First Peter is a subtle and subversive letter. Scholars are increasingly coming to recognize its subversive nature. This is especially evident in 2:13–17, where the author asks readers to submit to human authorities—all of whom, the reader will refer to as those authorities as fools, insisting that believers live as free people, and granting the emperor only the same honor that is due everyone else but not the love he craves or the fear he expects. Peter reserves such love and fear for fellow believers and God, respectively. This is not run-of-the-mill social conservatism. It is what John Howard Yoder called revolutionary subordination. It is the power of God demonstrated from a posture of apparent weakness.

It is increasingly common for scholars to roll this subversive trope forward into the following two subsections, which ask slaves to submit to their masters and wives to their husbands. These slaves are not asked to be doormats, but Christ followers who subvert injustice the way Jesus did—by bearing up under it and leveraging it for our salvation. Likewise, wives do not submit to unbelieving husbands from a posture of inferiority, but from one of triumph that wins over their husbands by the superior power of godly conduct.

Yet Peter’s subversive engine appears to have run out of steam by 3:7. There he highlights the weakness of women—referring to them as weaker vessels—and implores men to give them, like the emperor, only the same basic honor that everyone else deserves. For God offers women the gift of life, too, and these men would not want anything to hinder their prayer lives.

Fortunately, Peter wakes from this apparent patriarchal slumber in the very next verse and begins exhorting the entire community not to get sucked into pagan notions of power and retaliation, but to repay evil with a blessing and so ultimately to triumph like Jesus did—the Jesus, he points out, who suffered for a little while, but is now seated at God’s right hand with all “angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him” (3:22).

How odd for Peter to raise up women before their unbelieving husbands, then to shove them down beneath their believing husbands, then partially to raise them back up by appealing to their common lot before God and by threatening men with ineffectual prayer—and then, immediately afterward, to instruct the whole community to embrace the subversive way of Jesus. For those who see subversive strains all throughout 1 Peter, the brief instruction to men in 3:7 seems entirely out of place.

The commentary tradition appears to be blissfully unaware of this tension. Social conservatives interpret Peter as saying that, even though women are subordinates in the flesh, they are nonetheless equals with regard to salvation and should be honored as such. To them, womanly weakness is self-evident truth, even if it chafes against contemporary notions of political correctness. Social progressivists interpret Peter as saying much the same thing, only they dismiss his nod toward male superiority as unfortunate but understandable cultural baggage that we are obligated to leave behind.

In this article, I offer a third option. Peter was not, in fact, affirming that women are weaker. Rather—consistent with the subversive nature of the wider pericope in which this verse is situated—he was asking men to lay aside their cultural advantage and to win over their unbelieving wives in the same Christlike manner that slaves, women, and the wider community were called to non-coercively welcome Gentiles into the chorus of believers who will “glorify God when he comes to judge” (2:12).

I proceed by providing an alternative translation of 1 Pet 3:7 that better fits its context and better reflects the nuances of the Greek text. In particular, I examine the connective function of the term “likewise, in the same way” (homoiōs), the ambiguous meaning of the phrase “grace of life,” the comparative sense of the adverb “like, as” (hōs), the indefinite state of the phrase “weaker vessel,” and the default meaning of “vessel.”

After addressing these five textual issues, I offer an alternative translation and submit a few important implications of this passage.

The Connective Function of the Term “likewise, in the same way” (homoiōs)

First Peter 3:7 begins by emphasizing its connection to preceding sections. Most translations make this perfectly clear. The NRSV says, “Husbands, in the same way. . . .” Some commentators minimize the importance of the connecting term homoiōs, saying that it only means that Paul is here rounding out his household code by tacking on a brief address to husbands. However, there are several reasons to believe that the author intended “in the same way” in a much stronger sense. That is, the same logic he uses to instruct slaves and wives also applies to husbands.

The most obvious reason is that the immediately preceding section begins in an analogous way. First Peter 3:1 begins with homoiōs, thus the NRSV translation, “Wives, in the same way. . . .” This section addressing wives clearly points back to the previous section addressing slaves, which begins in 2:18. The most natural reading, then, is that the sections addressing slaves, wives, and husbands belong together.

Strengthening the connection between these subsections is that all three are driven by participial verbs that are set up by the imperative verb “submit” (hupotassō) in 2:13. This rather transparent structure is lost in translation, since most English versions render not only the imperative in 2:13, but also the lead participles in our three subsections, as imperatives. A clearer translation would not say “submit to every human institution on account of the Lord (2:13) . . . slaves submit to your masters (2:18) . . . wives submit to your husbands (3:1) . . . and husbands
cohabitate according to knowledge (3:7).” Rather, it would retain the structure by saying, “Submit to every human institution on account of the Lord . . . slaves submitting to your masters . . . wives submitting to your husbands . . . and husbands cohabitating according to knowledge.”

