

# Faithful Discipleship and Responsible Citizenship? Reimagining Household Ethos in View of Ephesians 5:21-33

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## Abstract

The paper explores the dynamic of New Testament households and their codes of conduct. It focuses on the reconfigured husband/wife relationship in the household code of Ephesians 5:21–6:9 in view of the code's ambivalent relation to the rest of the letter as well as its complex history of interpretation. Since Christianity's foundational documents originated from (and are often read) within patriarchal societies, influenced by the hierarchical ethos of empire, a major challenge is whether and how a text such as the Ephesians code provides a lens through which it may be reimagined (in Africa) today—even against its patriarchal grain and history of interpretation. In view of feminist and postcolonial criticism, it is argued that the code serves as an ongoing invitation to resist any form of exploitative power in contemporary as well as ancient empire.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Household as Primary Context for Moral Formation

Through the ages, households served as a primary space for the affirmation and development of human relations and moral conduct (*ēthos*). Already in the classical period of the Greeks, the household (*oikos*) formed an important constituent structure in the *polis*, where relationships of power, protection, submission, honour and duty were to be properly shaped if a city was to flourish morally (Meeks 1986, 19–39; 1993, 38–39; Balch 1988; De Wet 2012, 399–405).<sup>2</sup>

In the New Testament, the concept of *household* functions in a variety of contexts (cf. Sanders 2002, 121–128). It forms the basic cell of the Christian movement; its nucleus is often an existing household. Members of (post)pauline communities metaphorically speak of them-

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<sup>2</sup> According to Plato and Aristotle, *ēthos* (character) refers to *habit* or *custom*. It has to do with the *telos* of human life, the highest good for humans and the best way for them to arrange their common life so as to achieve that good. The good life is to develop the moral skills and virtues that would enable people to be good citizens, that is, to know one's place in a stratified society, and to live according to its rules, expectations, and interests (Meeks 1986, 32–38, 60–64; 1993, 40; cf. MacIntyre 1966, 57–83).

selves as *family*, using rhetoric of kinship and affection, of belonging, blessing and mutuality: God is their Father, the great *paterfamilias* “from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name” (Eph 3:14). They are God’s children, sisters and brothers in *God’s new household* (Eph 2:19–22). They use familial terms not only to refer to themselves but also to distinguish themselves from “outsiders” (Meeks 1983, 75–80).

According to John Elliott (1991), a major transition is described throughout Luke-Acts regarding the two basic institutions of Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, namely *temple* and *household*. Elliott succinctly indicates how “the household becomes increasingly prominent as the ... focus of the Christian movement which gradually shifts from Jerusalem and the temple to the households of the diaspora” (1991, 216).<sup>3</sup>

Within the context of household, *table fellowship* generally served as the most important matrix for the Jesus movement’s social and moral formation.<sup>4</sup> For them, the common meal became a central ritual of remembering, thanksgiving (*eucharisteo*), worship and solidarity. Storytelling expressed their *anamnesis*, their memory of God’s mercy through Israel and Jesus of Nazareth, and its reappropriation in the present. The central activity at the eucharist table was their renewed vision of who God is—through God’s empowering activities in the past and present, and God’s promises for the future.

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the teachings of the Lukan Jesus, “the household serves as the most apposite sphere ... of social life for illustrating features of life under the reign of God ... The boundaries of this symbolical family or household of God are expanded to include the marginalized, the outcasts, Samaritans, and Gentiles” (Elliott 1991, 227). In Acts 1–8, “the scene shifts with regularity between the household, where the believers assemble, pray, receive the Spirit, break bread and generously share all things in common, and the temple as the center of political and religious control, a place for seeking alms, and the scene and object of conflict” (Elliott 1991, 215).

<sup>4</sup> In their alternative household, Jesus is the lord and “householder” (*oikodespotēs*). The meals of which he speaks, and at which he serves, “are all signs of the inclusiveness, fellowship, status reversal, reciprocal service, and joy typical of life in the kingdom/household of God” (Elliott 1991, 228; cf. Acts 2:42; Moxnes 1986). For social aspects of family meals, women at public meals, and the reinterpretation of table by Jesus, cf. Meeks (1983, 140–163); Neyrey (1991; 1996, 159–182); Osiek and Balch (1997, 193–214); Corley (1993); Herzog (2000, 144–167).

## 2 Renewed Interest in Communities of Character

In view of two disastrous world wars, scholars of the twentieth century became increasingly concerned about the formation of moral people. With renewed interest in the work of Aristotle, yet with significant differences, the fundamental ethical question for many (also theologians) became one of identity. It is believed that who people are will determine what they see as moral challenges, and how they will respond. This, again, is determined by the communities of character (family, neighbourhood, church, school, workplace) in which they live, where they learn to practise specific virtues and act responsibly (MacIntyre 1984).<sup>5</sup>

It was particularly North American ethicist Stanley Hauerwas who popularised questions of moral identity and responsibility in his *Ethics of Communities of Character* (1981). For him, people are formed as moral human beings within a particular community—*Agere sequitur esse*: what people do is the result of who they are, of where they belong. In his entire ethical project Hauerwas pleads for a revaluation and integration of the categories of identity, character, vision, virtue and narrative for the moral life (cf. Hays 1996, 253–266). This emphasis would yet again foreground the centrality of households and their influence in society.

