

Essay 5: Genesis 2-3 and Headship (Part 2)

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Gen 3:16 is a key text in the debate over ordaining women as elders and ministers. The text reads, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” The last phrase of this announcement is oft cited by those who hold the Gender Exclusive (GE) view of ordination. They claim that this verse teaches a general male headship which proscribes women from “offices” of “spiritual authority.” It is this claim that I shall examine in this essay.

This particular GE argument is one I have been aware of for nearly thirty years. My first exposure to excluding women from being pastors or elders based on Gen 3:16 came while attending one of Bill Gothard’s seminars for pastors in the mid-1980s. Gothard proclaimed there was a divinely ordained “chain of command” placing the man under Christ and a woman under the man, both in the home and in the church. A modified version of this chain-of-command theology seems to be a key component of the current (2014) GE view.

My first encounter with such concepts within the Adventist church was during the debates over ordination during the early 1990s. In the ensuing twenty-plus years, the “Adventist” version appears to have remained largely unchanged. What has changed over that time is that GE proponents have increasingly asserted that Gen 3:16 is not introducing male headship into the human social order in response to the entrance of sin. Rather, GE advocates now frequently claim that this pronouncement on Eve is a “reiteration” of a pre-fall headship of Adam over Eve, perhaps with some minor modification. Thus, a critical component of the reiteration view is that male headship is a pre-fall institution which, like the Sabbath and marriage, continues post-fall. From my perspective, the reiteration argument appears to be an attempt to rebut the Gender Inclusive (GI) claim that female submission is a post-fall condition (or prescription) which the plan of redemption overturns, restoring male-female relations to pre-fall equality. The seven assertions examined in part 1 of this essay (Essay 5a) appear to have been developed to bolster the pre-fall headship of Adam, and thus solidify the reiteration interpretation of Gen 3:16. Having already demonstrated the problematic nature of those claims, I now move to examine Gen 3:16 itself.

## Literary Context

The literary context of Gen 3:16 is that of a judicial trial. Several features of the story support this understanding. First, the warning about the results of disobedience—“you shall certainly die”—is given in the literary form of a juridical penalty.<sup>1</sup> In the Old Testament (OT), the

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<sup>1</sup>For more details, see, Stephen Bauer, “Dying You Shall Die,” *Ministry*, December, 2011, 6-9. (See <https://www.ministrymagazine.org>). The formula usually occurs in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person (you) or third person (he, she, they), in singular and plural forms. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person forms of the formula are always in a juridical context.

grammatical form of warning used in Gen 2:17 is always an announcement of a legal penalty which will be enforced if a specified law is violated. For example, this grammatical formula appears in Gen 20:7, where God threatens Abimelech with death in response to his attempt to marry Sarah, who was already married to Abraham. A few chapters later, Abimelech-2 uses the same formula to threaten anyone who would “touch” Rebecca (Gen 26:11). In each case, God or the human king announce a death penalty for violation of a royal law.

Another example with uncanny similarity to Gen 2:17 is found in 1 Kings 2. Here, Solomon confines Shimei to Jerusalem (2:36) and then announces a legal penalty for leaving the city boundaries, using phrases identical to Gen 2. “For *on the day you* go out and cross the brook Kidron, *know for certain that you shall die*. Your blood shall be on your own head” (1 Kings 2:37).<sup>2</sup> Both the Gen and 1 Kings passages have the formula, “on the day you” do X. Both have the same grammar and vocabulary for the penalty (literally, “dying you shall die”). It is unquestionable that Solomon was establishing a law applying to Shimei and announcing a death penalty for its violation. Solomon repeats this same, Gen 2 language when he rehearses Shimei’s violation prior to executing him (2:42-46). Therefore, in the story of Shimei’s execution, the language in common with Gen 2 is clearly used in a trial setting. Such linguistic parallels reinforce the idea that God announced a juridical penalty in Gen 2:17.

Additionally, in Gen 3, God conducts an interrogation, asking questions leading to a conviction of wrongdoing, and then gives judgment sentences. The judgment penalties are announced in three phases: on the Snake, on the woman, and on *ha’adam* (see Part 1 of this essay for more on this Hebrew term). We thus have the first case of an investigative judgement in Scripture. The judgment context demands that Gen 3:16 be viewed as part of a trial process for Adam and Eve. We thus have strong evidences that the contextual setting of Gen 3:16 is judicial.

First-time offenders who are tried for a crime and then convicted are not likely to perceive their sentence as a reiteration of a pre-trial lifestyle. Something new, usually inconvenient, undesired, and limiting will be imposed by the judge. Therefore, the theological context of divine judgment seems incompatible with the idea that these pronouncements of penalty are primarily a reiteration of the pre-fall order.

