dowry before marriage. The husband is recognized as the head of the family, and the wife plays a central role in domestic life and in transmitting cultural values to children. Although the Hema matrimonial organization reflects some patriarchal characteristics similar to those of the Greco-Roman world, it also encourages consultation and cooperation between the spouses. The results indicate that reading 1 Peter 3:1-7 across various cultural contexts can shed light on its principles and support the development of balanced, respectful husband-wife relationships within the Hema community today.

**Keywords:** 1 Peter 3:1-7; Greco-Roman Household; Hema Marriage; Patriarchy; Contextualization; Marital Conduct, Paterfamilias

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### Introduction

The husband-wife relationship is shaped by cultural and religious contexts that influence its structure and function within society. In the Greco-Roman patriarchal system, a father's authority extended over the wife and children. Sampley states, "In Roman legal sources, the term



*paterfamilias* was normally applied to the male ascendant within a family in the exercise of his 'power' over his descendants and property."<sup>1</sup> This socio-cultural context, widespread in antiquity, provided the backdrop for the biblical message's first audience.<sup>2</sup> In this context, 1 Peter 3:1-7 reflects the realities of the Greco-Roman household while framing marital relationships within a Christian perspective. The passage exhorts wives to conduct themselves respectfully toward their husbands and calls husbands to honor their wives as co-heirs of the grace of life.

The Hema tribe is located in the north-east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the province of Ituri. The Hema culture is based on interfamily closeness, reinforced by dowry, to conclude the alliance between man and woman. In this context, the union between husband and wife goes beyond the individual relationship to engage solidarity between families and clans. Araali, in his article, *Tradition et Coutume Matrimonial des Hema*, observes that marriage also serves to create and maintain alliances.<sup>3</sup> While the differences between the Greco-Roman and Hema models must be emphasized, particularly in matters of matrimonial rites and spiritual beliefs, the roles of spouses share essential similarities: the husband is the protector of the home, and the woman is responsible for caring for the household's children and property. The present study examines the husband-wife relationship in the Greco-Roman household in relation to 1 Peter 3:1-7 to identify commonalities and differences with the Hema tribe, using a comparative historical-cultural approach.

## **Union and Patriarchate in the Greco-Roman World: Legal Framework, Social Role, and Biblical Influence**

### **Family Structure and Role of the Paterfamilias**

The power of the father was considered an important institution within the Greco-Roman family's social and hierarchical organization. Rafael Domingo remarks: "The power of the paterfamilias over the child goes beyond his marriage, until the death of the father."<sup>4</sup> The father held the primary decision-making authority as head of the extended family; his power was almost total over the people he directed within the household. This authority, which conferred on the father the widest management of his wife and his own children, as well as the other members

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<sup>1</sup> J. Paul Sampley, *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook: Volume I* (London: T&T Clark, 2025), 171.

<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Keener, *1 Peter: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2021), 94.

<sup>3</sup> Bagamba B. Araali, "Tradition et Coutume Matrimonial Des Hema," Unpublished manuscript, Ville de Bunia /Ituri, 2016, 16.

<sup>4</sup>Rafael Domingo, "The Family in Ancient Roman Law," *Electronic Journal*, 2017, 1.



under his control, was legally founded by Roman law through the principle of *patria potestas*. Frier acknowledges, "In some extreme cases, Emperor Augustine had voted for the law in which the father could kill his child."<sup>5</sup> The role of the father went beyond the family context to include the management of the heritage and the training of children to guarantee their future.