How is this supposed to happen in a world characterised by power abuse, corruption and conflict? How can “households of character” be formed as embodiment of the alternative ethos of God’s kingdom? Since Christianity is primarily about relations, we are led to focus on people’s *encounter with the living God of the Bible* as ultimate source for a transformative, sustainable Christian spirituality and practice. From here Christian households are envisioned as communities of character, as

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<sup>5</sup> For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian during the Nazi regime, the most important theological question is *Who is Christ for us today?* From there he develops his notion of *discipleship as transformative responsibility*, which would radically challenge communities of character with regard to their influence in society. In continuity with these notions, North-American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr focuses on an approach of *relationality and responsibility*, on Christians’ response to *God*, and not to rules, laws or duties. Niebuhr first developed these notions in his classic *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941). In the period of reconstruction after WWII, he wrote another important book, *Christ and Culture* (1951), in which he deals with the relation between Christianity and public life. From here Niebuhr develops his ethics of responsibility as people’s *response to the living God*. In order to transform culture, he argues, we need people who are willing to be made new in the attitude of their minds and who are able to hope for, and imaginatively to see and act according to that which now still seems impossible.

powerful social networks in providing the necessary stability and safety where adults and children may learn to live faithfully in the “world” of the Bible. However, since Christianity’s foundational documents originated from (and are often read) within patriarchal societies, deeply influenced by the hierarchical ethos of empire, households are particularly challenged to account for their identity and ethos in view of biblical (in this case, New Testament) notions of power.

In her critique of Western male-dominated theology for centuries, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, doyenne of feminist biblical scholarship in the twentieth century, stresses the importance of a discipleship of equals among Christian believers (1985, 97–241). Characteristic of disciples of Jesus, she argues, is a spirituality of ethical interpretation that accounts for the *implied rhetorical effect* of the biblical writings, for what they wished to do in the lives of their audiences in terms of justice and well-being (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 44–102; 2011, 229–242). For her, communities of character are safe spaces where bold conversations on the Bible, culture and gender take place, and where gender-inclusive language (also with respect to God) can be nurtured, even against the Bible’s patriarchal grain and often abusive histories of interpretation.

Since the hierarchical language of the Ephesians household code (5:21–6:9) continues to influence the functioning of family, church and society in deeply detrimental ways, fostering wife abuse and low self-esteem in women (particularly on the African continent),<sup>6</sup> I first turn to ancient household codes as probable backdrop to references to household relations in Ephesians.

### **3 Household Codes as Embodiment of Ancient Household Ethos**

Reference to household or domestic codes (*Haustafeln*) occurs in the so-called deuteropauline, Pastoral and Catholic Epistles of the New Testament (Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9; 1 Tim 2:8–15; 5:1–2; 6:1–2; Titus 2:1–3:8; and 1 Pet 2:13–3:7). The basic form of these codes consists of “three pairs of reciprocal exhortations addressing the relationship between wife and husband, children and father, slaves and masters. In each case, the socially subordinate first member of the pair is exhorted to obedience to the superordinate second” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985, 253).

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Oduyoye (2001, 90–93); Dube (2000, 2001); Kittredge (1998, 1–11; 2012); Mollenkott (2003, 51, 56); De Wet (2012, 412), among many others.

Since the 1980s, scholars generally accept that the household code material found in the New Testament had its origins in discussions on “household management” (*peri oikonomias*) among philosophers and moralists from Aristotle onwards (MacDonald 2010b, 65–74; cf. Balch 1981, 1–62; 1988, 25–50; Standhartinger 2000, 117–122; Osiek 2003, 30). Aristotle believed that a healthy society depended on the orderly functioning of households. Domestic codes (addressed to the male heads of households) were therefore meant to structure the functioning of the different members of the household in terms of roles and duties that would enable them to be good, moral citizens.

Despite a fairly general consensus about the origins of the household code, various points of disagreement remain, especially with respect to the *implied rhetorical function* of the codes in particular New Testament writings. According to Margaret MacDonald (2010b, 66–74), the main issues that seem to be unresolved are the nature of Jewish and Graeco-Roman influences on the New Testament household codes, as well as the nature of the reappropriation made by the New Testament authors in relation to the ethical discourses of writers of the same period.<sup>7</sup>

It is significant that “(r)real advances in the study of the *Haustafeln* were made ... as scholars moved beyond basic discussions of literary structure and historical context to acknowledge the impact of particular social locations” (MacDonald 2010b, 74). Household code discourse was, for instance, of central interest in Schüssler Fiorenza’s groundbreaking work *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, first published in 1983. Schüssler Fiorenza’s argument (1985, 251–259) concerning the introduction of patriarchy into the New Testament via the ancient household code continues to be highly influential in feminist theological discourse. It fundamentally critiques the ways in which Western culture and theology have generated an anthropological dualism by adopting ancient household rules as model for the state (cf. Balch 1988, 35). Feminist theology is thus committed not only to subvert the devastating effects of these choices, but also to uncover its political roots in the patriarchal household of antiquity. In subsequent publications, Schüssler Fiorenza continues to remind professional guilds and faith communities of what is at stake in the interpretation of these

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<sup>7</sup> MacDonald (2010b, 84–90) indicates that growing knowledge of families in the Roman world has revealed that the multiple identities and circumstances of the recipients of household codes were often more complex than what their seemingly clear-cut categories may suggest (cf. Kartzow 2010, 364–389).

codes, and works out a process that would empower women to read “against the grain” of the patriarchal rhetoric of the Bible (1992, 7). She consistently argues that the domination of such language “is not simply a matter of patriarchal, gender-based dualism but of more comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchically ordered structures of domination, evident in a variety of oppressions, such as racism, poverty, heterosexism and colonialism” (1999, 10). In the same vein, MacDonald (2010b, 75, 85–86) argues that “household discourse is patriarchal discourse par excellence,” and, therefore, the codes need to be read as “ideologies of masculinity” meant to reinforce paternity, male control of household dependents, and male control of women’s sexual experience.

