

**A MUSLIM READING OF THE HAUSTAFELN OF
EPHESIANS 5:21-33:
Does the Text Support a Hierarchical Relation
between Husbands and Wives?**

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Abstract

The essay questions whether Ephesians 5:21-33 supports that a hierarchical relation between husbands and wives as an ideal and universal principle. To answer the question, as a Muslim, I share my reading of this passage in dialogue with a similar Qur'anic passage, Q. 4:34. I learn that the two texts have undergone similar history since its emergence until today. Through a contextual reading, I view that even though Ephesians 5:21-33, as well as Q. 4:34, adopted the household concept accepted in the area, which was patriarchal, the author instilled a new higher equal relationship between husbands and wives. In short, this text proposes “an intended transformation” or an “imaginative vision.” Offering a new reading of gender related texts is a shared struggle in both traditions. It is an important endeavor to make the scriptures speak for today's world as a powerful basis for social transformation.

Keywords: *Haustafeln*, Ephesians 5:21-33, gender relations, Q. 4:34, contextual approach

Abstrak

Tulisan ini mempertanyakan apakah Efesus 5:21-33 mendukung relasi hierarkis antara suami dan istri sebagai sebuah prinsip yang ideal dan bersifat universal. Untuk menjawab pertanyaan tersebut, sebagai seorang Muslim, saya akan membaca teks ini dalam dialog dengan sebuah ayat al-Qur'an yang serupa, yakni Q. 4:34. Saya mendapati bahwa kedua teks telah melewati sejarah penafsiran yang serupa sejak awal hingga saat ini. Melalui sebuah pembacaan kontekstual, saya melihat bahwa, kendati Efesus 5:21-33, sebagaimana teks Q. 4:34, mengadopsi konsep rumah tangga yang diterima pada konteks masing-masing, yang bersifat patriarkis, penulis menanamkan sebuah relasi

baru yang lebih baik terkait relasi antara suami dan istri, yakni relasi yang setara. Secara singkat, teks ini mengajukan “sebuah transformasi yang dimaksudkan” atau sebuah “visi imajinatif.” Upaya menawarkan sebuah cara pembacaan baru atas teks-teks terkait relasi gender merupakan sebuah pergumulan bersama di dalam tradisi kedua agama. Hal itu merupakan sebuah upaya penting untuk membuat Kitab Suci berbicara kepada dunia masa kini sebagai sebuah basis kuat bagi transformasi sosial.

Kata-Kata Kunci: Haustefeln, Efesus 5:21-33, relasi gender, Q. 4:34, pendekatan kontekstual

Introduction

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.¹

Providing biblical instruction for ordering the relationship between a husband and a wife, Ephesians 5:21-33 (above) is widely known as an extended “teaching on marriage” and is often understood as an ideal model—even a command—for wives to be submissive to their husbands.²

¹ Italics mine. I use New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) for the English translation of the biblical texts in this paper.

² Helga Melzer-Keller, “Ephesians: Community Spirit and Conservative Values as Survival Strategies in the Churches of Asia Minor,” in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary of the Books and the Bible and Related*

When I read the passage, I am reminded of a text in the Qur'an, Q. 4:34. There are several versions of the Qur'an's translations into English, each of which represents a different understanding of the verse. Below are two such translations, the discussions of which I present in the following section. Marmaduke Picktall translates:

*Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great.*³

M.A.S. Abdel Haleem translates:

*Husbands should take good care of their wives with [the bounties] God has given to some more than others and with what they spend out of their own money. Righteous wives are devout and guard what God would have them guard in their husbands' absence. If you fear high-handedness from your wives, remind them [of the teachings of God], then ignore them when you go to bed, then hit them. If they obey you, you have no right to act against them: God is most high and great.*⁴

Even though the content is rather different from Ephesians 3:21-33, Q. 4:34 is also widely used as an Islamic basis for a hierarchical relation between and roles of women and men in the household, and even beyond. There is also a hadith tradition I find rather similar to the Ephesian invocation, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord." This hadith says, "Had it been permissible that a person may prostrate himself before another, I would have ordered that a wife should prostrate herself before her husband."⁵ While it would be

Literature, Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, eds. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 767.

