

# Victims of Compromise: Women and the Household Codes – Colossians 3:18-4:1 and Ephesians 5:21-33

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## <sup>1</sup>SHORT BIO

Gertrud Tönsing is a Lutheran Pastor working as a researcher for UNISA. Born in the Western Cape in 1967, she grew up in Pietermaritzburg where she completed her BTh in 1990, in what was then the University of Natal. She completed her Master's in Biblical Studies in 1993 after which she went into the ministry. In 2014, she graduated with a PhD in Practical Theology in the area of Hymnology. However, she returned to Biblical Studies in 2018 and worked as a contract lecturer for UNISA and after the contract ended as a researcher. She is still active in the ministry in the Lutheran Church in the St Peter congregation in central Pretoria.

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## ABSTRACT

This essay gives a brief overview of the authorship debate of Colossians and Ephesians, and argues that the letters, authored mainly by his co-workers, were written as an attempt to compromise between Paul's controversial views and the congregations of Asia Minor. The household code of Colossians is analysed as a possible accompaniment to the letter to Philemon and the sending back of Onesimus, using the Pauline passage on submission in Romans 13 as a basis, complemented by known Graeco-Roman traditions on the household. Slaves, and not women were the primary addressees of this probably earliest Christian household code, but undoubtedly then the status of women became an issue of contention. The essay argues that Ephesians was written as a modification to the Colossians letter, which had left out key controversial Pauline terms. The letter to the Ephesians pleads for unity, re-introduces Pauline terms in formulations acceptable to the mainstream congregations, and carefully formulates a position on women in the household, which was to become dominant in the early church. It is argued that the household codes were regarded as a necessary compromise at the time but were not initially intended to suppress the participation and leadership of women. However, the controversy heated up and became more bitter, leading to the later Pastoral Letters and other early Christian writings, completely suppressing women's leadership in the church.

## KEYWORDS

Household codes; Colossians; Ephesians; authorship debate; submission of wives; Deutero-Pauline hypothesis; Christian marriage; women's leadership in early church; Christian unity

## Introduction

The household codes in the two letters, Colossians and Ephesians (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-33) have played an extraordinarily large role in the debate about the position of women in the church and society. For countless Christians, these passages – particularly the passage in Ephesians – still define the God-willed relationship between man and woman in marriage, as they still regard it as normative for today.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This position is represented by Mary Kassian, quoted by Steven Tracy, stating: "Practically, there may be situations in which submission to authority is limited. However, these situations are few and far between. Our focus should be on humility and obedience to authority in *all* circumstances...Obedience to God generally means obedience to those in authority over us" (Steven R. Tracy, "What Does 'Submit in Every-

Many other scholars reject the normative status of these texts, but the opinions vary widely as to how to interpret these texts. Are they simply oppressive texts, which need to be critiqued and deconstructed, or do they have positive features that still apply today?<sup>2</sup> Did they make space for more partnership in marriage in a very patriarchal society or did they take the church backwards from more egalitarian beginnings?<sup>3</sup> Were these passages penned by Paul, by co-workers of Paul during his lifetime, or by later members of Pauline schools?

Many feminist writers have written about these texts. Most of them are taking the position which is currently dominant in the New Testament scholarship, i.e. that these are Deutero-Pauline texts, and therefore less authoritative than the genuine Pauline texts like Galatians 3:28.<sup>4</sup> However, it is clear that in congregations, these texts continue to have an influence, as the Deutero-Pauline hypothesis has not been a convincing route for many (not theologically trained) Christians to read the household codes in a new and less oppressive way. This article wants to explore a different hypothesis on the origin of the household codes, and to open up a way to read these texts not as static prescriptions for today, but as a dynamic mirror on early Christian conflicts. It is argued that these letters were attempts to compromise and build unity, which we can learn from and build on today. However, we will have to start with different questions and should arrive at different answers.

This research did not start as an exploration of the household codes, but began as research on early Christian worship and a study on the two most well-known texts on early Christian singing: Colossians 3:16-17

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thing' Really Mean? The Nature and Scope of Marital Submission," *Trinity Journal* 29, no.2 [2008]: 286).

<sup>2</sup> Shi-Min Lu argues that the codes all "bear some tension" against prevailing cultural norms, and were a way to "heal the wounds caused by culture" (Shi-Min Lu, "Woman's Role in New Testament Household Codes: Transforming First-Century Roman Culture," *Priscilla Papers* 30, no.1 [2016]: 9).