More recent postcolonial readings of the household codes have likewise challenged long-held views about their implied function by subverting imperial strategies through postcolonial theories (cf. Dube 2000; MacDonald 2010b, 79–84). The usefulness of these theories for exploration of the place of early Christianity within the Roman Empire lies on various levels, *inter alia* in “how the colonized themselves made use of and went beyond many of those strategies in order to articulate their identity, self-worth, and empowerment” (Sugirtharajah 2002, 11). This has encouraged biblical scholars “to understand how early church groups opposed elements of the dominant imperial culture and essentially lived the experience of the colonized and displaced, while at the same time expressing an ethos in ways that appeared to call upon the strategies of dominion of the imperial order” (MacDonald 2010b, 80).<sup>8</sup>

Since the household code material of the New Testament produced such complex histories of interpretation via the misogyny of church fathers and theologians through the centuries, the issue of *agency* needs nuanced attention. Both the text of Eph 5:21–33 and the often unquestioned patriarchal assumptions and culturally biased interpretations of present-day readers will have to be accounted for. In view of these challenges, my

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<sup>8</sup> With reference to the work of political scientist James C. Scott, scholars have indicated elements of “hidden transcript” in Paul’s rhetoric in general, and the NT household codes in particular—a transcript that would be innocuous to outsiders, but ultimately undermining the dominant categories of the slave-master relationship (MacDonald 2010b, 69–70; Elliott 2000, 27). The significance and impact of the household codes thus appear to be culturally complex, “representing a type of inter-cultural exchange between the emerging early Christian ethos and the values and ethics of the broader society” (MacDonald 2010b, 81; cf. 84–90). On imperial ideology and Pauline literature in general, see Horsley (1997, 2000); Mwaniki (2010); Punt (2012); on imperial ideology and Eph, see Maier (2013).

proposal for a re-reading of Eph 5 entails three interrelated yet distinguishable dimensions or phases. First, the implied effect of Eph 5:21–33 will be explored within the *literary thrust* of the epistle itself. Second, brief attention will be given to a *socio-cultural construction* of ancient household codes, as probable reality to which the Ephesians code refers and which it seems to reconfigure. Third, since feminist and postcolonial readings challenge household code discourse towards ultimately enquiring about the *implied rhetorical function or effect* of such material in the New Testament, I will attempt to account for this aspect of Eph 5:21–33 in view of the dynamic yet complex process of (re)interpretation reflected and stimulated by it.

#### 4 Transformative Potential of Ephesians 5:21–33?

##### 4.1 *Literary aspects*

Ephesians is generally divided into four major sections, namely the opening (1:1–2), a first and second main section (1:3–3:21 and 4:1–6:20 respectively), and the ending (6:21–24).<sup>9</sup> Both the greetings at the beginning and the farewell wishes at the end contain the powerful blessing of χάρις and εἰρήνη, summarising the document’s view on humanity as one of wholeness in relation to God and fellow-believers (1:6–7; 2:5–8, 14–17; 3:2, 7–8; 4:3; 6:15). The eulogy of 1:3–14 (with the significant recurrence of εὐλογέω in 1:3) announces the thrust of the epistle as a celebration of God’s gracious blessings towards all people *in Christ*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For interpretations of the linguistic structure of Eph, its intratextual dynamics, coherence and tension, cf. *inter alia* Lincoln (1990); Roberts (1991); Tanzer (1994, 325–328); Johnson (2012); Mouton (2002, 53–75; 2011, 284–288).

<sup>10</sup> The first main section (Eph 1:3–3:21) takes the form of an extended prayer, containing elements of praise, thanksgiving, intercessory prayer and confession of faith (cf. Roberts 1991, 15; Mouton 2011, 284–285). These are significantly arranged in an a-b-c-b-a pattern, which emphasise not only the recurring elements but specifically the confession of faith in 1:22–23 as middle section of the chiasm (Roberts 1991, 14–19). The dramatic consequences of Jesus’ death and exaltation for both Jews and Gentiles are described in 2:1–22. The Gentiles’ former status is depicted as that of ξένοι καὶ πάροικοι who used to be “far away”—separated from Christ, “excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (2:12–19). *In contrast*, the thrust of Eph reveals their new status *in Christ*. Those who were dead, have been made alive, those who were far away, have been brought near, and those who had been power- and statusless foreigners and aliens, have been made *fellow-citizens* with God’s people and *members of God’s household* (2:19–22). By destroying the barrier of hostility between them (2:14–16), including all manipulative,

The second main section consists primarily of paraenetic elements directed at the church. These are interwoven with theological and christological motivations, and are intrinsically linked to, and informed by, the first main section. The structural and semantic coherence between the two main sections is indicated by conjunctions and particles such as οὖν, τοῦτο οὖν and διὸ in 4:1, 17, 25 and 5:15, which indicate the particular sections they introduce as direct and logical consequences of what was said before. The essence of Eph 1–3 (a radically new humanity in relation to Christ and fellow-believers) is thus explicated in terms of a life worthy of their calling (4:1).