Moreover, procreation and the preservation of family values guaranteed the social and legal contract in Greco-Roman marriage. Rawson argues that Roman marriage legally joined couples.<sup>6</sup> The father's practical management of his family was a valued social practice. As for the woman, her role remained essentially domestic, and she enjoyed the legal protection of her husband. It has also been observed that women were deliberately marginalized in Roman political culture.<sup>7</sup> However, some have noted that Roman philosophers such as Seneca and Cicero advocated a moderate exercise of this domestic authority, encouraging husbands to treat their wives with respect, despite the predominance of female submission in Greco-Roman social norms. Griffin and Gloyn comment that "Seneca already proposed an alternative idea of marriage where beneficiaries can deepen the virtues of home by pursuing the happiness of the couple under the authority of *paterfamilias*."<sup>8</sup>

### **Status of Women and Their Obligations in Marriage**

Ancient Roman society recognized two principal forms of marriage that shaped women's legal position within the household. As Gardner explains, "In a marriage *cum manu*, the wife passed from the legal authority of her father into that of her husband and became legally part of his family."<sup>9</sup> Under this arrangement, the woman left her biological father's jurisdiction. She became incorporated into her husband's household, assuming a status comparable to that of a daughter within the new family. Such a change of legal status was often accompanied by religious rites marking the transition. By contrast, another form of marriage, *sine manu*, allowed the wife to remain legally attached to her father's family even after marriage. Gardner observes that "by the

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce W. Frier, *A Casebook on Roman Family Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 191.

<sup>6</sup> Beryl Rawson, *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 247.

<sup>7</sup> Ronnie Ancona and Georgia Tsouvala, *New Directions in the Study of Women in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 213.

<sup>8</sup> Miriam T. Griffin, *Seneca on Society: A Guide to De Beneficiis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 47.; Liz Gloyn, *The Ethics of the Family in Seneca* (Cambridge University Press, 2013.), 76.

<sup>9</sup> Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law & Society* (Croom Helm, 1986), 13.



late Republic most marriages were contracted *sine manu*, leaving the woman legally a member of her father's family."<sup>10</sup>

The second form of marriage is *sine manu*, in which the wife remained under the legal authority of her biological father even though she was legally married to her husband. Under this form of marital status, the husband had partial control over his wife. Despite their conjugal union, the wife still held the right to the material property of her biological father. The common denominator of these two forms of marriage was that the wife had to show virtue, fidelity, and submission to her husband, regardless of her status as a married woman. As Jobes explains, "In Greco-Roman society, it was expected that the wife would have no friends of her own and would worship the gods of her husband."<sup>11</sup> Within this social framework, the household was organized under the authority of the husband, with the wife playing a central role in managing domestic affairs and raising children.

### **Cultural Representation of Marriage in Greco-Roman Literature**

In the Greco-Roman world, legal contexts gave marriage an exceptional value in social and political organization. Ancient Greece was the cornerstone of Western European culture, including its marriage practices.<sup>12</sup> By consolidating marriage, the stability of the city and the continuity of family lineages were guaranteed. The legal framework for marriage was intended to promote the legitimacy of children and to place the responsibility for maintaining the social balance of their homes on wives. With this in mind, it has been noted that "The uncertain status of a bride and the struggle to defend her had become familiar themes in the stories of the Roman past."<sup>13</sup>

Beyond legislation, philosophical and moral reflection has also been the essential pillar defining the husband-wife relationship within Greco-Roman society. In this perspective, Plutarch proposed a marriage ethic based on the husband's benevolence and moderation, without ignoring the father's authority in the home. Mathilde Cambron-Goulet affirms, "For Plutarch, tolerance in the home is a value that partners must preserve within a couple, without flouting the authority of

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<sup>10</sup> Gardner, *Women in Roman Law & Society*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New T (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 259.

<sup>12</sup> Zhulduz Amangelidyevna Seitkasimova, "Status of Women in Ancient Greece," *Open Journal for Anthropological Studies* 3, no. 2 (January 2020)50.

<sup>13</sup> Lena Larsson Lovén and Agneta Strömberg, *Ancient Marriage in Myth and Reality* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 12.



patriarchy."<sup>14</sup> This aspect has revitalized the emotional reciprocity between husband and wife in society.