<sup>3</sup> A scholar who clearly regards these codes as a regression after egalitarian beginnings, is Ho Lai Han. She writes: "It is hypothesized that the egalitarian passages stem from Christian ideas only, but those male chauvinist passages are strongly affected by cultural, such as Jewish or Greco-Roman considerations or arguments" (Ho Lai Han, "Regressive Development of Woman's Status in Pauline Epistles" [MA Thesis, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1993], 5).

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Osiek, "The Family in Early Christianity: 'Family Values' Revisited," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58, no.1 (1996): 8; Kari Syreeni, "Paul and Love Patriarchalism: Problems and Prospects," *In die Skriflig* 37, no.3 (2003): 396.

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and Ephesians 5:18-20. This led to an intense study of the authorship debate and to me coming to a different conclusion than the dominant position.<sup>5</sup> This then naturally led to a rereading of the two texts immediately after the worship texts, which are the household codes.

## Overview of the Authorship Debate

This section provides a relatively brief overview of the authorship debate, as I have dealt with this extensively in a previous essay.<sup>6</sup> At the moment, the dominant scholarly position is that Ephesians is a Deutero-Pauline document based on the letter to Colossians.<sup>7</sup> There is more debate about whether or not Colossians is a Pauline document, as the majority position is that Colossians, just like Ephesians has such a markedly different style, vocabulary, and theology, that it cannot have the same author as the undisputed Pauline letters.<sup>8</sup> The letter to the Colossians does treat Pauline themes, but it “fails to treat [them] in a typically Pauline manner.”<sup>9</sup> The letter omits key Pauline terms and introduces new terms which are not found in the undisputed Pauline letters<sup>10</sup> and has a markedly less polemical tone, in spite of trying to address a heresy.<sup>11</sup> Most striking is the very different style and sentence structure.<sup>12</sup> While the debate is not settled, the majority of current scholars follow the Deutero-Pauline conclusion.<sup>13</sup>

However, the Deutero-Pauline hypothesis raises as many new questions as it answers old ones, leading some scholars still to argue for a Pauline

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<sup>5</sup> J. Gertrud Tönsing, “‘The Spirit.’ Left Out and Then Reintroduced? A Study of Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18-19 in the Context of the Authorship Debate,” *Scriptura* 119, no.1 (2020): 1-17.

<sup>6</sup> Tönsing, “‘The Spirit.’ Left Out and Then Reintroduced?” 1-17.

<sup>7</sup> Morna D. Hooker, “Colossians,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D.G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 2003), 1404; Petr Pokorný, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Kolosser* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1987), 2-27.

<sup>8</sup> See an overview of the debate in Richard I. Pervo, *The Making of Paul – Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 60.

<sup>9</sup> Marianne M. Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*. The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 2005), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *Der Brief an die Kolosser* (Zürich: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976), 22; Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser, der Brief an Philemon* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1993), 27-9.

<sup>11</sup> Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser, der Brief an Philemon*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Eduard Lohse, *Die Briefe an die Kolosser und an Philemon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968), 254.

<sup>13</sup> Pervo, *The Making of Paul*, 60. Many contemporary scholars no longer debate the issue, which is the reason for the mainly older sources used above.

authorship of Colossians. For example: why would a Deutero-Pauline author choose a congregation which the apostle never visited, which was possibly at that time destroyed by an earthquake?<sup>14</sup> Was this a deliberate attempt to mask pseudonymity?<sup>15</sup> Why would such an author painstakingly imitate the greeting list of the rather obscure letter to Philemon, probably in an attempt to seem genuine, but then leave out the most characteristic phrases of Paul such as “justification by faith,” “grace,” “sin” (in the singular), “freedom,” and the “Holy Spirit?”<sup>16</sup> The omission of these phrases is an argument against Pauline authorship, but why would someone writing in the name of Paul not use them? Why would the person write that Paul is signing in his own hand (Col 4:18) when the letter to Philemon and other undisputed Pauline letters do not do so? Why would the author add into the greeting list comments about Mark (Col 4:10) at a time when a gospel with that name was already circulating? There is also a question that is very relevant to our text: why would the author have felt justified to invoke the authority of Paul in telling women to submit to their husbands? The questions are compounded when one begins to study Ephesians. This document seems to be a general circular letter, while all the undisputed Pauline epistles have specific addressees. The phrase ἐν Ἐφέσῳ is missing in the earliest manuscripts.<sup>17</sup> Why would an author choose such a general form, when claiming Pauline authority? It is very heavily based on Colossians, but changes it in crucial ways and brings no personal greetings to anyone. Ephesians reintroduces key Pauline terms, as if needing to correct Colossians (see later discussion), but if the author of Ephesians realised that Colossians was deficient in Pauline theology, why did that author base his writing on Colossians at all?