Throughout the second main section, Christ's *transformative power*, qualified by his humility as *sacrificial love*, serves as ultimate motivation for their new behaviour (4:32–5:2). This directly leads into 5:15–6:9 which illustrates the principle of the new life under the influence of the Spirit in terms of the three household relationships: husband and wife, children and parents, slaves and masters. The general introduction of 5:15–20 is followed by the household code in 5:21–6:9. The Ephesians code substantially expands the code in Colossians 3:18–4:1 and dwells at greatest length on marriage. The present participles following 5:18 (“Be filled with the Spirit...”) as well as the imperatives in the household code indicate a process of continuous (trans)formation in accordance with the community's new identity in Christ. The radical example of the indwelling Christ (cf. 4:32; 5:1–2, 25) and the Spirit (4:30; 5:18; 6:18) explicitly serve to *transform* these relationships.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective it may be argued

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dominating, destructive powers and authorities (1:20–23; 2:1–2; 4:17–19, 22; 6:12), Christ gave birth to *a radically new creation, a new humanity* with a new identity and lifestyle (4:1, 23–24). In Eph 1–3 God is praised for what God had done *in Christ*—in the genre of epideictic rhetoric which was used to praise the excellence of a god or an outstanding person (cf. Dahl and Juel 2000, 1113).

<sup>11</sup> The section on marriage in 5:21–33 moves back and forth from wives and husbands to the relationship between Christ and the church, which is seen as the model for human marriage in two ways. First, the husband hears that he is the head of his wife “as Christ is the head of the church” (5:23, 29). Second, Christ's headship is characterised by the power of his love which is paradoxically revealed in his suffering. The husband has to submit to his wife (5:21) and love her “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (5:25). The two sets of metaphors are then fused in 5:28–33 “by means of a subtle combination of Gen. 2:24 ... and the commandment of love in Lev. 19:18” (Dahl and Juel 2000, 1119). The wife is likewise encouraged to embody her new identity by submitting to her husband “as to the Lord” (5:22, NIV). In their *redescribed* (idealised) form these relations seem to reflect the ethos worthy of the implied recipients' new status in Christ (cf. Osiek and MacDonald 2006, 123–126; Gombis 2005, 319–330).

that verses 5:21 and 6:9c respectively (re)frame the Ephesians household code by emphasising its new motivation: “Submit to one another *out of reverence for Christ ... (A)nd there is no favouritism with him.*”

However, the explicit *hierarchical* language of the Ephesians code comes as a surprise after references to a new humanity, to equally worthy members of God’s household (2:15, 19–22; 4:15–16, 24). A certain (creative?) tension, ambiguity or paradox seems to occur between what the letter proclaims about the believers’ (men and women’s) status *in Christ* and what the code requires—between the epistle’s liberating vision of reconciliation and (comm)unity on the one hand, and the typical patriarchal language that (re)describes that vision through notions of “wifely submission” (5:22) and slaves’ obedience with “respect and fear” for their masters (6:5) on the other hand.<sup>12</sup> Mindful of the critique of feminist and postcolonial colleagues, we need to be alert to the possibility that “rhetorical strategies promoting ‘mutuality’ and ‘community submission’ could in fact reinstate hierarchies and power relationships whilst seemingly challenging and undermining them” (Penner and Lopez 2012, 48). The reinterpreted language of the Ephesians code (christologically motivated yet phrased in hierarchical human terms) would thus require careful hermeneutical discernment. For interpreters sensitive to the fact that language is not value-free, any defence of the “reconfigured” status of the Ephesians code may serve as an unconvincing attempt to take the patriarchal sting out of it, rather confirming the gendered status of both husband and wife (cf. Mouton 2011, 287).

In her discussion of domestic duties in Graeco-Roman culture and early Judaism, Elizabeth Johnson (2012, 578–580) reviews the Ephesians author’s complex comparison of the marriage relationship to Christ and the church in 5:21–33, and concludes that the result for women is a retreat from the initial freedom promised in Paul’s preaching and a reassertion of conventional patriarchal morality (cf. Osiek 2003). Also, Schüssler Fiorenza (1985, 266–270) challenged the patriarchal interests underlying the Ephesians code by showing how its hierarchical language restricted the leadership roles of women in the early Jesus movement and Pauline Christianity. For her (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985, 270), the christological modification of the husband’s role “does not have the power, theological-ly, to transform the patriarchal pattern of the household code, even though

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Standhartinger (2003, 93–97) for a similar tension between the theological thrust of the epistle to the Colossians and its household code (Col 3:18–4:1).

this might have been the intention of the author. Instead, Ephesians christologically cements the inferior position of the wife in the marriage relationship.”

Thus, aware of the complex relation between the hierarchical language of Eph 5:21–6:9 and the rest of the letter, contemporary readers are challenged with tricky issues of interpretation. On the one hand, we are invited to interpret the passage from the radical theological-rhetorical thrust of the letter (and the code itself)—that is, from the perspective of a *God with whom there is no favouritism*. On the other hand, hermeneutically suspicious readers may wonder: Does the language of the Ephesians code (of mutuality *and* submission) challenge, reimagine and significantly *redescribe* the conventional connotations and contexts of a hierarchically ordered morality,<sup>13</sup> or does it reinforce a cultural-patriarchal pattern of subordination by merely *describing* generally accepted standards, by reimposing a form of subtle and faith-sanctioned sexist hegemony, and thereby contradicting the received Pauline baptismal tradition of Gal 3:28?<sup>14</sup>

These questions regarding the literary ambivalence of the Ephesians text have to be explored further in view of its probable historical, socio-cultural and rhetorical contexts, which brings me to the second phase of my reading of Eph 5:21–33.