## Theology of Limits

Another key theme in the passage involves how God disciplines Adam and Eve. God is seeking to correct a problem, but what is the problem that needed correcting? In Gen 3, the temptation was that by disobeying, they would “become like God.” The problem, then, was that Eve, and later Adam, sought to transcend their finite limits as creatures under the governance of their creator. They sought to upgrade their status to be co-deity with God. Because they were deceived into this choice, God, in His love, took corrective measures to teach them that creatures can *never* metamorphose into deities. He did so by introducing new, more stringent limitations into their existence. Gen 3:16 focuses on the woman’s new set of constraints. She would now have pain in childbirth and a new restriction on her autonomy in relation to her husband. *Ha’adam* likewise gets confronted with more stringent boundaries. The ground will be cursed,

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis added to identify phrases also found in Gen 2.

labor and life will be a sweat-producing struggle, and finally *ha'adam* will die. Thus, these disciplinary actions brought an entirely new way of life upon Adam and Eve, and was designed to help them admit and accept their finiteness.<sup>3</sup> Like the judicial themes, the theology of increased limitations is more compatible with the concept of reversals and changes, than with reiteration of pre-fall structures.

### **Serpent, Eve, Adam**

The evidence that Gen 3 is not a reiteration of pre-fall policies is further strengthened by looking at the structure of the three-fold judgement on the Serpent, the woman, and *ha'adam*. Note that the woman's sentence is sandwiched between the judgements pronounced on the Serpent and *ha'adam*. An examination of the divine sentences given before and after the woman reveals an interesting pattern.

The serpent is cursed to crawl on his belly and to eat dust. This sentence suggests that there was previously some other, unnamed form of locomotion for the serpent which was now removed, forcing the snake to crawl on its belly. As such, this would not a reiteration of pre-fall conditions for the serpent but, rather, an overturning of the old order with a corresponding installation of something new.

Likewise, the curses on *ha'adam* such as thorns, thistles, and working in sweat all suggest that the pre-fall order would not have had thorns, thistles, and sweat-producing conditions for work. Additionally, the pronouncement of death was not a reiteration of any pre-fall structure. The apostle Paul declares that death was something new, introduced to the earth by human sin (Rom 5:12). Thus, as with the Serpent, all the elements of the curse on *ha'adam* are newly introduced conditions which overturn aspects of the pre-creation order, with the purpose of increasing human limitations.

If the judgements before and after those on the woman all overturn the previous order and bring something new and disciplinary in its place, it would seem likely that her judgments should follow the same pattern. Thus, she would not have had difficult childbirth pre-fall, but that changes to painful childbirth post-fall. Why, then, would one suddenly ignore this literary structure and assert that the submission clause is a reiteration, even though nothing else in the immediate context is a reiteration of pre-fall conditions? Logic demands that as painful childbirth was a new reality, so was Eve's subjugation to her husband. We thus have good reasons to believe all three judgement sentences on the Serpent, Eve, and Adam are not reiterating elements of the pre-fall order, but are, instead, reversals which overturn and change key aspects of the sinless state of existence.

In summary, the juridical setting, the theology of limitations, and the location of Eve's curses between judgements which introduce all new conditions, demand that Gen 3:16 should be viewed as a judgement sentence which establishes a new, alternate order designed to deal with the entrance of sin. Thus we have multiple, compelling evidences that Gen 3 intends to depict divinely imposed changes that overturn some aspects of the pre-fall order.

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<sup>3</sup>I develop this concept of discipline more in a chapter I wrote on Theodicy. See, Stephen Bauer, "If God is Good and All-powerful, How Can He Allow Suffering?" in, *Always Prepared: Answers to Questions About our Faith*, eds. Humberto M. Rasi and Nancy J. Vyhmeister (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2012), 141-151.

## The Grammar of Gen 3:16

Another question to examine is whether the basic literary features of Gen 3:16 support or contradict the teaching a general male headship. For this particular point, it does not really matter whether this alleged headship in Gen 3 is a reiteration or not. If Gen 3:16 prescribes a general male headship, even if only for the post-fall world, we could still have a basis to argue that men were divinely granted spiritual authority over women and hence, women should not be ordained as pastors or elders. In other words, one does not need a pre-fall hierarchy to still make the assertion that Gen 3:16 proscribes women from ordination. It thus becomes necessary to more closely examine the text itself.

