



OBEY LIKE SARAH?

Submission, Context, and Coded Language in 1 Peter 2

Bobby Gilles

When it comes to Bible interpretation, context is key. Complementarians ask women to submit to husbands and male church leaders without properly contextualizing the New Testament's use of "submit." This can be especially harmful when quoting 1 Peter 3 where the author asks wives to submit to unbelieving husbands, modeling Sarah, "who obeyed Abraham."

Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives . . . For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord (1 Peter 3:1, 5–6a).

Wives of unbelievers were already disobeying their husbands by being Christians.

1 Peter 2:11–3:12 belongs to the “household code” genre, similar to the passages on the family unit in Ephesians 5:21–6:9; Colossians 3:18–4:1; and Titus 2:1–10. Ancient Greco-Roman philosophers and statesmen wrote and taught household codes to ensure that citizens, slaves, and other inhabitants obeyed laws and cultural expectations. Plato taught that each household is a “mini-state.” Under these principles, households were expected to organize for the good of the state: “Parents are superior to their offspring, men to women and children, rulers to ruled.”¹ Plato’s student, Aristotle, further solidified this concept, writing, “It is a part of the household science to rule over wife and children. For the male is by nature better fitted to command than the female.”²

The Greeks and Romans believed that insubordination at home led to insubordination against the state. In modern terms, this was a matter of “national security.”³ If a group of people (say, Christians) violated these customs, they would be deemed seditious. The way Peter introduces his household code suggests he knows this context and wants to help his people avoid further persecution:

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. . . . Show proper respect to everyone . . . honor the emperor (1 Peter 2:13–17).

Neighbors were already assaulting Peter’s flock for disassociating from pagan temple activities honoring their former gods:

For you have spent enough time in



the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and *they heap abuse on you* (1 Peter 4:3–4, emphasis added).

Peter’s adaptation of the household code helps the church accommodate cultural expectations whenever possible and resist only when necessary, such as when asked to deny Christ or engage in idolatry. *Peter wants to protect his flock.* By 100 AD, the Christian population of the Roman Empire was only 0.0126 percent.⁴ They lacked the strength in numbers, financial clout, legal protections, voting power, or social cache that many Christians in the Western world take for granted today.

Peter is most concerned about the wives of unbelievers because these pagan husbands could cause particular trouble for the community by accusing it of corrupting their wives. These women were already on thin ice because they were expected to adopt their husbands’ religion. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60–7 BC) wrote *Roman Histories* to preserve foundational policies, including the expectation that a wife share in the “sacred rites” of her husband (meaning, “join his religion”) and that a husband should “rule her as a necessary and inseparable possession.”⁵

Wives of unbelievers were already disobeying *by being Christians*. Peter mitigates their risk by telling them to be as quietly submissive as possible, because their situation is unlike that of Christians in contemporary democracies. His call for wives to submit is standard fare in his world—wives are supposed to submit, just as we should drive with a valid license. But Peter’s reason in verse 1, “that they may be won over,” is subversive. He is telling them to obey Rome for the sake of their

safety and the church’s, but to do so for a reason that will ultimately undermine the false lord, Caesar.

What Christians Knew About Sarah

Here is where it gets interesting. The reference to Sarah will appease potential enemies of the church who may hear Peter’s letter. To them, it simply seems Peter is commanding women to submit and commending an ancient, holy woman who “obeyed” her husband. However, those catechized in the faith will understand it at a deeper level. The Old Testament is their Bible. The story of Abraham and Sarah is not a minor story tucked away in an obscure part of the canon. It is foundational, and Christians were expected to know it.

Of course, this was even more true for Jewish Christians. Even small synagogues that lacked copies of much of the Hebrew Scriptures owned the Pentateuch, the five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy.⁶ This was must-read material.

In the story of Sarah and Abraham, each tells the other what to do at times. *The text never criticizes Sarah for this.* God directly backs her up in Genesis 21:12, following Sarah’s demand regarding Ishmael:

“Whatever Sarah says to you, שָׁמָעָה” (Hebrew “*shama*,” which means “listen and obey”).

In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used by the early church), Abraham also “obeys” Sarah in Genesis 16:2, using the same Greek word that 1 Peter 3:6 uses to describe Sarah’s obedience:

“Abram *listened to the voice* of Sarai.” (“listened to the voice” is from *hupakousen*, which literally means “he obeyed”).