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<sup>14</sup> It seems that the city of Colossae, together with neighbouring cities, were destroyed by an earthquake in 61, but unlike Laodicea was never rebuilt. Schweizer argues that this would mean that the letter to the Colossians was either written before 61 or it was written to a congregation which no longer existed (Schweizer, *Der Brief an die Kolosser*, 23).

<sup>15</sup> This is argued by Robert M. Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 18. Wolter disputes the theory that Colossae was destroyed (Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser, der Brief an Philemon*, 35).

<sup>16</sup> Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser, der Brief an Philemon*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Examples are P46, as well as in the originals of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus and some other later manuscripts (6 and 1739, dated from the eighth and tenth centuries). See also Lilly Nortjé-Meyer and Alta Vrey, “Artemis as Matrix for a New Interpretation of the Household Codes in Ephesians 5:22-6:9,” *Neotestamentica* 50, no.1 (2016): 53-4.

In the general dispute between Pauline and non-Pauline authorship, a third position has emerged, which argues that Paul used a secretary, or that Colossians was written by Timothy, as his name appears as co-author on this and several other letters of Paul.<sup>18</sup> Arguments against this are that the letter is too different for Paul to be even an indirect author and that he would never have allowed someone to draft a letter in his name completely independently.<sup>19</sup> This article will argue that Paul did allow this, though it was not completely independent of his input, and in fact that he had little choice.

## **A Possible Scenario for the Origin of Colossians and Ephesians**

The close relationship between the letters to Colossians and Philemon with its overlap of greetings and the mentioning of Onesimus in Colossians 4:9, implies that the two letters were composed to be sent together. This is one of the main reasons for defending a Pauline authorship.<sup>20</sup> Proponents of a Deutero-Pauline authorship have not given plausible reasons for this similarity. The letter to Colossians mentions another letter, the one to the Laodiceans (Col 4:16), which is lost. Attempts to identify it with existing Pauline letters are all unconvincing.<sup>21</sup>

A careful reading of the letter to Philemon and the letter to the Colossians – particularly the household code with its strong emphasis on the behaviour of slaves – has led me to the following hypothesis: initially, Paul had no intention of sending Onesimus back to his owner and had to be persuaded to do so by his co-workers. This could have happened after quite an acrimonious exchange which included a letter to the Laodiceans, which was too controversial to be transmitted. (We know of another controversial letter which was probably not transmitted, mentioned in 2 Cor 2:3.) The controversy caused a restlessness both among the

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<sup>18</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1996), 38; Schweizer, *Der Brief an die Kolosser*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Lohse, *Die Briefe an die Kolosser und an Philemon*, 254.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> There have been many attempts to identify the letter to the Laodiceans with one of the canonical letters. This already began with Marcion who equated it with the letter to the Ephesians. Since then, other scholars have also done so. There have also been attempts to identify it with the letter to Philemon or the letter to the Hebrews. Nowadays, most scholars accept that the letter has been lost. See the discussion in Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser, der Brief an Philemon*, 220; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 287.

slave owners and the slaves in Christian households. Paul's co-workers were concerned about the good order in these congregations as well as the long-term influence of Paul and his teaching, and they persuaded him that it would be best for everyone if he sent Onesimus back. One can imagine that householders who owned slaves could have threatened to shut down house churches if Christians did not preserve the *status quo* on slavery. This is conjecture, but one can observe how reluctant the powerful are today to accept social change which is not in their favour – even if they are Christians – and how easy it is for them to thwart it. This is therefore a not too far-fetched hypothesis.

The argument that in the end could have won Paul over was his own text in Romans 13: *let everyone be subject to the governing authorities*. This text includes the verb ὑποτάσσω (*subject, subordinate*), which has gained much prominence in the household codes. This article wants to argue that Paul was persuaded by his own text and decided that in this situation, submission to authorities would mean sending Onesimus back and giving Philemon the power to decide over his fate – a fate which obviously Paul tried to influence positively in his letter to Philemon. While the verbal similarity to Romans 13 has often been commented on,<sup>22</sup> only a few commentators have regarded Romans 13 as a possible source text for the “household codes,” as they deal with different realms of society. However, it is not difficult to imagine how co-workers might have looked for ways in Paul's own writings to solve a difficult problem.