In relation to the headship question, the critical portion of Gen 3:16 is the last phrase, which literally translates, “Your desire shall be for your man, and he shall rule over you.” The term used for “man” is gender specific – *’ish*, a man or husband – and not the gender-neutral *ha’adam*. At first glance, because the woman is to desire the male, the GE headship view might appear to have some sort of textual support. That Gen 3:16 calls for some kind of submission of a woman to a man seems indicated by the pronouncement to Eve, “he shall rule over you.” It is important to note, however, that while Eve is told she will be ruled over, no corresponding command is given to Adam. The Bible contains no direct instruction that specifically calls for a man to rule his wife.<sup>4</sup> It seems less than prudent for men to claim a God-given right to rule their wives—or women in general—that is not explicitly in Scripture. Nonetheless, some kind of submission is indicated in the text. How does Gen 3:16 frame and define the woman’s submission it calls for?

“Your desire shall be for *YOUR* man.” Two grammatical features leap out for consideration. First, “man” is singular. The woman (singular) in this verse is made subordinate to ONE man, not to all men. The woman was not made subject any man at random, nor to all men. She was solely placed in a state of “desire” to HER man.<sup>5</sup> The basic grammar of Gen 3:16 eliminates any option except one woman being subordinate to one man, in the context of marriage. Since Gen 3:16 only creates the subordinate relation between a husband and a wife, the GE headship interpretation fails for lack of analogy. This is because the GE view seeks to make all men heads over any woman, regardless of marital status.

Digging a bit deeper, the GE headship interpretation actually mimics a very Platonic type of thinking in its male-headship interpretation of Gen 2. Viewed in Platonic logic, Adam and Eve, as the first two humans, would be viewed as the prototypical template for their respective genders, functioning as Plato’s “idea” of man and of woman. Thus, when the prototypical “idea”

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<sup>4</sup>While a few texts may use the language of man ruling his household, parallel expressions have him ruling his children. There are no explicit passages specifying rulership of husband to wife.

<sup>5</sup>I remind the reader that in Hebrew, *’ish* linguistically designates a man or a husband. Adding a possessive pronoun is a classic form of indicating marriage. “Your man” means “your husband.”

of woman is made subject to the prototypical “idea” of man, all men and women descended from that prototypical pair must conform to the respective “ideas” in which they “participate.” Only on this non-biblical basis can Gen 3:16 be argued to teach that women as a class are subject to men as a class.

By contrast, Moses does not make a Platonic-style application to gender relations. Rather, Moses casts Adam and Eve as the prototypical pattern for marriage relations (Gen 2:22-25). That Moses continues the marriage focus in Gen 3 is indicated by his use of matrimonial language in Gen 3:16, “your husband.”<sup>6</sup> Moses’ literary focus is on the changes in the marriage relationship that came through human sin and divine judgment. He is not addressing general gender relations. Attempts to leverage general gender relationships out of the text thus fail for lack of analogy. The imposition of a foreign philosophy (akin to Plato) onto the sacred text thus creates a Quasi-Moses to support a general gender-based subjugation of female to male. Quasi-Moses, however, is not divinely inspired, so cannot have authentic spiritual authority. There are strong textual indicators which indicate Gen 3:16 does not command or reiterate a general, gender-based submission of females to males. Rather, the context calls for such submission solely in the context of marriage, as a newly introduced response to human sin. This now raises the question of what this submission means. I believe Paul explicates the meaning of Gen 3:16 in Ephesians 5.

## **Ephesians 5 and Female Submission**

I have already made a brief examination of female submission in Eph 5 in Essay 2, but only enough to show that Paul was calling for wives to submit to their respective husbands and that this does not regulate general, inter-gender relations. Like the rest of Scripture, in Eph 5, Paul develops no corresponding theology of the male/husband *ruling over* the female/wife. Rather, in Eph 5, Paul takes the husband’s duties in an entirely differing direction.

Our passage opens in Eph 5:21: “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” This is part of a chain of exhortations given with present participles in the Greek text. In Greek, these participles indicate ongoing action, not something to be done once and then ending. In verse 21, Paul urges the Ephesian members to practice “submitting”—ongoing action—“to one another.” Paul thus calls for mutual, reciprocal submission as a basic lifestyle for the church community. They are to be submitting *to one another*. Most interestingly, however, Paul illustrates this mutual, reciprocal submission by appealing to the marriage relationship. In our English Bibles, this connection of mutual submission to marriage is not immediately obvious. In the original Greek text, however, one cannot miss it.