#### 4.2 *Socio-cultural aspects*

Ephesians is generally regarded as a circular letter destined for various churches visited by its bearer, Tychicus (6:21; cf. Dahl and Juel 2000, 1113). The letter points to a possible historical situation in the underlying tension between Jewish and Gentile communities in western Asia Minor during the first century C.E. (cf. 2:11–3:13). Whether it dates from an early period such as 58–61 C.E. (Roberts 1991, 13), or a deuteropauline period (Lincoln 1990, xxxv–lxxiii), the basic exigency in terms of the struggle for identity among Jewish and Gentile Christians remained acute (MacDonald 2004). After the Roman-Jewish War of 66–70 C.E. the tension between Jews and (Gentile) Christians intensified and gradually led to a break between the synagogue and the Christian communities. It is also possible that the political climate under Emperor Domitian (81–96 C.E.) was contributing to increasing hostility between the church and

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gupta and Long (2010); Mouton (2003).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Dahl and Juel (2000, 1119); Kirk (2011, 129–131).

society as reflected in Ephesians (MacDonald 2004, 434–435). The letter further presupposes a setting in which Christians who ought to have been mature were exposed to a variety of false doctrines (4:13–16). The author’s greatest concern is to maintain the unity of the church against whatever teachings threatened to divide it or alienate it from its heritage (4:1–6; cf. Dahl and Juel 2000, 1114; Johnson 2012, 577).

In view of the author’s concerns, this section of the paper briefly addresses the need for a socio-cultural analysis of ancient households and their codes of conduct.<sup>15</sup> The alternative perspective of the Ephesians code is only to be appreciated once a plausible picture of the socio-cultural world “behind” the text becomes clearer.<sup>16</sup> Through the work of numerous scholars (e.g., Garnsey and Saller 1987, 126–147; Balch 1988; Osiek and Balch 1997, 5–87; Dudrey 1999; Moxnes 1997; 2003; Balch and Osiek 2003; Hodge 2010; MacDonald 2010b; De Wet 2012), we have become aware of the complexities and contingencies involved in the structure and functioning of ancient households, causing us to refrain from quick conclusions.

At the most basic level of kinship in the ancient Mediterranean world was the *household* (οἶκος). The ancient notion of *household* was much broader than families in modern societies, including not only immediate relatives but also slaves, freedmen, and hired workers, as well as tenants and partners in trade or craft (Meeks 1983, 75–76; Moxnes 1997, 14–27). In the Roman Empire, the household (*domus* or *familia*) was

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<sup>15</sup> To discuss the varied structures and functions of ancient households in detail would take me beyond the scope of the paper. For discussions of Israelite/Judean, Greek and Roman families/households, cf. Garnsey and Saller (1987, 126–147); Hanson (1996, 73–79); Osiek and Balch (1997); Moxnes (1997); Balch and Osiek (2003); MacDonald (2004, 2010a); Osiek and MacDonald (2006); Thatcher (2007, 25–50); and Punt (2010).

<sup>16</sup> For aspects pertaining to the socio-cultural world of Eph, especially the typical values of honour and shame reflected and reinterpreted by it, the work of Meeks (1993); Malina (1993); Malina and Neyrey (1991); Domeris (1993); Moxnes (1996, 1997, 2003); Osiek and Balch (1997, 36–47); and Osiek and MacDonald (2006, 7–9) is particularly helpful. As a core value in the social life of first century Mediterranean societies, *family honour* was at stake in every public interaction—“fundamentally the public recognition of one’s social standing” (Moxnes 1996, 20; cf. 19–40; Johnson 2012, 578). In such societies, individual or collective honour was firstly *ascribed*, that is, obtained passively through birth (kinship, genealogy), family connections (marriage), or endowment, and could secondly be *acquired*—that is, actively sought and achieved in terms of qualifications and personal success. “The distinction between men’s honour and women’s shame does not result only in a dual pattern, but in a hierarchical system in which the husband has the most powerful role, closer to God” (Moxnes 1997, 32–33).

composed of all those who were legally under the power (authority, paternal patronage, *patria potestas*) of the patriarchal male head (*paterfamilias*)—“this could include children, even adult sons, slaves, freedpersons, and ‘clients’,” as well as “the spouses of all these persons” (Tanzer 1994, 328; cf. Garnsey and Saller 1987, 127–129). As such it was “a unit of identity, solidarity, and status” (Hanson 1996, 66). The structure of the *oikos*, in both the Greek *polis* and Roman Empire, was therefore patriarchal (i.e. essentially hierarchical) in nature, with fatherly responsibility and dominion as legitimate rule over free (male) citizens while the submission of women, children and slaves was taken for granted (Meeks 1983, 76; Girard 2000, 138–139; Hodge 2010, 9–13).<sup>17</sup> As such it was regarded as a microcosm of society (Johnson 2012, 578). The primary function of ancient *household codes* was thus socio-political: they were meant to maintain good order in both household and society.

As far as the New Testament household codes are concerned, Balch (1988, 28–36) argues that, in general, these serve an *apologetic* purpose, inviting the early Christians to account for their new identity and ethos in the context of empire (1 Pet 3:15; Col 4:6; Eph 4:1–5:21).<sup>18</sup> During ongoing household discourse, this view was nuanced to include other functions of the codes, such as offering a home for strangers and aliens, thereby encouraging cohesion among household members (cf. MacDonald 2010b, 73–74). Christian households were to exhibit the character of God’s inclusive household in society. They were to live in peace and unity, as God’s newly established people *in Christ* (Eph 2:14–15, 19), reconciled by the power of God’s self-giving love.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Osiek and MacDonald (2006, 1–15, 118–143); Schottroff (1995, 69–118); Dudrey (1999, 27–39), among others, for a social history of the everyday life of women in the first-century Mediterranean world. Functionally, most women were treated as property of their fathers or husbands. The lives of women were further typically determined by all kinds of codes such as purity-, debt-, and household codes (cf. Herzog 2000, 156–158).