³ Italics mine. For several English translations of the verse, see <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=4&verse=34>

⁴ Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54, italics mine.

⁵ This hadith is found in various redactions in *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, *Sunan Abū Daūd*, *Sunan Ibn Majjah*, and *Musnad Ahmad*. For a reinterpretation of the hadith, see Inayah Rohmaniyah, "Penghambaan Suami pada Istri," in *Perempuan Tertindas? Kajian*

interesting to trace the possible historical relation between these two textual traditions, such a study is beyond the scope of this essay—which presents my reading of Ephesians 5:21-33 as a Muslim. Yet, even as I rely mainly on the work of Christian scholars who have offered interpretations of the passage, throughout the essay I position my own experience reading the Qur'an (particularly Q. 4:34 and other gender-related verses) in dialogue with my reading of Ephesians.

Reading only the first part of Ephesians 3:21-33 would be sufficiently jarring, as it seems clearly to speak about women's subordination. However, my own experience in reading the Qur'an has taught me to be cautious, that I ought not accept a literal meaning automatically as the intended meaning. The Bible, as well as the Qur'an, was written/revealed in a patriarchal society, a fact that is reflected one way or another in the text. Contemporary minds unprepared with such a perspective would find reading Qur'anic or biblical passages on women difficult. Another difficulty is that the disposition towards women in relation to men seems to be ambivalent in both holy texts. There are passages which suggest *gender equality*, as well as passages that seem to promote *gender inequality*—which some even describe as “misogynic” verses.⁶ However, I argue that this ambivalence is apparent only when we read either text according to its literal meaning.

Because the Bible and the Qur'an were born of patriarchal societal worldviews, it is necessary to take such contexts into account when one conducts an interpretation of these texts. Only by carefully paying attention to contexts, both historical and contemporary, is one able to uncover some higher objective in the text. In other words, *literal reading or interpretation* would not be an ideal approach for making the text meaningful in today's context. In Qur'anic studies, the alternative approach is usually referred as *contextual reading or interpretation*.⁷

Hadis-hadis Misoginis, Mochamad Sodik dan Inayah Rohmaniyah, eds. (Yogyakarta: Elsaq, 2003), 95-119.

⁶ The Qur'an, for example, clearly speaks about women being equal to men in the creation (Q. 4:1), salvation or recompense in the hereafter (Q. 9: 72), eligibility for reward (Q. 4:124; 16:97), and ability to promote good (Q. 9:71). Other verses *seem* to assert women's subordination—for example, concerning women's status and role in comparison to man (2:128; 4:34), polygamy (Q. 4:3), witness or testimony (Q. 2:282), and inheritance (Q. 4:11-12). However, the latter verses can also be read in light of the following perspective: the Qur'an promotes an acknowledgment of women's rights in the household, divorce, and inheritance, when compared to the already-established customs at that time.

⁷ This approach has been popularized by contemporary Muslim scholars, such as Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Amina Wadud, and Abdullah Saeed. The latter popularized the term “contextualists' approach” in contradiction to “textualists' approach.” See Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (London:

Given the above, following are two ways of reading Ephesians 5:21-33 that I find problematic: first, a critical approach that considers the text to be anti-feminist and “rejects the authority of the text because of its androcentric patriarchal character,”⁸ and, second, a traditionalist approach that offers an apologetic or “spiritualized reading” which does not take into account circumstances surrounding the historical emergence of the text.⁹ In the latter approach, the text is essentialized and understood as divine command regardless of time and space.¹⁰ In terms of reading gender-related verses in both Qur’anic and biblical studies traditions, one might find similar approaches for mitigating difficulties in similar textual categories. The approaches can now be categorized generally into three: a total rejection of the authority of the text for this postmodern time, a complete acceptance of the passages each in their literal sense, and a middle position (contextual reading).¹¹

I view—as many scholars do—that a contextual reading is an ideal approach to these verses. Why? Because—we contend—a contextual reading is a faithful one. It maintains the authority of the text, yet it opens up space to read the text beyond its literal meaning by uncovering hidden meanings, higher objectives, or general principles within the text.¹² Such an approach also allows the sacred texts to support actively the liberation of women amid a societal worldview that oppresses them.¹³ In the following section, I conduct a

Routledge, 2008), 220-232. For an elaboration of his contextual approach, see his *Interpreting the Qur’an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006) and *Reading the Qur’an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁸ See Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, “Discipleship and Patriarchy: Early Christianity Ethos and Christian Ethics in a Feminist Theological Perspectives,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, Vol. 2 (1982): 155.