Most English Bibles translate Eph 5:22, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” In the Greek text, however, there is no verb or any other vocabulary for submitting in Eph 5:22. Rather, verse 22 is a continuation of the same sentence containing verse 21, and it derives its sense of verbal action from the participle for submitting used in verse 21. A highly literal translation of the two verses together would read, “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, the wives to their own husbands as to the Lord.” Because the concept of submission in verse 22 is derived from the participle in verse 21, this means that Paul is using the

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<sup>6</sup>See footnote 4.

submission of the wife to her husband as an application illustrating the mutual submission called for in verse 21. Mutual submission, however, would also mean that the husband must reciprocate with some sort of submission to his wife. Thus, in the ensuing verses, Paul depicts mutual submission between husbands and wives. The key point, however, is that Paul calls the wife and the husband to practice mutual submission but *in differing ways*. It is the difference in how each spouse submits to the other that reflects and explains Gen 3:16.

In Eph 5:22-24, Paul opens his explanation of mutual submission by describing how the wife is to submit to her husband. First, we note that Paul does not address the husband about his wife's submission. Rather, he directly addresses the wife as an independent, responsible person. This indicates that in Paul's mind, the submission of the wife to the husband is her unique responsibility. It is none of her husband's business. (Why does Paul not follow the "chain of command and talk to the husband about his wife's submission? Paul blatantly ignores such strictures.) Second, as with the rest of Scripture, Eph 5 contains no corresponding concept of the husband ruling over her. Thus, her submission is not to be supervised and regulated by her husband. The woman's submission, then is solely her domain, making it an entirely voluntary action of her own initiation. Furthermore, the mutuality of submission called for by Paul implies the equality of the submitting parties because he is illustrating mutual submission for emulation by all church members, whom Paul says are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). Thus, mutual submission shows they are all fundamentally equal in God's sight.<sup>7</sup> In Eph 5, then, the wife's submission to her husband is to be the voluntary submission of an equal, not the compelled submission of a subordinate.<sup>8</sup>

The voluntary nature of the wife's submission is further reinforced by Col 3:18: "Wives,

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<sup>7</sup>Gal 3:28 must be about more than equal access to salvation for all. It must include how we view and treat one another for in Gal 2, Paul takes Peter to task for treating Gentile believers as second-class members in the church. Likewise, Paul uses highly similar language to Gal 3:28 in Col 3:11, where the context is entirely focused on how we treat each other. We are not to mistreat others for "there is no Greek or Jew . . ." As we are all adoptees of Christ, we are all brothers and sisters, equals under the authority of one Heavenly Father.

<sup>8</sup>One can see a certain parallel in the Trinity with Christ, being equal in being and function with the Father, voluntarily submitting to the incarnation and "learning obedience" (Heb 5:8). We must be careful, however, not to overly infer marital relations out of the Trinity for two reasons. First, the members of the Godhead are never depicted in terms of being married to each other. Such a depiction would imply a god married to a goddess or goddesses, perhaps even two gods married to one goddess. Marriage in the Godhead could easily lead to justifying polygamy or polyandry as the natural expression of the image of God in mankind through marriage. Second, the Bible almost exclusively depicts the members of the Godhead in the context of how they relate to us through the plan of salvation. In other words, the Bible focuses on the economic roles each member fulfills while functioning in relation to humanity and our salvation. The Bible has almost nothing to say about their private relationship with each other apart from reference to humans. Children develop a view of each parent by how those parents relate to the family at large, but have no concept of how their parents relate in the bedroom. The reality is that too often, people build a view of God by reasoning from human relations to God, thus creating a God in their image, then they bow and worship the God they created.

submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” The qualifying phrase, “as is fitting in the Lord,” is significant. Who determines what is appropriate in the Lord? Since Paul is addressing the wives, it automatically implies that it is the wife who evaluates what is appropriate submission to her husband and what is not. As an independent moral agent who is accountable to God for herself, the wife must test the moral efficacy of demands and requests made by her husband. This is because some husbands will certainly declare that their demands are fitting in the Lord, regardless of the facts. Thus the husband has a conflict of interest in assessing the appropriateness of his wants and demands, meaning the wife must have her own walk with God upon which she can base her evaluation of what is appropriate submission, in the Lord. In Paul’s theology of submission, then, the wife’s submission is direct, purposeful, voluntarily, and given as an equal. How then, does the husband submit to his wife?

Paul devotes twice as many verses—six— to the husband’s submission as to the wife’s. (Perhaps Paul recognized that men would miss the point, so doubled the explanation). We first observe that Paul does not call the husband to rule over his wife. Rather, he calls the husband to *love* his wife in the same way that Christ loves the church (Eph 5:25), continuing to unpack the concept for five more verses. In short, how did Christ love the church? Self-sacrificially.