## The Exegesis of 1 Peter 3:1-7

### Literary Context

A proper understanding of 1 Peter 3:1-7 requires considering the preceding passage (1 Pet 2:11-25), where Peter encourages believers to live honorably among non-Christians so that their conduct may testify to their faith. This teaching includes submission to authorities, slaves to masters, and ultimately applies to the relationship between husband and wife. Peter addresses members who understood the Greco-Roman household and calls them to relationships characterized by respect and submission.<sup>15</sup> There were domestic codes in the ancient Greco-Roman world that governed family and community life. The codes were comparable with those in Greek literature.<sup>16</sup> In light of the prevailing views, Peter articulates the Christian belief and conduct characterized by mutual respect and spiritual equality.

### Historical and Cultural Context

The authority of marriage in the Greco-Roman context was felt across the legal, social, and religious spheres. The woman was obliged to adhere to her husband's religion, which was considered the spiritual and moral leader of the household. On single women, MacDonald states, "Single women were a subject of conflict from their status that made them free, so wives were covered by the authority of their spouses."<sup>17</sup> The wife's violation of this principle was considered a breach of the recognized social order, exposing her to rejection in the community, contempt from her entourage, and even moral sanctions. With this in mind, Beth Barr says, "Biblical femininity is rooted in the human patriarchal structures that continue to infiltrate the church imitating Greco-Roman culture."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mathilde Cambron-Goulet, "Sophia Xenophontos, Ethical education in Plutarch: moralising agents and contexts," *Anabases. Traditions et réceptions de l'Antiquité*, no. 28 (November 2018): 1

<sup>15</sup> Dennis R. Edwards, Tremper Longman III, and Scot McKnight, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2017), 128.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley E. Porter and Andrew Pitts, *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2013), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 196.

<sup>18</sup> Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2021), 107.



From this perspective, the Apostle Peter's call on women to submission does not constitute an endorsement of the system of inequality in Greco-Roman society, but rather a wisdom that aimed to preserve family unity and promote Christian witness in the home through the gospel. Herbert Schneider reflected, saying, "Although submission was Biblical, it corresponded to political and military submission in secular Greek."<sup>19</sup> And mentioning that husband and wife are all co-heirs of God's grace (v. 7) was a new theological dimension in Peter's message to believers.

### **Analysis of 1 Peter 3:1-7**

In verses 1-2, the present middle/passive participle ὑποτασσόμεναι conveys the idea of a continuing and voluntary disposition of submission on the part of the wives. Keener states, "As in other household codes (cf. Eph. 5:22-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1), expectations for submission relate not only to slaves but also to wives."<sup>20</sup> This submission is unconstrained, but with the intention of winning their husbands in Christ. The construct ἵνα expresses this intention... κερδηθήσονται, combined with the future passive of the verb κερδαίνω (to win), which emphasizes that the respectful behavior of the wife aims to communicate the gospel, even in the case of a mixed couple. Apostle Peter uses domestic codes to demonstrate that the Christian faith does not suppress social duties but rather transforms them in the light of Christ into a strong witness for God.<sup>21</sup>

The noun ἀναστροφή (conduct, or way of life) with the qualifier ἀγνήν (pure) refers to blameless morality and, by extension, to a way of life harmonious with Scripture. At the same time, the expression ἐν φόβῳ (with respect) suggests an attitude of consideration, probably towards God first, and then towards her husband. Apostle Peter emphasizes the testimony, a practical aspect that can impact the husband's faith. Daniel Keating notes that Peter recalls the conduct of Christians as a means of conveying the gospel.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, he highlights that the credibility of the Christian message within the household is expressed not merely through words but through a life characterized by purity and respectful conduct.

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<sup>19</sup> Herbert SJ Schneider, "Has God Ordained the Subordination Of Wives To Husbands?" *Landas* 17, no. 1 (December 2003): 94.

<sup>20</sup> Keener, *1 Peter*, 208.

<sup>21</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2005), 637.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel A. Keating, Peter Williamson, and Mary Healy, *First and Second Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 72.