⁹ Jennifer G. Bird, “The Letter to the Ephesians,” in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds. (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 274.

¹⁰ Fiorenza includes three apologetic stances justifying its use of theological reasoning, namely necessary adaption, goodness of creation, and subversive subordination. See Fiorenza, “Discipleship and Patriarchy,” 149-152.

¹¹ From the Muslims’ side, see for example, Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), ix-xxi; Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 1-30.

¹² This is similar to Suzanne Watts Handerson’s work on Colossians 3:18-4:1, though in my opinion it falls into a spiritualized model of interpretation. See Handerson, “Taking Liberties with the Text: The Colossians Household Code as Hermeneutical Paradigm,” *Interpretation*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (2006): 421-422.

¹³ Melzer-Keller, “Ephesians,” 782.

contextual reading of Ephesians 5:21-33, first by situating it in its textual and historical contexts.

The Textual Context

Situating a passage in its textual context is important. Otherwise, one might arbitrarily use the text as legitimation for a circumstance beyond what is spoken in the text. This is not necessarily problematic, but, as we will in the case of Q. 4:34, a failure to understand textual context of a text can be dangerous. As “a masterpiece of devotional literature,” Stephen Harris states that Ephesians’ main topic is “the union of all creation with Christ, manifested on earth by the church’s international unity” (1:10-14). In this regard, the household code is a set of “instructions for living in the world while united to Christ” (4:1-6:20).¹⁴ Furthermore, from the text, it is also apparent that the author’s main focus is to maintain the unity of the church (4:1-6). Elizabeth Johnson states that although the nature of the danger is not clear, the text implies that the situation is not exactly conducive and that there are some threats from without that urgently required the response of an apostolic letter.¹⁵

The setting of Ephesians 5:21-33 is clear, that the context of discussion is the household. The case of Q. 4:34 is different. Because the Arabic terms used in the verse referring to the subjects involved (*al-rijāl* and *al-nisāʾ*) can mean men and women, or husbands and wives, scholars argue differently whether the context of the verse is matrimonial or general. The two translations I quote above reflect these two opinions. In my view, those who assume a context beyond matrimony have failed to see the textual context of the verse, since it is obvious that the verse concerns matrimonial disputes. As we will see later, the issue is that one’s assumptions of context bring about different legal and philosophical implications on gender relations. Due to this, one needs to carefully determine the precise textual context of a passage.

¹⁴ Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 379.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Johnson, “Ephesians,” in *Women’s Bible Community: Twentieth-Anniversary Edition*, Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 577.

The other New Testament passages on household codes for husbands and wives are Colossians 3:18-19¹⁶ and 1 Peter 2:18-3:7.¹⁷ Colossians is widely acknowledged as the oldest text speaking about the subject. Similarly to Ephesians 5:22 (“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord”), these two texts includes similar statements, that wives are ordered to be subject or submissive to husbands.

In Ephesians, interestingly, the section on household codes commences with an order for Christians to be subject to one another, a phrase that seems to abolish any subjection of one party to another. Yet, the passage continues with a clear command for women to subject themselves to their husbands. The coordinating phrase “in everything” (5:24) is qualified by the subordinating phrase “as you are to the Lord” (5:22). Next in the passage is the instruction for men to love their wives as Christ loves the church (5:23). Explanation for this instruction to the men occupies three-fourths of this particular passage, being anchored with the analogy of the relation between Christ and the church.

The Intertextual and Sociopolitical Contexts

Because no text comes from a vacuum, scholars have scrutinized both the intertextual and the sociopolitical contexts of this household code. To begin, there is a particular concept of *household* or *family* that is established in the Greco-Roman culture. These were seen as the basic unit of the empire, thus a key to socioeconomic control.¹⁸ One basic element of the *household* consists of freemen and slaves. The micro-relations between (1) a master and a slave, (2) a husband and a wife, and (3) a father and children become collectively a necessary

¹⁶ “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.” (NRSV)

¹⁷ “Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behavior. Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of fine clothing, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. So once the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves and were submissive to their husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are now her children if you do right and let nothing terrify you. Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered.” (NRSV)

¹⁸ Bird, “The Letter to the Ephesians,” 275.

locus for investigation.¹⁹ It follows for social norms to ensure that all relations were in order, to support the empire.