Christ voluntarily relinquished His rights and privileges as deity to take the form and function of the slave (Phil 2:7-9). The one who had every right never to encounter a “no,” said “no” to Himself in order to achieve the higher goal of our salvation and the reunification of the universe (Eph 1:10). Christ placed higher priority on the protection and health of the universe than His own rights, desires (Luke 22:42), and comfort. Thus, Paul calls the husband to whom the wife submits to rank her needs, her welfare, her happiness as higher in priority than his wants, his desires (including his desire for power over her), and his needs. The husband is to be the head in self-sacrifice, not the head in power. As Christ’s self-sacrifice is deeper and greater than our submission to him, so the husband’s selflessness should surpass his wife’s submission. She can safely submit to him when she can trust that he will not prey upon or exploit her but instead, will protect her from his own selfishness. The submission Paul calls the husband to exercise towards his wife is thus more demanding and more radical than the submission Paul requires of the wife.

Sin made full-functioning marital equality, if not impossible, certainly most difficult. Philosophically, equality is rooted in a sense of equal personal rights. To maintain a sense of equality, one naturally begins thinking in terms of protecting personal rights from encroachment. In marriage, such an approach tends to induce power-struggle as each partner seeks to defend their personal rights from diminishment by their spouse. Thus, the oneness of the marriage bond is easily compromised by fostering an attitude of suspicion that one’s spouse might be violating one’s own rights. By contrast, both husband and wife are called to follow Christ in voluntarily divestiture their personal rights (in the marriage) to achieve a higher purpose of marital oneness. The husband is called to facilitate this process by example, not by demand. He is to devote himself to a deeper level of self-sacrifice than is expected of his wife. She submits by following his example of self-emptying, self-sacrificial love. Since enforcing personal rights is no longer the focus of the relationship, suspicion can be banished and intimate trust inculcated. The headship of the husband, then, is not a matter of his ruling authority over his wife. Rather, it is a call to lead her by example after the pattern of Christ in Phil 2:5-9.

I would contend, then, that God placed Eve in a subordinate position to Adam to avoid a

competition for equal rights that undermines the oneness of the marriage.<sup>9</sup> Paul shows us, however, that God's design for how this submission operates was never meant to inflate the husband to a position of power over his wife. Rather, he is to be the head of self-sacrifice in the family, setting the example for all others to follow. Husbands and wives thus practice mutual submission but in differing ways.

Paul's theology of the husband's headship seems incompatible with the idea that women, as a class, are somehow subjugated to men, as a class. The concept of spiritual authority attached to headship by GE advocates seems at odds with Paul's theology of self-emptying service in the pattern of Christ. Instead, the GE interpretation seems to be more a theology of power, specifying who may be the rightful recipients of God-granted authority,<sup>10</sup> and whom God has excluded from it. Such concepts seem akin to the Gentile view of authority expressed by Christ in Mat 20:25-28. Jesus exhorts us, "it shall not be so among you. The greatest among you will be your slave."

Paul's application of Gen 3:16 in Eph 5 leaves no room for a hierarchal-power view of headship. Additionally, neither the grammar and syntax of Eph 5, nor that of Gen 3:16 allow for interpretations advocating the general subjection of the female gender to the male. Both passages restrict this submission dynamic to a monogamous marriage relationship, and Paul makes it clear that the woman's submission is the voluntary submission of an equal, not the compelled submission of a subordinate. The husband submits to his wife by leading the way in radical, self-sacrificial love. In my view, then, the evidence examined in Essay 5a (the previous essay) and in this essay shows that the manner in which GE advocates extract the "headship principle" from Gen 3:16 (and Eph 5:21-30) does violence to the sacred text. It creates faux biblical authors like Quasi-Moses, illegitimately investing them with biblical authority. The male hierarchal headship interpretation promotes a view of male power that seems at odds with God's ideal for our use of personal power, embodied in the self-emptying, self-sacrificial love, exemplified by Christ through the incarnation and cross. It is for these reasons, along with the evidences examined in Essays 2-4, that I cannot accept the headship interpretation as presented by advocates of the GE position on ordination as biblical.

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<sup>9</sup>Thus, a woman can seek appropriate help in defending her rights outside of marriage, when those rights are encroached by other men or women. This is seen in the parable of the unjust judge (Luk 18:1-8), in the case of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27:1-7), and more.

<sup>10</sup>Interestingly, Christ says that ALL authority in heaven and on earth is given to Him (Mat 28:19). As children of God, we need to avoid attempts to usurp the authority of the family head to ourselves.