Verses 3-4 contrast outward adornment with the inner beauty that God values—the external ornamentation, such as elaborate hairstyles, jewelry, or clothing. By contrast, the adjective ἄφθαρτος (imperishable) highlights the enduring value of a πραέως καὶ ἡσυχίου πνεύματος, that is, a gentle and quiet spirit. Peter therefore encourages the cultivation of inner character, which he describes as πολυτελής, precious in the sight of God. As Edwards notes, the ethical teaching of this passage reflects spiritual values that transcend the cultural expectations of the Greco-Roman household.<sup>23</sup> In this way, Peter redefines the concept of beauty by directing attention from outward appearance to the imperishable qualities of a gentle and quiet spirit, which represent the true value of a life shaped by faith.

In verses 6-7, he points to past examples of women who hoped in God by citing the "holy women" who placed their hope in God ("ἐλπίζουσαι εἰς τὸν θεόν"), including Sarah as a model of obedience to her husband, Abraham. The verb ὑπήκουσεν (she obeyed) and the title κύριον (lord) express this attitude of submission. Daniel Keating reveals that, "Peter was teaching Christian women, who may have known the Greek models, to turn instead to the 'first lady' who founded the people of God's covenant, in the tradition they now consider their own people."<sup>24</sup> However, Pierre clarifies that those who do good without giving way to fear (μὴ φοβούμεναι μηδεμίαν πτόησιν) prove themselves authentic heirs of Sarah's faith. Thus, the apostle presents Sarah not merely as a historical example but as a model of courageous faith, emphasizing that Christian obedience is grounded in trust in God rather than in social pressure or fear.

Finally, in verse 7, the Apostle Peter addresses the husbands by involving them συνοικοῦντες (living together), in a good cohabitation. The expression κατὰ γνῶσιν (according to knowledge) implies discernment and understanding in the management of the home. Grudem points to a specific aspect of a woman, saying, "Peter looks at the characteristic nature of femininity (a rare word) to spark her husband's honor."<sup>25</sup> The weaker expression ἀσθενεστέρῳ σκεύει (vase) probably refers to the place occupied by the woman in the Greco-Roman society. At the same time, the term συγκληρονόμοις (co-heirs) gives her the value of spiritual equality with the husband in divine grace. Schreiner concludes this idea with: "Men should honor women because they share the same destiny, and an eternal heritage in the kingdom of God."<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> Edwards, III, and McKnight, *1 Peter*, 134.

<sup>24</sup> Keating, Williamson, and Healy, *First and Second Peter, Jude*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter* (La Vergne: IVP, 2024), 154.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary, Volume 37 - I and II Peter, Jude* (Broadman &



Apostle Peter concludes by warning that a lack of honor towards the wife can prevent "ἐγκόπτεσθαι" communion with God in prayer, by establishing the close link between the life of the couple and intimacy with God.

### **Some Key Observations in 1 Peter 3:1-7**

In this passage, the Apostle Peter presents the woman's submission not as a weakness or inferiority, but as a Christian testimony expressing a will to positively influence her spouse in the home. Sproul comments, "The practical reason that Peter gives for submission to husbands, particularly if the husband is an unbeliever, is that a submissive spirit might bear witness to the truth of the gospel."<sup>27</sup> This submission has nothing to do with the moral or spiritual position of the woman. Still, it comes from the heart to preserve peace in the home and to promote the spiritual growth of the partner (1 Pet 3:5). Transformation through gentleness and respect is the basis of this exhortation. At the same time, the "hidden adornment" evoked in verse 4 reflects the inner action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer during his life in the home. In this context, Robert Wilkin et al. argue that, "The attitude of a Christian woman is reflected in gentleness and humility, compared to Christ, and silence must be her answer."<sup>28</sup>

In addition, husbands are called upon to show honor and understanding towards their wives. Their responsibility to their wives should not be limited to the social and legal dimension of paterfamilias. Still, it should also include spiritual values, involving careful listening to their wives, consideration of their needs, and acceptance of their spiritual position as co-heirs of salvation in Christ. Keating and Harink state, "Women must be honored as equals by their husbands, for their relationship is based not on physical strength, but on God's shared grace."<sup>29</sup>

