“THIS IS A GREAT METAPHOR!”
RECIPROCITY IN THE EPHESIANS HOUSEHOLD CODE

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1. INTRODUCTION

The instructions to wives and husbands in Eph 5:21–33 adapt a more basic household formula from Col 3:18–19 by interpreting the marital relationship with a constellation of Pauline metaphors that have been used in the Pauline epistles for Christ’s patron-client relationship with the church. Usually the household codes in the New Testament have been treated as closed units with an identifiable single source outside of the New Testament, but there has been a movement towards understanding them as they function in both their social context in the Greco-Roman culture and in the context of the letters in which they occur in terms of the argument and the author’s theology. The traditional Greco-Roman understanding of the household responsibilities of the wife and husband will be shown to function within the patronage system that was the basic building block of the society. While the Greco-Roman household code for husbands and wives may only be slightly modified with Christian teaching in Col 3:18–4:1, in Eph 5:21–33 the material from Colossians is significantly edited and expanded in the section on wives and husbands. A reading of Eph 5:22–33 in this socio-cultural and literary context contributes significantly to the understanding of the passage. The Ephesians household code creates a variation on traditional Greco-Roman and Christian themes that maintains the Greco-Roman principle of reciprocity but interprets it in such a way that it is consistent with Pauline teaching and theology on servanthood and so effectively undermines the assumed privileges of the patron in the patronage system without denying social realities of power and dependency.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON HOUSEHOLD CODES

The relationship between the household codes in the New Testament and household codes in the Greco-Roman culture has been under discussion
since Martin Dibelius categorized a group of texts as *Haustafeln* in 1927: Col 3:13–4:3; Eph 5:22–6:9; 1 Peter 2:18–3:7; Titus 2:1–10; and 1 Tim 2:8–15; 6:1–2. Subsequently, most recent scholarship has narrowed the household codes in the New Testament to a shorter list: Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:22–6:9; and 1 Pet 2:18–3:7. However, the discussion has evolved from the basic form-critical approach that assumed that the New Testament household codes found their source in traditional Greco-Roman or Jewish material. The discussion has broadened to include a more extensive literary context, as well as the Greco-Roman culture and the broader societal structure as source materials. In addition, some scholars are reconsidering the possibility that they may reflect Christian teaching. In addition, attention has been given by some of the recent scholarship to the relationship between the household codes and the discourses in which they appear in terms of their theology.

The discussion of the origins of the household codes has largely assumed form-critical assumptions and methodologies. Dibelius’s student Karl Weidinger provided the definitive work on the form-critical analysis of the household codes, adopting Dibelius’s texts and suggested that the Stoic duty lists were the *Vorlage* or origin of the codes. In time, that which defined their form was refined to eight common elements according to Marlis Gielen:

1. It is composed of a closed parenetic unit that stands out from its context.
2. The subjects are addressed in pairs in sequence.
3. There is a sub/superordinate relationship between the pairs.
4. The cohesive theme of the unit is subordination.

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