The hypothesis for the origin of Colossians is the following: to calm the troubled waves in the congregations, the co-workers suggested that Timothy, in discussion with Paul should draft a letter to the neighbouring congregation of Laodicea, i.e. Colossae, which was having their own troubles, and which had probably already heard of the story. In this way, Paul did not have to directly take back what he had written, which he probably would not have been willing to do. At the end of the letter, there is the request for an exchange of letters with Laodicea (Col 4:16). The injunction to Archippus in Colossians 4:17 might have to do with the Onesimus issue, as he is included as addressee in the letter to Philemon (Phm 2). The letter to the Colossians is a general letter about the Lordship of Christ, and a warning against false teachings, which tries to phrase general Pauline emphases in a less controversial way, without

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<sup>22</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Der Brief an die Epheser*, Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar, Vol. 10 (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1982), 250.

using concepts like “freedom from the law” and the Holy Spirit as equaliser. An important element in “calming the waves” was the address to both slaves and slave owners, a clear indication to the congregations that Paul was not going to overturn the order of society. This was formulated in the household code.

Obviously, this is a hypothesis which needs to be carefully tested from all angles. An unrelated factor which might speak in its favour is the fact that scholars have been unable to agree on the purpose of the letter to the Colossians. While many commentaries state that the primary purpose of the letter was to combat a dangerous false teaching,<sup>23</sup> there is no agreement on what this false teaching was. In his commentary, O'Brien discusses an exhaustive study done in 1973 by John Gunther, where he lists 44 different suggestions from nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars as to what this dangerous teaching was. O'Brien comments that there has been no more agreement since.<sup>24</sup> The fact that there is a lack of polemic and argumentative style in Colossians (quoted in defence of a Deutero-Pauline authorship), is also surprising if this was the primary purpose of the letter. This would support the hypothesis that the primary purpose of Colossians was not to attack a false teaching at all, but to defend the position of Paul and to soothe troubled waters.

## Possible Origin of the Household Codes

Much has been written about the origin of these codes and their parallels to the threefold structure of the household in the Graeco-Roman society.<sup>25</sup> Parallels have been found in the writings of the Stoics, in some Jewish Hellenistic literature, and in Aristotle who refers to a household management or *oikonomia*.<sup>26</sup> However, it is always pointed out that the

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<sup>23</sup> Lohse, *Die Briefe an die Kolosser und an Philemon*, 28; Pokorný, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Kolosser*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 44 (Waco: Word Books, 1982), xxxi.

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management: Reading the Household Codes in Light of Recent Methodologies and Theoretical Perspectives in the Study of the New Testament,” *New Testament Studies* 57, no.1 (2011): 66; Elna Mouton, “Reimagining Ancient Household Ethos?” *Neotestamentica* 48, no.1 (2014): 167; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 243.

<sup>26</sup> Lisa Marie Belz, “The Rhetoric of Gender in the Household of God: Ephesians 5:21-33 and Its Place in Pauline Tradition,” *Loyola University Chicago ECommons*, 2013, 4; Russ Dudrey, “‘Submit Yourselves to One Another:’ A Socio-Historical Look at the Household Code of Ephesians 5:15-6:9,” *Restoration Quarterly* 41 (1999), 28; Evan B.

household code in Colossians (which most authors agree is the earliest known Christian version) is very different, in that it does not only address the *paterfamilias*, but also the subordinates as active subjects.<sup>27</sup> Romans 13 has not been regarded as a source text for the household codes (cf. previous section).

Even if Paul was not the author of Colossians, or his co-workers, and it was a Deutero-Pauline author, Romans 13 would still have been a plausible reason for producing the household codes as a contextualisation of “submission to authorities.” This would have conferred some legitimacy on claiming a Pauline authority. However, if it was Deutero-Pauline, one would need to explain why the same letter reminds people of one slave treated as a dear brother, while telling other slaves to submit. It makes more sense as a way of persuading slave-owners that the special treatment of a run-away slave who had become as dear to Paul as a personal son (Phm 10), would not have negative consequences for them in the long term. It is likely that Paul was persuaded by his co-workers that leniency for Onesimus could result in revolt and very harsh treatment for other slaves and that it was better to prevent that.