### **Theological Principles**

The passage of 1 Peter 3:1-7 communicates theological principles essential to maintaining balance in the life of a Christian couple. First, the witness of Christian conduct plays an important role within the marital relationship. In this context, the apostle suggests that a believing wife's respectful behavior can be a powerful testimony, influencing her husband and shaping the household's spiritual atmosphere. In this sense, obedience within the marital

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Holman Publishers, 1996.), 181.

<sup>27</sup> R. C. Sproul, *1-2 Peter: An Expository Commentary* (Orlando: Ligonier Ministries, 2019), 110.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Wilkin et al., *The Grace New Testament Commentary: Revised Edition* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2019), 1411.

<sup>29</sup> Keating, Williamson, and Healy, *First and Second Peter, Jude, 77.*; Douglas Harink et al., *1 & 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2019), 108.



relationship reflects a deeper spiritual attitude. As Sproul observes, "submission to authority in the flesh is the equivalent of submission to the Lord Jesus."<sup>30</sup>

Second, the value of inner beauty is an imperishable virtue, like the new birth and the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which God considers more. John Elliott asserts that "this discipline on the part of wives leads unbelieving men to conversion."<sup>31</sup> Third, the term "co-heirs" raises the notion of spiritual equality of husband and wife before God. He has the same grace for husband and wife, with the same hope of eternal life. Jobes argues that the apostle Peter sought to convey a new hope to believers in Christ through this equality.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the husband-wife relationship is based on mutual responsibility, requiring mutual respect and the honor that the man reserves for his wife. This husband-wife dynamic must converge towards communion and harmony within the Christian home. The apostle orders husbands to change their selfish attitudes and to grant it to their wives.<sup>33</sup>

### **Contemporary Application**

In 1 Peter 3:1-7, Peter presents Christian teachings applicable to Christian homes today. First, he elevates respect and mutual understanding as the foundation of a Christian couple. These values include the sustained attention one partner can give the other in the home, the sharing of decisions, and the honor that the wife expects from her husband, and regular times of prayer for husband-and-wife spiritual growth.

Second, in the context of mixed couples, the passage highlights God's love through behavior. In this perspective, Rawson says, "In view of the immorality that prevailed in the Greco-Roman milieu, Christian values should be preserved."<sup>34</sup> In the event of a divergence of views, the fruit of the Spirit of Galatians 5:22 remains essential for constructively resolving conflicts and valuing a true Christian witness. Third, in this passage, the apostle Peter does not favor any form of domination or violence. Given that "the mentality of submission was imposed in the Greco-Roman world on the patriarchal regime,"<sup>35</sup> the Christian teaching served to remedy all forms of abuse. Finally, the principles of respect, honor, and spiritual equality must be

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<sup>30</sup> Sproul, *1-2 Peter*, 110.

<sup>31</sup> John H. Elliott and John Hall Elliot, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed, The Anchor Bible; 37B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 558-59.

<sup>32</sup> Jobes, *1 Peter*, 172.

<sup>33</sup> Grudem, *1 Peter*, 156.

<sup>34</sup> Rawson, *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 245.

<sup>35</sup> Elliott and Elliot, *1 Peter*, 554.



adapted to each household's cultural background, preserving the couple's harmony. Jobes notes that the Greco-Roman world viewed believers as different from them because of the Christian values they embodied.<sup>36</sup>

## **The Married-Woman Relationship in the Hema Tribe, DRC**

### **Marriage Organization and Family Structure of Tribe Hema**

The Hema people, who live primarily in the Ituri region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, maintain social and family traditions that play a central role in matrimonial practices. Within Hema society, marriage is not limited to the union of two individuals but represents an alliance between extended families and clans. The participation of relatives and elders reflects the collective dimension of the marital process, through which social cohesion and inter-family relationships are reinforced. As noted by Jan Vansina, marriage alliances in many Central African societies serve as important mechanisms for maintaining social stability and strengthening bonds between kinship groups.<sup>37</sup> In this context, the elders of the families often guide and supervise the process to ensure the success and legitimacy of the matrimonial union.