Although some commentators maintain the conviction that the hermeneutical context of Ephesians 5:21-33 is uniquely Christian, other scholars have tried to find intertextual parallelities between the New Testament household code statements, and other texts found to have emerged from similar background. First, Martin Dibelius and Karl Weidinger identify parallels in the text with elements of the Greco-Roman world, particularly Stoic thought. Weidinger asserts that it was customary at that time to set a brief formulation of ethical *topoi* for practical uses.²⁰ Second, James Crouch and others demonstrate that this household code bears influence from Hellenistic Jewish writers, such as Philo. More recently, scholars like Dieter Lührmann, David Balch, and John Elliott aver that there is resemblance with Aristotelian philosophical teachings on household management (*oikonomia*) and political ethics (*politeia*). For instance, Aristotle argued that the “pattern of patriarchal submission” is an ideal form of society, since the patriarchal relationship is not constructed or based on social convention but is a natural principle.²¹

In sum, the household code in Ephesians reflects the sociopolitical values of its own (patriarchal) world, where one would expect the author to encourage the audience of antiquity to implement the standard relationship pattern between husbands and wives, which was well established in their society. However, I believe there is a question worth asking—*Did the text merely affirm and continue the established standard, or does it imply a liberative message?* This question is valid because, first, a serious reading should be holistic, analyzing the text and its textual and historical contexts, being able to uncover its hidden message, the unsaid. Second, the Qur’an and the Bible were revolutionary texts at the time they emerged, inspiring their audience to establish a more spiritual, just society.

¹⁹ Johnson, “Ephesians,” 578.

²⁰ See Angela Standhartinger, “The Origin and Intention of the Household Code in the Letter to the Colossians,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Vol. 79 (2000): 119.

²¹ In *Politics* 1254b3-1277b25, Aristotle states, “[T]he male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind.” See Fiorenza, “Discipleship and Patriarchy,” 141.

The Old and the New in Ephesians 5:21-33: Understanding the Hidden Transformative Vision of the Text

As mentioned above, that which is old in Ephesians 5:21-33 is the superficial order for wives to be subjected to their husbands, a norm most likely universal throughout the ancient world. So, what is new in what the author is saying in this text? Some argue, it is Christ who becomes the transformative power in the mutual submission: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21). However, sometimes this notion is understood in ways that leave out any liberating potential for women.²²

Uncovering the transformative vision of this passage, Alan Padgett proposes an insightful approach. His interpretation centers on the figure of Jesus stated in the text, an analysis starting with the analogy deployed to describe relations between husbands and wives, namely Christ’s relation to the church. This analogy illustrates that the unity of “one flesh” shared by a husband and a wife is akin to the unity of Christ and “his bride.” If one understands this analogy correctly, one is able to see the hidden meaning of the household code, which in essence supports mutual submission, not permanent hierarchy.²³

Different from the familiar prophetic metaphor of Israel as God’s wife (e.g., in Hosea) that utilizes human marriage to illustrate God’s faithfulness to Israel, the Ephesians text reverses the method by using Christ’s relationship to the church to direct the analogy of how men should relate with their wives and women to their husbands.²⁴ In his analysis, Padgett focuses more on Christ’s relation to the church than husbands’ relation to wives. While it is true that there is no single verse that explicitly commands husbands to be submissive to their wives, as Padgett asserts this notion is implied in the other verses: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21); “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25); “In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself” (v. 28); and, “Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself” (v. 33). In sum, just as the text begins with an order for mutual submission,

²² Russ Dudrey proposes such a spiritual reading of this text. He states that the New Testament should not be read as either repressive or liberationist. Yet I find that his approach ignores the contextual liberative vision in the emergence of the text. See Russ Dudrey, “‘Submit Yourselves to One Another’: A Socio-Historical Look at the Household Code of Ephesians 5:15-6:9,” *Restoration Quarterly* Vol. 41, No. 1: (1999), 45.