<sup>18</sup> Communities of faith were constantly challenged to (re)interpret new experiences in the light of a pluralistic Mediterranean symbolic world, constituted by complex combinations of Roman rule, Graeco-Roman culture, and the religious symbols of Judaism. In the process they did not so much invent a new language, but rather *reconfigured* inherited traditions and images—especially those related to power and authority (cf. Mouton 2006, 57–60). This also seems to be the case with respect to Eph 5:21–33.

<sup>19</sup> Chris de Wet (2012, 400–412) argues that the NT *Haustafeln* exhibit the typical features of an ancient social contract, and are reappropriated in the NT for the sake of group cohesion and identity. “The author of Ephesians implies that the social contract the *haustafeln* represent is based on a larger, authoritative contract—namely the

With regards to marriage, celibacy or abstinence seems to have been a main alternative for early Christians to the inherited household ethos of ancient societies (cf. 1 Tim 4:3; 1:3, in the context of Ephesus). However, instead of encouraging sectarian isolation, the New Testament codes rather seem to promote “selective integration” into Graeco-Roman society (Balch 1988, 33). For Macdonald, they express “the complex negotiations required with respect to group identity in the Roman imperial world which early Christians shared with Jews” (2010b, 71; cf. Osiek 2003, 33). Typical of discussions of household management in the Graeco-Roman world, she argues that,

Eph 5.22–33 uses familial relationships, in this case marriage, to address the realities of the broader community. But there are also elements of resistance to the dominant social order taking the form of the presentation of the *ekklesia*. These elements of resistance become most obvious in the references to purity, fidelity, and unity which are grounded in scriptural references and allusions (p. 71).

How, then, does the Ephesians code adapt and/or modify inherited household traditions?

Primarily, the author reimagines ancient household ethos from a *christological* perspective. This would have profound implications for the transformative potential of the code. While it remains the case that no precise parallels of the New Testament codes have been found in other traditions (Osiek 2003, 30; MacDonald 2010b, 72), the address to subordinate groups directly rather than via the *paterfamilias* is unusual (Balch 1988, 45–47; Osiek and Balch 1997, 189). Again, by encouraging wives and husbands to submit *to one another*, and masters and slaves to treat *each other* with respect, the Ephesians code modifies the common tendency to make the master of the house responsible for the good order of the entire household (Dahl and Juel 2000, 1118). Various scholars draw attention to the fact that 5:21 calls for the mutual subjection of each

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covenant between Christ and the church” (2012, 401). This would have important consequences for the functioning of the Eph code in early Christian households. According to Osiek and MacDonald (2006, 126), recent work on the Roman family “has highlighted the importance of marriage for assertions of identity in society generally and suggests that marriage practices among the early Christians would be one of the most important vehicles for communicating the essence of the church and for negotiating life with neighbors.”

Christian to every other Christian without regard to gender—an element which is significantly new and which seems to govern the whole passage (Girard 2000, 126–129; Osiek and MacDonald 2006, 122–123).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the command to husbands to *love* their wives (5:25, 28) does not appear in any other contemporary household code (Gombis 2005, 327).

The disclosure of the “great mystery” regarding the relation between husband and wife in Eph 5:32 (cf. 3:5–6) thus seems to serve not only to *uphold* the inherited ethos but also to *modify* it (Dahl and Juel 2000, 1119). While the Ephesians code does not explicitly do away with traditional hierarchical structures, it rather introduces new attitudes implicitly meant to confront and subvert exploitative elements of ancient household ethos (cf. Balla 2003, 165–178; Mollenkott 2003, 45–53). In Gombis’ words (2005, 324), it is aimed at “counteracting the devastating effects of the powers upon human relationships and in transforming relationships within appropriate hierarchical structures.” Underestimating this would expose the code to serious misinterpretation and abuse. In the final analysis, it is probably “best understood as encoding *both* culturally compliant and culturally resistant elements” (MacDonald 2010b, 67; emphasis added; cf. 2004, 439, 442–444): while it seems to invite its recipients to *identify* with the familiar ethos of their traditional household culture, it also seems to *estrangle, alienate* them from (life-denying aspects of) that culture by reminding them of their radically alternative orientation

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<sup>20</sup> It is rhetorically significant that the strategic verb ὑποτάσσω in 1:22 recurs in its middle form ὑποτάσσομαι in 5:21, 24. In both instances it is nuanced by a context referring to the fullness of the body of Christ. The author thereby seems to reverse the patriarchal connotation of ὑποτάσσω (as *imposed* loyalty and obedience) to reflect not only the emancipative relationship between Christ and the church (in terms of *willing* honour and reverence), but also among the members of the body itself (cf. the semantically related terms φοβέομαι in 5:33, ὑπακούω in 6:1, 5, and τιμάω in 6:2). That the subjection is intended to be mutual is clarified by the phrase “out of reverence for Christ” and the many references to Christ throughout the passage: Christ is the head of the church and saviour of the body (5:23), who loved the church and gave himself up for her (5:25–26), who nourishes and cares for her (5:29). The idiomatic expression found in Eph 6:9b (“With God there is no partiality” [NRSV], literally “God does not lay hold of someone’s face/does not esteem anyone according to face value”) probably originated in a context of slavery. In Eph 6:9, as well as parallel expressions in Deut 10:17, 16:19; Lev 19:15, the phrase occurs in a context which emphasises God’s sovereign power. In contrast to the often abusive power of contemporary authorities, God’s power (character) is defined in terms of God’s concern for people (Mouton 2002, 72–73 n. 21; cf. Standhartinger 2000, 128–129; Kartzow 2010, with reference to Col 3:18–4:1).