The payment of the dowry in the family of the young bride is a strong sign that marks the alliance between the two families before the marriage. This represents both the husband's commitment and the recognition of the woman's social value within her family. The dowry given or demanded is negotiated based on the social status and investments in the future wife's education by her family. Araali records that, in the Hema tradition, dowry payment, although modest (ranging from 6 to 8 cows), has significantly risen today for many reasons.<sup>38</sup> The two families agree on the dowry and the day of the dowry ceremony. After the wedding rites, the husband will offer as a sign of gratitude to the mother of his wife, a cow or, at the limit, a goat as a sign of recognition. This will be a gesture of honor to his mother-in-law. Baloyi remarks, "Cultural value systems play an important role when two families come together to value their rituals within marriage."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, in the case of a family that respects the marriage process, when the wife gives birth to children, the wife's family can organize a ceremony called *Ku taaha*,

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<sup>36</sup> Jobes, *1 Peter*, 171.

<sup>37</sup> J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 77.

<sup>38</sup> Bagamba B. Araali, *Tradition et Coutume Matrimonial Des Hema*, (Ville de Bunia/Ituri), 2016, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Gift Tlharhani Baloyi, "Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 48, no. 1 (June 2022): 2,



aimed at thanking the husband for the care provided to their daughter, returning a symbolic cow to tell the husband to take good care of his family.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of Husband and Wife**

In the Hema culture, the husband is traditionally considered the protector and the head of the household. The management of resources and the equitable distribution of household members' welfare are the husband's responsibility. The children are attributed to the husband, and, in the event of his death, their care can be transferred to a paternal family member. Compared to the Nilotic people of Uganda, Meinert et al. state: "If a marriage is dissolved, the children remain with the father, unless they are very young to be recovered later."<sup>40</sup> Repayment of the dowry is envisaged in the case where the widow has no children. Another option is to assign the widow to the deceased's brother to ensure the continuity of the family line.

Within the Hema household, the woman occupies a central place as the manager of domestic life and the first educator of the children. She is responsible for preparing meals, supervising the children's daily activities, and transmitting basic social values within the family. At the same time, she actively contributes to agricultural work that supports the household's subsistence. As Burke observes, "Women are the main workforce in the family economy in Africa, despite male dominance."<sup>41</sup> Their close relationship with children also enables paternal aunts to pass on cultural values and family traditions, including the practice of giving daughters names linked to the circumstances of their birth. From the early stages of the marriage process until the wedding night, these aunts guide the bride and prepare her for married life. Araali notes that signs of virginity were traditionally entrusted to the aunt as a mark of family honor.<sup>42</sup> Such customs highlight the collective nature of marriage among the Hema, where kinship ties and family alliances remain essential.<sup>43</sup>

### **Spiritual Values and Beliefs Affecting Marriage**

In the Hema tradition, the girl undergoes several rituals before and during the marriage. These marriage ceremonies guarantee longevity, fertility, and protection against the bad luck that will

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<sup>40</sup>Lotte Meinert, Julaina A. Obika, and Nanna Schneidermann, eds., *Marriage Matters: Imagining Love and Belonging in Uganda* (London: UCL Press, 2025).

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Burke, *Front Cover Photograph: Akot Susan, Fotografi Senza Frontiere (FSF) Photo Lab, Kalongo SS, November 2009. Back Cover Photograph: Charles Yomoi, FSF Photo Lab, Kalongo SS, Nov., 2009, 2.*

<sup>42</sup> Bagamba B. Araali, *Tradition et Coutume Matrimonial Des Hema*, (Ville de Bunia/Ituri), 2016,29.