²³ Alan G. Padgett, *As Christ Submits to the Church: A Biblical Understanding of Leadership and Mutual Submission* (Michigan: Braker Academy, 2011), 60.

²⁴ Johnson, “Ephesians,” 579.

the same notion is repeated throughout the verses, thereby abolishing the patriarchal structure of the household.

We have arrived at the idea that the text supports mutual submission. Understanding the nature of Christ's submission to the church would help to understand the nature of husbands' submission to wives. In this regard, we are speaking about Christ's ministry as an example of husbands' submission to their wives, since an important aspect of Jesus is that, although being God, He did not hold himself "to his godly authority but humbled himself and took up the form of slave or servant in the earthly ministry out of love."²⁵ This interpretation supports the call to husbands to love their wives, not to govern or rule them—in other words, not to follow a common prescription in the household code of the ancient world. Wives should not been treated like possession; they are to be treated as Christ loves and lays down himself before the church.

However, what about the term "head" (*kephale*) in "...for the husband is the *head* of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church"? Doesn't this term suggest men's superiority? It is to be noted that as a metaphor, the term "head" has a multiplicity of meanings. In other words, it does not necessarily only refer to "authority," but it can also mean "being first or preeminent in some way, including being the source of something."²⁶ The term "head" does imply certain weight of authority, yet this text is unique because the headship is Christ's headship. Christ is the perfect example a leader, demonstrating that the quintessence of leadership is to be a servant, not someone who governs or rules. Christ's headship is clearly not a role of hierarchy, and this should serve as model for husbands' headship.

The difficulty of explaining here the term "head" also arises in the case of Q. 4:34. The term *qawwām* in the verse is in some sense equivalent to the term *kephale* ("head") in Ephesians, and both have been used to signify women's subordination in the household. In the Qur'an's original Arabic, the possibility is more apparent for a multiplicity of meanings. For example, the English translations of the Qur'an offer a variety of translations to the term: men or husbands (1) *should take good care of*, (2) *are in charge of*, (3) *are the protectors of*, (4) *are the maintainers of*, or (5) *are the managers of* women or wives (and their affairs).²⁷ Each translation brings a different nuance to the term *qawwām*. In classical Islamic tradition the meaning of *qawwām* includes, in general, the functions of *ta'dīb* (education, discipline, and

²⁵ Padgett, *As Christ Submits to the Church*, 64-65. See also, Philippians 2:5-11 (the "Christological hymn").

²⁶ Padgett, *As Christ Submits to the Church*, 66-67.

²⁷ See <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=4&verse=34>

chastisement) and *tadbīr* (planning and management). Other renderings of *qawwām* connote the function of guardianship and protection.²⁸

The Qur'an itself does not provide an explanation for what the term actually means. Something clear for the the Qur'an's contemporary audience might not be clear for later audiences. Nevertheless, Q. 4:34 does include reasoning or basis for men's function as *qawwām* (in contrast, Ephesians does not discuss the reasoning or basis behind the headship of men beyond analogizing the headship of Christ). Of note is the following phrase—i.e., the first basis, the meaning of which also finds variation in the opinions of scholars: “by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other”; “because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other”; “because of the greater preference that God has given to some of them”; “because Allah has made one of them to excel the other”; “for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another,” and, “with [the bounties] God has given to some more than others.”²⁹ Thus the general argument states that men have more excellence than women, which are aspects of physical quality (*mazīd al-quwwa fī al-a'māl* and *ṭā' āl*) together with other qualities such as *kamāl al-'aql* (the excellence of the intellect), *ḥusn al-tadbīr* (the capability in management and planning).³⁰ The context of Q. 4:34 is debatable, whether it is matrimonial or general. Those scholars who take the context to be general usually also argue for a natural and universal nature of men's preference or excellence over women. Consequently, the principle that “men are *qawwām* of women” is not limited to the category of husbands and wives, applying generally to men and women in society. The qualities distinctive between the two sexes result in different gender roles in society.³¹ The leadership of men is considered not only normative in the household, but obligatory in wider society as well.