First Peter 3:7 should be read in the context of this wider pericope, following the lead imperative to submit.

**The Ambiguous Meaning of the Phrase “grace of life”**

The connectedness of the aforementioned subsections goes a long way to help us interpret a highly ambiguous phrase in 3:7 (charitos zōēs) which means “grace of life.” An inordinate number of commentators assume that the women referred to in this passage are believers and thus interpret this phrase as the gift of eternal life. Yet this phrase, which appears only here in all of Scripture, may just as well denote the gift of life in general. Some commentators assume, contra Paul in 1 Cor 7:12, that all first-century women adopted the religion of their husbands. Others assume that because inheritance language is connected to salvation elsewhere in 1 Peter (1:5 and 3:9), it must be here as well. Yet before we rush to interpret this phrase in light of Greco-Roman convention and parallels in the wider book of 1 Peter, we ought to consider its place within its most immediate context, which is 2:11–3:7.

Although grammatically-speaking the string of participles connecting our three subsections leads to the imperative in 2:13 (hupotagēte, from hupotassō, “submit”), the discourse as a whole begins thematically, in 2:11, with the term “beloved” (agapētoi). This term of direct address establishes the beginning of a new main discourse, one that continues at least through 3:7 and perhaps beyond. In vv. 11–12, the recipients are identified as “aliens and exiles” and are encouraged to exhibit such good “conduct” (anastrophēn) among the Gentiles that they, too, might be drawn to glorify God when he comes to judge. From this evangelistic perspective, the author then commands Christians to submit to various human institutions in v. 13. He commands them to do so not because those in power are somehow superior but, according to v. 15, because it is God’s will that by doing good they might silence the “ignorance of the foolish.” The word for ignorance here is agnōsia, or lack of knowledge (gnōsis)—in this case, the knowledge that comes with faith.

In the next two verses, the author wraps up his double introduction to our wider passage by instructing believers to live as free people and yet to honor all people, including the emperor (vv. 16–17). He employs the notions of knowledge, freedom, and honor to set up all three subsections because they establish believers as those who are in the know and truly free, but who must use their freedom to honor all people, particularly those who lack knowledge.

The author then turns immediately to slaves whom he calls to submit to their masters, even those who are harsh. Presumably such masters would be unbelievers. For the author goes on to use the example of Jesus who suffered at the hands of unbelievers and, in so doing, triumphed over them and opened the door of salvation to those who would believe. Slaves are encouraged to walk in his train and share in his triumph. This is not how 1 Peter exhorts fellow believers to relate to one another. Their relationship to each other is characterized in 3:8 by unity of spirit, sympathy, mutual love, and humility; in 4:8 by constant love and uncomplaining hospitality; and in 5:5 by mutual humility. It is unthinkable in this context that a believer would be suffering at the hand of a fellow believer.

The author then turns to wives whom he calls, in the same way (homoios), to submit to their husbands. But here the evangelistic thrust is far more explicit. They submit “so that” their husbands “may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct” (3:1). This is the same word for conduct in 2:12 (anastrophēn) that leads Gentiles to glorify God. Just like slaves are encouraged to use their freedom in a Christlike way as a witness to their masters, so wives must exercise their freedom in Christ to win over their husbands with pure and gentle conduct.

Thus when husbands, in the third subsection, are called to behave homoios, “in the same way,” it is most natural to assume that he is addressing husbands who are married to unbelievers. Not only does it preserve the steady chain of witness to unbelievers going back to 2:11, but the fact that husbands are called to act in accordance to “knowledge,” echoing 2:15, and are also asked to “honor” their wives, echoing 2:17, establishes two strong verbal links to the introduction of this passage where witness to unbelievers is explicit.

It therefore makes the most sense to interpret the author as instructing husbands to win over their unbelieving wives by their good, honoring conduct. Whereas wives were told not to resort to outward beauty like unbelievers often did, men ought not resort to the marital authority granted them by wider society to force their wives into faith. With this in mind, the “grace of life” that husbands have inherited along with their wives may simply refer to the divine gift of life that all humans share, which obligates God’s people to honor all fellow humans.

**The Comparative Sense of the Adverb “like, as” (hōs)**

Having situated our weaker vessel passage within its immediate context, we turn now to clause level analysis—our target clause being “as weaker vessels” (hōs asthenesterō skuei). The first word in this clause begins an adverbial conjunction, which often functions comparatively and so is translated “as” or “like.” The same term appears in 1:14 “like obedient children,” 1:19 “like that of a lamb,” 1:24 “like grass and all its glory;” 2:2 “like newborn infants,” and 2:5 “like living stones.” Such uses are often metaphorical, but this is not always the case. Sometimes hōs conveys a characteristic that is quite straightforward. In 2:11, Peter addresses the audience “as aliens and exiles,” in 2:13 the king is identified “as supreme,” and in 2:16 the audience is addressed both “as free” and “as servants of God.” So we must analyze the immediate context to determine how hōs is being used and what exactly it modifies.