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Pierre Chrétien and Scott Straus, *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 202.



attack the young couple. Mbiti finds that "A person cannot detach himself from the rites of his people, it is to cut him off from his roots, his foundations, his security context, his kinship ties and to empty him of his own existence."<sup>44</sup> The paternal aunts speak words of blessing accompanied by gestures called "spitting the saliva of blessing" to ensure the home of the young wife. In some non-Christian families, additional rituals go further to prepare the young wife for fertility and her role in the home.

After the wedding ceremony, the woman retains certain symbolic rights, such as the right to name her children at birth. The names the mother gives her child are always tied to her feelings and the circumstances surrounding this birth. Pallangyo and Sane from Tanzania state that, "Members of the Meru community assign personal names based on their beliefs and circumstances of birth. This practice is unique to Africans."<sup>45</sup> Thus, in the Hema social organization, marriage is a fundamental institution governed by cultural and spiritual values that structure the couple's common life and strengthen family cohesion.

## **Comparison Between Greco-Roman and Hema Matrimonial Models**

### **Points of Convergence between the Two Cultures**

In both Greco-Roman and Hema traditions, marriage operates within a hierarchical structure in which the man occupies a central position in household functioning. In the Greco-Roman world, the *paterfamilias* exercised legal and moral authority over all members of the family, including his wife and the slaves under his control. Comparably, among the Hema, the husband is recognized as the head of the household, responsible for protecting his family and making major domestic decisions. Göran Therborn, "Greco-Roman and African cultures present patriarchal family structures where paternal authority is the basis of the organization of social and educational relations."<sup>46</sup>

Although marriage begins with the union of two individuals, it also represents an alliance between families in both contexts. In the Greco-Roman world, marriages often served to strengthen social or political ties between influential households within a recognized legal and moral framework. Similarly, among the Hema people, marriage establishes a network of

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<sup>44</sup> "John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Wariaeli Ismaeli Pallangyo and Eliakimu Sane, *The Significance and Impact of Traditional Naming Practices in the Meru Community of Tanzania*, 13, no. 2 (2024): 166.

<sup>46</sup> Göran Therborn, *African Families in A Global Context*. Research Report 131. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2006, 80.



relationships between the extended families and the two clans involved. The participation of paternal aunts in the marriage process, together with the payment of the dowry, symbolizes the formalization of this alliance and reinforces social and economic bonds between the families.<sup>47</sup>

### **Cultural Divergence in the Marital Relationship**

Although male authority is recognized in both cultural contexts, important differences remain. In Greco-Roman society, the power of the *paterfamilias* was often unconditional and legally established over all household members. In contrast, among the Hema, the husband's authority is not absolute, as decisions are often shaped through consultation with his wife, particularly in matters of household management and child rearing. This dynamic reflects a form of shared responsibility within the couple; "No ritual ceremony was legally necessary, except legal capacity and the intention to marry."<sup>48</sup> Contrary to Araali's observations, "From the choice of the spouse, to the marriage itself, Hema culture provides several stages rich in ritual ceremonies."<sup>49</sup>

The role of women in decision-making differs in these two traditions. In Greco-Roman society, women had limited influence in family or public matters. Among the Hema, however, wives often participate in household decisions. Through their responsibility for children's education and daily domestic life, they exercise meaningful influence within the family. Sawyer argues that "the Greco-Roman context reduces the woman to a domestic life."<sup>50</sup> Unlike in Hema culture, but similar to the Nuer Nilotic people of Southern Sudan, "the full participation of every member of the family in the construction of the institution of marriage is paramount."<sup>51</sup>

### **Exegetical Application of 1 Peter 3:1-7 in the Hema Context**

In 1 Peter 3:1-7, Peter calls wives to respectful submission and husbands to honor their wives within a relationship of mutual regard. This perspective resonates with Hema cultural practice, where consultation often guides household decisions. As Wiedemann notes, "Women deserve special attention because of their nature."<sup>52</sup> Although the father's authority is recognized, it is often exercised in a collaborative relationship with his wife, which is in harmony with Scripture.