Just as Christian scholars have proposed new readings of gender-related verses in the Bible, Muslim scholars of the Qur'an also argue that it is critical to produce a reinterpretation of text, which takes into account the historical and current contexts. Not only was the Qur'an revealed in a patriarchal society, classic interpretations of the Qur'an were also produced in similar milieux. No wonder

²⁸ See Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2014), ch. 11, and Lien Iffah Na'atu Fina, “The Status of Women in the Qur'an: A Survey of Shi'i Tafsirs,” *Jurnal Palastren*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2014), 202-211.

²⁹ <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=4&verse=34>

³⁰ Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an*, chapter 11; Fina, “The Status of Women in the Qur'an,” 202-211.

³¹ *Ibid.*

commentaries on the verse even take the meaning of the verse to another level, one that the Qur'an itself does not speak of—namely, the inner qualities of men compared to women. Nowhere in the Qur'an is such a statement found. Thus, it is important that these commentaries be read in light of their own respective contexts as well.

In their proposals to reread Q. 4:34, some scholars apply the principle of contextual reading. Generally, when such an approach limits the context to the matrimonial, interpretive results suggest that the quality of husbands' being *qanwām* of their wives is conditional *on the basis of* material preference that men support women. Indeed, one contextual interpretation suggests that the preference or excellence to which this verse refers is not men's inherent qualities (as mentioned earlier) but men as economic resource, including their inheritance (which was more than it would be for women). Such an understanding is in-line with the following statement—(i.e. the second basis—namely, that men become *qanwām* of women when men provide for women.³² In short, this verse claims that husbands as *qanwām* take care of wives when they provide.

In line with this understanding yet suggesting a more general role for men in society (not only in the household), some scholars like Azizah al-Hibri and Riffat Hasan—instead of translating *qanwām* as maintainers or protectors—translate this term as “breadwinners” or “those who provide a means of support or livelihood.”³³ One should also note that the term *qanwām* in the Qur'an does not mean “guardians” or “rulers” as understood in feudal cultures.³⁴ Therefore, the idea that men “rule” women is not supported by Q. 4:34, which was revealed in a patriarchal society where husbands were “breadwinners” in the family. I understand this verse to be a Qur'anic way to protect women and that husbands' role as *qanwām* is legitimate only under certain circumstances. In the modern period, with both men and women providing for the family, the two might share the role as *breadwinners* or *maintainers*.

I have discussed only the first half of Q. 4:34. Constraints of space limit examination of the remainder to some brief yet intriguing observations. The rest of the verse states, “If you fear high-handedness from your wives, remind them [of the teachings of God], then ignore them when you go to bed, then hit them.” This part of the passage is generally used as basis by those accusing that the Qur'an allows domestic violence—an interpretation that is both unfortunate and dangerous. However, a new reading is not only possible but also

³² Wadud, *Qur'an and Women*, 69-74.

³³ Asma Barlas, *Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations*, 187.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

legitimate. Just how the Epistle to the Ephesians borrowed the language, so to speak, of its audience for its message to be relatable, the Qur'an also employs the same rhetorical strategy. The act of "beating" or "hitting" (*daraba*) wives when necessary had been an acceptable practice in Arabia at that time. That the Qur'an positions this action as the last resort after two peaceful methods may be seen as an indication that *beating/hitting* a wife is not favored in the Qur'an, that the hidden meaning of the text is not to do take this action. The text aims to protect women from arbitrary violence in the household. In addition, scholars are called to read this verse in light of the Qur'an's universal message of justice and equality.

When Qur'anic scholars reread Q. 4:34 in this way, they point to the higher objective of the text. The Qur'an, being revealed in the language of its time, thereby asserted its loftier moral values. As mentioned above, Christian scholars too argue that Ephesians 5:21-33 contains a transformative vision, as the author purposely asserts new values or higher standards of equality when applying the household code prominent at that time. On the one hand, the church's survival requires an adaptation of patriarchal structures in Greco-Roman society. On the other, maintaining a common language is part of the rhetorical strategy for helping a (new) teaching to be accepted in that society. If the author proposed a completely new code, it likely would not be effective. In this spirit, the *haustafeln* not only Christianizes patriarchal Aristotelian ethics but also humanizes and modifies it.³⁵ Such an interpretation counters the common (mis)understanding that the analogy deployed in the text somehow legitimates absolute authority for the *paterfamilias*—which, in turn, is often used to legitimize the abuse and subordination of women³⁶—and is a (mis)understanding shared in common with the interpretive history of Q. 4:34, as well.