In the story of Sarah and Abraham, each tells the other what to do at times; Sarah obeyed Abraham, and Abraham obeyed Sarah.

So Sarah *hupakousen* (obeyed) Abraham according to 1 Peter 3:6, and Abraham *hupakousen* (obeyed) Sarah in Genesis 16:2. All of this would have been apparent to those catechized in the faith but would have gone unnoticed by a pagan who heard or read Peter's letter. It's clever, subversive, and gives these Christian women dignity.

Conclusion:

When Peter ends his instructions for wives and begins writing to husbands (where he will suggest that God won't even hear their prayers if they are inconsiderate toward their wives), he introduces the husband clause with the same clause he used to address wives:

- "Wives, in the same way . . ." (3:1)
- "Husbands, in the same way . . ." (3:7)

What does the author mean by "in the same way?" We have to trace his thought to the beginning of his "household code" in 2:18: "Slaves, in reverent fear of God, submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh."

This sounds pretty unilateral; Peter gives no specific instructions for the masters. Yet, he has just told these early believers to "live as free people" and, paradoxically, to "live as God's slaves" (v. 16). This gives the slaves in his community dignity, and it gives the wealthiest and most powerful fellow believers a reality check: they are all slaves, and they are all free. Before the throne of God, they share the same status.

Having provided this mind-bending alteration of standard Greco-Roman codes, Peter then focuses on the reality of his flock's situation as a persecuted minority who must live in accord with society's laws. Peter knew that trying to overturn Greco-Roman customs on slavery and marriage, which were tied to the state, would only bring persecution on the tiny church. He had no power to overturn slavery or undo the patriarchy, but his examples and instructions make clear that there is a better way, even within those fallen contexts.

We must remember this when we leave the section of the household code that addresses slaves and come to the section addressed to wives. Peter was *nobody* in the Roman Empire. He wrote to wives who had even less influence. Their situation is not analogous to ours, so a blind adherence to "the letter of the law" in this passage is irresponsible logically and biblically. It also goes against how the Holy Spirit has worked in the world

over the millennia since Peter's day. This Holy Spirit, whom Peter announced at Pentecost and who is poured out on sons and daughters, causing them to prophesy, has changed the social fabric.⁷

We see the seeds of equality planted in the New Testament, in the hard soil of political patriarchy. But today, we see so much of the fruit of Jesus's teaching: slavery and domestic abuse are illegal in many countries. As the Gospel spreads, women's freedom has increased in religious, financial, relationship, and educational spheres. The battle is not over, but the principles behind Peter's instructions, highlighted by his examples of biblical relationships, have taken root. Let's submit mutually to one another, obeying like Sarah, listening like Abraham. We are no longer trapped under Roman rule; why should the church continue to cosplay as citizens under Caesar?

Notes

1. Plato, Laws 3.690a via Jeannine K. Brown, *Embedded Genres in the New Testament: Understanding Their Impact for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 90.
2. Aristotle, *Politics 1.5.1* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944), 90.
3. Brown, *Embedded Genres in the New Testament*, 94.
4. Rodney Stark, *The Rise Of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 7.
5. Dionysius, *Roman Histories* II.24.i, II.25.vi-v via Jennifer G. Bird, *Abuse, Power and Fearful Obedience: Reconsidering 1 Peter's Commands to Wives* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011), 22).
6. Tim Hegg, "Public Reading of the Scriptures in the 1st Century Synagogue," *TorahResource.com*, <https://torahresource.com/article/public-reading-of-the-scriptures-in-the-1st-century-synagogue/>.
7. Women have always played key roles in shaping God's people, from Junia to Macrina the Younger, Catherine of Sienna, Julian of Norwich, and Sojourner Truth. But the degree of influence, education, and leadership women exhibit within the church today continues to grow. Teachers like Barbara Brown Taylor, Beth Moore, and Brenda Salter McNeil have immense followings. Women serve on translation committees of major English Bible translations, including Cynthia Westfall and Seung Ai Yang (CEB), Jeannine Brown and Elizabeth Mburu (NIV), Deirdre Fulton and Laura Nasrallah (NRSV), and Amy Peeler and Lynn Cohick (NLT). The Visual Museum of Women in Christianity uncovers and promotes visual exhibits of women's leadership in Christianity from the early centuries of the Church, and CBE promotes the equality, equity, and leadership of women around the world.



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