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<sup>47</sup> Cynthia B. Patterson, *The Family in Greek History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 108-109. Lotte Meinert, Julaina A. Obika, and Nanna Schneidermann, eds., *Marriage Matters: Imagining Love and Belonging in Uganda* (London: UCL Press, 2025).

<sup>48</sup> Rawson, *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 247.

<sup>49</sup> Bagamba B. Araali, *Tradition et Coutume Matrimonial Des Hema*, (Ville de Bunia/Ituri), 2016, 6.

<sup>50</sup> Deborah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centurie*. (Routledge, 2002), 17.

Samuel J. Bany Mading, "The Nuer Marriage Process, Center for Strategic & Policy Studies. 2020, 1-20.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2014), 176.



In this context, submission and honor must be understood as expressions of mutual respect and mutual consideration in the home. Such an interpretation makes it possible to be flexible in ceding its strict position of home patriarchy in favor of a dynamic father authority grounded in collaboration and reciprocal dignity in the home. This approach is consistent with Scripture's teachings for the edification of Christian and mixed couples. Marzouk appreciates the cultural diversity in the church, saying: "Churches bring together people of various cultures to learn from each other, giving equal value and power to each culture, preserving cultural differences and celebrating the variety of cultural traditions."<sup>53</sup>

In traditional Hema society, gradual social changes have allowed women to participate more actively in certain household decisions, while still respecting the customs that structure community life. A comparison between the Greco-Roman and Hema matrimonial models reveals notable similarities, particularly in the recognition of paternal authority and the importance of family alliances. At the same time, differences emerge in how this authority is exercised within the household. The message of 1 Peter 3:1-7 invites readers to approach these realities with socio-cultural sensitivity, encouraging relationships shaped by respect and cooperation. As Payne explains, "The motive that Peter invokes to justify the submission of wives is not the Greco-Roman belief that women, by nature, were inferior, and should be subordinate to men."<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

This study examined the husband-wife relationship in the Greco-Roman household in light of an exegetical analysis of 1 Peter 3:1-7, with application to the cultural context of the Hema tribe. From the time of the apostles, the biblical teachings have been understood within diverse cultural contexts, but the challenge has always been to ensure that the interaction process is authentic. The Greco-Roman socio-cultural world featured a family organization based on the authority of the paterfamilias, in which marriage was a social, legal, and political institution aimed at the stability of the city and the consolidation of lineages. This reality served as a framework for interpreting the passage in 1 Peter 3:1-7, inscribed within the Greco-Roman family codes, in which the apostle Peter exhorts wives to submit to their husbands. The exegetical and theological analysis of the text has shown that the submission to which the apostle Peter refers does not

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<sup>53</sup> Marzouk Safwat, *Intercultural Church: A Biblical Vision for an Age of Migration* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, U.S., 2019), 18.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Barton Payne, *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood: How God's Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality* (Zondervan, 2023), 170.



express a moral or spiritual inferiority of the woman but rather reflects the missionary value within the home by preserving unity and authentic Christian witness. In addition, the term "co-heir" conveys the notion of spiritual equality between husband and wife in the Greco-Roman context, grounded in mutual respect and responsibility in the home.

The study of marriage in the Hema tribe revealed a social organization centered on inter-family alliances through the cohabitation of two clans, reinforced by dowry payment as well as a distribution of marital roles based on the protection of the home by the husband and domestic care, as well as the custody of children in the wife's care. The comparison of the two matrimonial models revealed convergences in the recognition of the authority of the father and the need for family alliances, and cultural differences in how this power of *paterfamilias* is exercised and in the level of collaboration within the Hema culture. Thus, applying the passage in 1 Peter 3:1-7 to Greco-Roman society requires a contextualized reading of Scripture, which further illuminates husband-wife relations grounded in mutual respect and honor within the framework of Christian theology of marriage.

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