Translators disagree widely about what hōs modifies in 1 Pet 3:7. It could modify the woman, as in the NRSV: “paying honor
to the woman as the weaker sex.” It could define how husbands ought to cohabit with knowledge as in the 1995 revision of the New American Standard Bible: “live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker.” It could modify how men ought to honor their wives, as in the KJV: “giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel.” Agreement upon where the implied commas should be placed would presumably help matters. Yet some of our earliest editions of the Greek New Testaments disagree with how this sentence should be parsed. Erasmus in 1516 disagrees with Stephanus in 1550. And the text shared by the modern editions of Nestle-Aland and the United Bible Societies changed between their 1979 and 2000 editions. More recently, OpenText.org, an online source developed by Stanley Porter and his associates, breaks down the text in still a different way.13 It is therefore difficult to invoke some sort of textual analysis trump card to settle this debate in a definitive way. It will have to do for now to note the use of the comparative ἥσος and to see what further information the rest of the clause provides.

The Indefinite State of the Phrase “weaker vessel”

Though the definite article is conspicuously absent from our target clause all throughout the manuscript tradition, nearly every English translation renders the phrase ἥσος ἀσθενεστέρος skeuei as if it were definite,14 which leads to translations like “the weaker vessel,” “the weaker sex,” or “the weaker partner.” When linked with the comparative ἥσος, the definite article carries the meaning in a specific direction. If the wife in the passage is referred to as “the” weaker partner, this implies that she is being compared to her husband who is presumably the stronger one. So, no matter where one places commas in this sentence, the same sense is conveyed: the phrase “weaker vessel” refers directly to the woman. Yet the most natural rendering of this phrase without the definite article would be “as with a weaker vessel,” and this opens up a different meaning for the word “vessel” than is assumed by English translations and all the major commentaries.

The Default Meaning of “vessel”

Most commentators point out that the term skeuei, in its most basic sense, means a material object that is used to carry out a particular function, often a jar or container of some sort. For instance, in Luke 8:16 we are told that no one lights a lamp only to cover it over with a jar or vessel. By extension, skeuei sometimes refers to a person who carries out a particular function. In the Greek OT, this term refers to an inanimate instrument or container over 270 times. Of those instances, less than thirty refer to humans as vessels and all such cases refer to a royal armor bearer (a “vessel” carrier).15 In the NT, skeuei appears twenty-two times, and only three of them refer to people.16 The ordinary sense of the term is therefore an instrument or container.

In two passages, moreover, a distinction is made between ordinary and special vessels. The Greek terms for special and ordinary in these passages are timēn and atimian, or “honor” and “dishonor.” Paul says in Rom 9:21, “Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object [skeuos] for special use [timēn] and another for ordinary use [atimian]?” This passage and 2 Tim 2:20 testify that honor is something ascribed to vessels, which provides interesting context for interpreting our contested passage.

Neither the translations nor the commentaries seriously consider that the “weaker vessel” of 3:7 might simply be a fragile piece of pottery that warrants special care, like a family heirloom. If such is the case, this verse could be saying that Christian husbands ought to treat their unbelieving wives with special care. Rather than lord their religion over them, they ought to woo their wives into the faith by according special dignity to them. This would be analogous to how Christian wives win over their unbelieving husbands and how Christian slaves relate to their unbelieving masters.

We might then offer a variety of translations of 1 Pet 3:7, each of which conveys the same basic meaning:

Following the Structure Offered on OpenText.org

Husbands, in the same way, cohabitating according to knowledge: as with a delicate vessel, to the wife, showing honor as also to coheirs of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Following the Punctuation of the 26th edition of the Greek text by Nestle and Aland (and thus the NRSV and ESV)

Husbands, in the same way, cohabitating according to knowledge, showing honor to the wife as to a delicate vessel, as also to coheirs of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Following the punctuation of 27th edition of the Greek text by Nestle and Aland

Husbands, in the same way, cohabitating with your wife according to knowledge as with a delicate vessel, showing honor as also to coheirs of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

If this basic approach to translation is correct, then Peter is not instructing his audience to think of women as being weaker. Rather, he is holding up how households treated precious vessels as a model for how husbands ought to treat their unbelieving spouses. He calls them to act out of faith knowledge—like Christian citizens, slaves, and wives earlier in the pericope—not out of widely shared societal notions that men are stronger than women. If Peter were encouraging that sort of knowledge, this would stand against his instruction to wives in the previous section, where he instructs them not to use outward beauty to win over their husbands, which would have been the societal norm. Were that the case, he would not have said “Husbands, in the same way” but “Husbands, on the other hand,” and then applied a different standard to them.
Implications

If this alternative translation is correct, four implications follow. First, and most obvious, we ought not appeal to 1 Pet 3:7 in order to argue that women are weaker than men. It is simply not what the passage is about. Indeed, it may be a subtle polemic against this notion.