in Christ. Is this how the author uses his creative freedom in Christ—by utilising bifocal rhetoric, a strategic compromise between submission and resistance towards developing a social reality where equal dignity, justice and unity would ultimately prevail? If we assume that the life, death and glorification of Jesus Christ is the primary perspective from which the author reinterpretes the Graeco-Roman symbolic world, the transformative potential of this ultimate reality needs to be emphasised amidst complexities presented by the text. In the process of reappropriation by later readers, the dynamic yet complex *process* of interpretation embedded in the text remains a guiding principle—more than its “static” *product* (cf. Osiek and MacDonald 2006, 118–143).

### 4.3 *Rhetorical aspects*

This brings me to the third phase and end result of my analysis, on the implied rhetorical effect of the Ephesians household code. The intended function of the entire epistle is stated frequently and explicitly. The recipients are encouraged to live wisely for two major reasons: (a) that the *God who destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the God with whom there is no favouritism*, may be worshipped (1:3–14, 22–23; 2:14, 22; 3:17; 4:6, 10–13, 32–5:2, 18–21); and (b) that the church may be edified, strengthened, encouraged (4:12–16, 29; cf. 2:21; Mouton 2011, 282–283).<sup>21</sup>

Although the implied effect of Ephesians as a whole may be fairly explicit, it is not necessarily evident in the case of the household code with its ambivalent connection to the rest of the letter. Was the reinterpreted code supposed to *change* the first century Greco-Roman world’s understanding of the gender status of both men and women, and of marriage and other household relationships? We can only guess how an audience in the social matrix of the Roman Empire would have heard the Ephesians code.<sup>22</sup> In spite of its profound patriarchal roots, the author seems

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<sup>21</sup> In urging readers to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (4:3), the author seems to employ typical features of the appropriate rhetorical species for treating the subject, namely deliberative rhetoric. The strategy is similarly employed in the ancient literary works where the family or household was a common image of concord and unity. Eph makes ample use of these and other related metaphors for the church, revealing its most essential characteristic *in imitation of the God of peace and reconciliation* (cf. Meeks 1993, 38–41, 45–51).

<sup>22</sup> This is where postcolonial theories have assisted us significantly in searching for a possible “hidden transcript” in these codes—subtle and perhaps not so subtle motivating

rhetorically to challenge his audience in various ways to hear the reinterpreted code *against* the cultural grain of its environment. I briefly explore six potentially transformative elements that may assist towards discerning its implied rhetorical function.

First and foremost, the inclusive *God images* referred to in the Ephesians household code (and the rest of the epistle) represent a primary principle for a transformative rereading of the code. Rhetorically, these images serve to shape and nurture the identity and ethos (character) of members of the Christian household, while providing its patriarchal language with a radically new orientation. This new identity, embodied in the christological perspective of the code, was to challenge the self-understanding and ethos of the faith communities in Asia Minor to their roots.

Second, the *direct address* to members of all social classes seems to be unusual in terms of ancient household ethos. Contrary to Hellenistic discussions of household management, the Ephesians code addresses all categories of persons concerned according to their new status *in Christ*. “Now wives, children and slaves are given social visibility and therefore personal dignity ... What is more, in each dyad they are addressed first” (Osiek 2003, 30). Thus, while the “*oikonomia* tradition reflected the contemporary notion that the woman was constitutionally inferior to her husband” (Gombis 2005, 326), the Ephesians code seems to affirm her status as an equally worthy member of God’s household.

Third, the focus on *mutual submission* is noteworthy. While thoughts of reciprocity are not entirely unique to Christian household codes (Dudrey 1999, 40–41), the transforming power of its driving force is, namely that it is to be “out of reverence for Christ” (5:21) while being “filled with the Spirit” (5:18). The author’s strategy seems to be the “formation of proper relationships within the household as microcosm of the church, just as it was earlier seen as microcosm of the state. The

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signals which would be recognisable only/mainly to insiders in the community, a way of expression typical of oppressed groups (cf. the author’s reference to himself as “a prisoner of Christ” and “an ambassador in chains,” 3:1; 4:1; 6:20, and the section directly following onto the household code on the armour of God, 6:10–20). Eph was proclaimed in a society saturated with symbols of imperial cult (MacDonald 2004, 422–432). With its emphasis on Christ as ultimate authority, as *lord of the cosmos* (1:21–23; 3:10; 4:8–10; 6:12), and God as the great *patēr* from whom every *patria* is named (3:15), Eph seems to have a consistent *anti-imperial thrust*. It is thus important also to read the Eph code as declaring ultimate loyalty to Jesus Christ instead of the emperor (cf. the only reference in Eph to kingdom in 5:5—in a context of exhortation, to live a life worthy of one’s calling, directly preceding the household code).

dominance-submission pattern is still there, but it has been radically changed, from treatise on male dominance to exhortation to mutual relationships in Christ” (Osiek 2003, 31; cf. Gombis 2005, 324–328). To underestimate these shifts, would be to violate the theological thrust not only of the household code, but of the epistle as a whole.