Conclusion: A Reflective Note

Upon reviewing alternative readings of Ephesians 5:21-33 based on traditions of Christian scholarship, in this essay I have constructed an interpretive argument as a Muslim familiar with the

³⁵ See Fiorenza, "Discipleship and Patriarchy," 148; Padgett, *As Christ Submits to the Church*, 66; Jack Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership in the Pauline Mission: A Social Identity Perspective on Local Leadership in Corinth and Ephesus* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 165-166; and Suzanne Watts Handerson, "Taking Liberties with the Text," 420.

³⁶ Johnson, "Ephesians," 579.

works of Qur'anic exegesis and commentaries. In terms of demonstrating perhaps an *expectant* approach to the biblical text, this article reflects my own experiences by which I endeavor to read Ephesians 5:21-33, in order to seek a biblical vision concerning gender relations.

After reading Ephesians and placing this text in dialogue with a similar Qur'anic passage (Q. 4:34), I have come to a better comprehension of how much the two passages share a similar *story*. By *story* here I mean different things. First, even though the two texts come from an extensively different time and place, the two were produced in comparable milieux—that of a patriarchal society. Second, both texts include teachings that seem to perpetuate gender imbalances and social injustices of both time periods. Third, these texts have been approached ambivalently according to their respective adherents—both as a scriptural basis to legitimize imbalanced, unjust gender relations (within the household and without) and as a rhetorical, religious basis for promoting gender equality. What scholars see in the text really depends on their own positionality. In other words, the problem does not lie in the text but in its interpretation. Both Ephesians 5:21-33 and Q. 4:34 have undergone new readings, mainly in the modern period. These readings are not only purposive—namely, (1) to provide a scriptural basis for gender equality and justice, as a counterargument against the majority interpretation, and (2) to uncover the higher objective of both holy texts; such *interested* readings are also necessary, as each has been generally used to legitimize women's subordination, even domestic violence. I have shown how similar are the methods, applied by scholars from both religious traditions to reread these texts; the steps to conduct such a “contextual reading” include linguistic, textual, intertextual, and historical analyses.

Through contextual readings, I have argued that Ephesians 5:21-33 and Q. 4:34 insist upon a new, higher standard of equality between husbands and wives; in spite of their adoption of practices and values established as normative in the areas where they emerged, rather than promoting inequality these texts actually assert religious protection for women's rights. In light of the fact that a message successfully understood by its audience must be articulated in relatable language, the texts propose an *intended transformation*—an *imaginative vision*—which can be read only by maintaining certain principles. My argument is that Ephesians 5:21-33, just like Q. 4:34, does *not* support hierarchical relations between husbands and wives supposedly to be applied universally, regardless of time and place.

In my rereading of Ephesians, the decisive clue in support of hearing a more liberative message is the definitive analogy of Christ

and the church. I find the argument that Christ's relationship to the church is based not on authority but on love and service to simple, sensible, and convincing. Husbands' relationship to wives, therefore, should be founded upon love and mercy, not rulership and authority. While in Q. 4:34 there is no parallel analogy, it is possible to introduce a new meaning by offering new analysis of the text, namely by rereading it in light of the universal message of the Qur'an—humanity, justice, equality. Instead of either (1) promoting literal interpretations that have been so often used to subordinate women or (2) rejecting the authority of the text due to tendencies leading toward patriarchally defines relationships, an egalitarian spirit should transform our current experience. Again, the problem lies not in a text but in its interpretation. It is not the text that needs to be abandoned but some of the ways we read them as scripture.

Finally, my reading of Ephesians allows me to be immersed in the experience of Christians dealing with a difficult passage. I have come to an understanding that the struggle for gender equality is common in both religious traditions, Islam and Christianity, alike. Whenever scriptural passages are perpetually used to legitimize injustice, the need for alternative interpretation presents itself. Christians and Muslims alike share in this work, to reread our textual-religious traditions as powerful means for social transformation.

Mengenai Penulis

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