Second, we should pause before applying the instruction in this entire pericope—whether concerning slaves, wives, or husbands—to relationships between fellow believers. Though some of it may be relevant, the author’s concerns lie elsewhere.

Third, since the women in this verse are not believers, Peter’s rationale for showing them honor may be seen as having even wider applicability. Believers ought to show honor to all unbelievers on account of their being coheirs of the grace of life. Their lives are not a waste should they not choose to follow Jesus. It is indeed a shame that they do not experience eternal life, but their present lives are just as much a gift from God as ours. This builds upon the OT notion that all humans are made in God’s image and that all blood is sacred, not just the blood of our family or tribe or gender. Any notion of Christian superiority is refuted by this pericope.

Finally, 1 Pet 3:7 teaches us that when society grants believers social privilege, for whatever reason—whether gender, ethnicity, seniority, or majority status—we ought not wield such privilege in order to coerce unbelievers into Christian faith and practice. This passage calls upon people of social privilege to lay aside their privilege and to extend God’s gift to those below us in the social pecking order as the same gift of grace that we received. In order for God’s gift to be received as a gift, it must be presented in a way that is rejectable. Anything less is not God’s gift of salvation, but just another human rule.

Notes

5. I am not arguing that a participle cannot have an imperative force, or that all Greek participles must be translated as English participles. Rather, my point is about the structure, which is clear in Greek but veiled in most English translations.
6. M. Eugene Boring, 1 Pet, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 127; Edmund Clowney, The Message of 1 Peter, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 134; Peter H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 122; Elliott, 1 Peter, 579–86; Daniel Keating, First and Second Peter, Jude, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 77; I. Howard Marshall, 1 Peter, IVP New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 104; Scot McKnight, 1 Peter, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 185; Michaels, 1 Peter, 169–70; Pheme Perkins, First and Second Peter, James, and Jude, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 59; Thomas Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 161; Donald P. Senior, 1 Peter, SP (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2008), 84; Duane F. Watson, First and Second Peter, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 76–77.
7. E.g., Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, 122.
8. E.g., Senior, 1 Peter, 84.
9. I owe this insight to Greek scholar and colleague Ronald D. Peters.
10. That Sarah is introduced as a role model does not mean this section is not about the relationship between believing wives and unbelieving husbands. There is no reason to assume that behavior toward a believer cannot be used to exemplify behavior toward an unbeliever. Plus, it is quite possible that the example of Sarah being appealed to is her submission to Abraham precisely when he did not believe in God’s promise to give him a son through Sarah. Cf. Bott, “Sarah as the ‘Weaker Vessel,’” 243–59. Though I do not find Bott’s interpretation of 3:7 to be persuasive, he helpfully illuminates the allusion to Sarah and Abraham in 3:6.
11. Supporting the view that these women are unbelievers, see Carl D. Gross, “Are the Wives in 1 Peter 3:7 Christians?” JSNT 35 (Feb 1989): 89–96; Karen H. Jobes, 1 Peter, BECNT (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2005), 207–8. Jobes concludes, “the husband is to treat his wife as if she were a sister in Christ. The unbelieving wife is to be accorded the same respect as a fellow Christian . . . with the hope of winning her to authentic faith” (208).
12. This understanding finds support in some of the most reliable manuscripts. Codex Sinaiticus (4 th cent.) and Codex Alexandrinus (5 th cent.) add the term poilikes, which would lead to a translation like “the grace of various kinds of life.” This suggests that, even though the wife may not yet be a coheir of new life in Jesus, she is coheir of another, albeit more basic, kind of life that is also an invaluable gift from God. On the other hand, P72 is a 3rd–4th century papyrus that inserts the word aiounou, which would render the phrase “eternal life.”
13. Ronald Peters offered valuable assistance regarding the location of the comma in the textual tradition.
16. In Acts 9:15, Paul becomes God’s instrument; in 1 Thess 4:3 the human body is referred to as a vessel; and in 2 Tim 2:21, people may serve as vessels who do good work.

John Nugent

Teaches Bible and theology at Great Lakes Christian College in Lansing, Michigan. He holds an MDiv from Emmanuel Christian Seminary, a ThM from Duke Divinity School, and a PhD from Calvin Theological Seminary. He is well published, including the book, Endangered Gospel: How Fixing the World is Killing the Church (Cascade, 2016).