Fourth, when it comes to the statement that the wife is to be subject to the husband *in everything* (5:24), Mollenkott emphasises the *limitations* of this part of the contract, namely that the wife is only supposed to be subject to the husband “as the church is subject to Christ,” that is, “in an utterly non-coercive voluntary manner” (2003, 46).<sup>23</sup>

A fifth potentially emancipative element in the Ephesians code is the *husband’s proposed self-emptying* (Mollenkott 2003, 48–50; Kirk 2011, 130–131). The husband is no longer to view his power as absolute, and his wife as his possession, but to love her “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25; cf. Dudrey 1999, 41). Again Mollenkott focuses on the *limitations* of the comparison by stating that the husband is compared to Christ “only in Christ’s self-giving, self-humbling capacity” (2003, 42).<sup>24</sup> While Thatcher (2007, 37) sees a serious paradox lurking in the masking of the (divine) male power advantage with the proviso that the husband’s leadership style is (or ought to be) one of service, Mollenkott (2003, 49) argues that, “to say that the comparison of the husband to Christ divinizes the patriarchal husband is to violate the precise parameters of the analogy.”<sup>25</sup> She concludes by saying that “(t)he

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<sup>23</sup> Mollenkott (2003, 46) argues, with reference to Markus Barth, that the Eph author “does not use the active mode, as he does to describe God’s subjugating of the principalities and powers. Rather, for Christian submission Paul uses the passive mode in order to describe ‘a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden.’” Also see Osiek’s apt warning against the bride/body metaphor being abused to be something else than poetic analogy (2003, 31–36; cf. Johnson 2012, 578–580).

<sup>24</sup> Mollenkott (2003, 49) substantiates this by saying that “(o)nly the male could Christianize the marital structure by stepping down to equality with his wife, as Christ stepped down to equality with human beings. Only the male in patriarchal society had sufficient status to honor his wife by raising her status to the point where he loved her as much as he loved himself.” According to Eph, household management was thus no longer to be regarded for the sake of the honour, social status and benefit of the husband/patriarch alone (Gombis 2005, 322, 325).

<sup>25</sup> Mollenkott (2003, 47–48) continues by saying that “the instructions to the husband are more far-reaching and demanding than those to the wife—especially when projected against a patriarchal social order, where wives were expected to be obedient, but husbands were not necessarily expected to be either respectful or loving ... So for a man

model for the Christian husband is Phil. 2.5–8: Christ’s self-emptying of the privileges of divinity, voluntary servanthood, and obedience to God even to the point of death” (Mollenkott 2003, 48; cf. Girard 2000, 129–137; Penner and Lopez 2012, 43–50).

This leads to a sixth element that seems to be crucial for a responsible reimagining of the function of the Ephesians code, namely the organic *oneness and interdependence* between the husband as “head” and the wife as “body.”<sup>26</sup> In this regard, Mollenkott (2003) finds the Ephesians redescription of the husband/wife relationship unheard of in patriarchy. She argues that,

(c)areful study of Eph. 5.21–33 would indicate that the word “head” is being used chiefly in the sense of “source.” Just as Christ is the source of the church ... so the husband who empties himself of patriarchal privilege is the source of the Christian marital structure and, in that sense, the source of the Christian wife (p. 51).

## 5 Conclusion

The challenge to keep the transformative potential of the Ephesians household code in balance with its paradoxical relation to the rest of the letter, as well as its life-threatening history of interpretation, remains enormous. The letter to the Ephesians displays fascinating points of contact with imperial ideology, which seems to include *both* elements of accommodation and resistance. Its household code likewise appears to be ideologically complex, representing a dynamic wrestling, a transitional *process*, where identity has to be negotiated time and again.

With the legacies of Aristotle, Jesus Christ, Paul, Hauerwas, Schüssler Fiorenza, Oduyoye et al., how should Christian communities (in Africa) then read this text today? How can we engage it in ways that would emphasise “a critical appraisal and reimagination” of the author’s thinking? (Lopez 2012, 96). How do we respect it as a product of its time

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to relate to his wife as Christ relates to the church is to relate on an equal basis unheard of in patriarchy.”

<sup>26</sup> Mollenkott (2003, 50) argues that the Greek word for head (κεφαλή) refers to “a human head, or to a point of origin such as the head of a stream, or to the chief support such as the head cornerstone of a building.” According to her, the word “head” is never connected with intelligence (or decision-making) in the Bible. “In fact, for the ancient Hebrews the intellectual powers of humans were believed to be situated in the *heart*” (Mollenkott 2003, 51).

and at the same time allow its theological thrust to transform our rhetoric and ethos, so that the integrity of God's justice-seeking new creation in Christ would be recognised by all?

Reimagining the implied rhetorical effect of the Ephesians code would require careful discernment and bold hermeneutical choices. In my view, the text primarily challenges us to use its explicit theological thrust as a rhetorical *lens* to read against its patriarchal grain and history of reception. In continuation with the dynamic process of reinterpretation represented by it, Eph 5:21–33 invites and stimulates an ongoing, faithful struggle to interpret God's radical presence in the world (cf. Girard 2000, 143–152). Anything less would confine the God of Jesus Christ to the socio-cultural boundaries of an ancient canonised text in ways contradictory to its own theological thrust.

Ultimately, it is the choice of Christian families to give *priority* to the imaginative possibilities of God's liberating, healing love over the broken realities of our lives and the world. As such, the Ephesians code serves as an ongoing invitation to critique and resist any form of exploitative power in contemporary as well as ancient empire.

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