It is thus argued here that the author of Colossians was the creator of the genre *Christian household code* and did not take over a pre-existing form. The author probably did not want to single out slaves and therefore contextualised Romans 13 into the familiar threefold form of the Graeco-Roman household structure.<sup>28</sup> However, it is very clear that the Colossian code (Col 3:18-4:1) was primarily addressed to slaves. Single verses are dedicated to women (Col 3:18), men (Col 3:19), children (Col 3:20), and fathers (Col 3:21). A longer verse is dedicated to masters (Col 4:1), while slaves are addressed in four longer verses (Col 3:22-25). This has not been explained by those who argue for the origin of the Christian household codes to be in the Graeco-Roman *oikonomia*.<sup>29</sup>

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Connock and Fika J. van Rensburg, “The Literary Context of the Husband-Wife Code in the New Testament,” *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 12, no.1 (2001): 75.

<sup>27</sup> Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser, der Brief an Philemon*, 194; Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Household Code and Wisdom Mode of Colossians,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 74 (1999): 101.

<sup>28</sup> It is clear that they must have been familiar with the threefold structure as, for example Connock and Van Rensburg argue. However, this does not mean that they adapted a pre-existent Christian form. This seems to have been an original creation (cf. Connock and Van Rensburg, “The Literary Context of the Husband-Wife Code,” 78-9).

<sup>29</sup> Dunn tries to explain the emphasis on slaves without referring to Onesimus. He states that the emphasis “probably shows that there were more slaves than masters in that

The hypothesis above has argued that Paul initially did not want to send Onesimus back. The fact that the letter to the Colossians avoids terms like “freedom” and “justification,” would suggest that Paul argued for the physical freedom of Onesimus. His focus on being one in Christ and the sentence in Galatians that there is neither slave nor free (Gal 3:28), which is repeated in Colossians 3:11, would imply that he supported the manumission of Christian slaves. In 1 Corinthians 7:17-24, where he argues that everyone should stay in their station, he expressly states that if a slave can obtain freedom, they should take the opportunity (1 Cor 7:21).

If the lost letter to the Laodiceans indeed contained such sentiments, it is obvious that this would have caused a restlessness among both slaves and slave owners. The appeal to slaves in the household codes would then have been an attempt to prevent slaves from revolting and masters from retaliating harshly, which would undoubtedly have happened. Paul was probably convinced by his co-workers that it was preferable to persuade slaves to wait for their reward in heaven than to risk violence if they revolted.<sup>30</sup> It is likely that Paul’s words in Romans 13 were borne from a similar concern: revolt against Rome was unwinnable (as indeed was shown in the Jewish war) and revolt against slave owners would be just as suicidal. These words, which were probably initially intended to be cautionary, were then taken as prescriptive by the church for centuries.

It has often been argued that the codes were a call for Christians to adapt to the surrounding society so as not to cause offense.<sup>31</sup> However, the letter repeatedly refers to Paul’s chains and his suffering, and his imprisonment for not conforming (Col 1:24; 4:10, 18). Conforming to society for the sake of avoiding persecution could not be the goal of the codes. Adaptation to society was the result of the codes, though it was

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congregation...Perhaps we can infer that Christian slaves needed greater encouragement to live out a positive relation to their non-Christian masters than the Christian masters to their slaves” (Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 254, 259). This assumes a confidence that Christian masters would usually treat their slaves fairly, a confidence that is unfortunately not borne out by history.

<sup>30</sup> Dudrey argues that he “is a social realist rather than idealist,” and that “liberationism” would have undermined the effectiveness of his ministry as it was politically dangerous (Dudrey, “Submit Yourselves to One Another,” 42).

<sup>31</sup> See the discussion in MacDonald, “Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management,” 78.

probably not initially intended to be. The concern was primarily the conflict within the Christian house churches which contained both slaves and slave owners. The codes have also been regarded as an attempt to show that Christian faith was not the same as “other-worldliness” or the need to be ascetic.<sup>32</sup> However, there is no clear case that this is what the Colossian false teachers were saying.

The above argument implies that women and marriage were not really the focus of the household code in Colossians. They were included only to construct a more generalised context for the specific appeal to the slaves. Only fathers were addressed in the section on the family. However, it is likely that the letter to the Colossians stirred up new controversies, particularly the question around women and marriage. The focus decisively shifted in the code in Ephesians.

## **The Letter to the Ephesians**

Scholars who are studying the letter to the Ephesians are mostly struck by its close and yet strange relationship with the letter to the Colossians. It contains passages that are almost verbally the same, but with crucial and marked changes, leading many scholars to argue that it cannot have been written by the same author.<sup>33</sup> The style is even further removed from Paul, though many of his theological terms are present, while they are absent in Colossians. It almost seems as if the letter to the Ephesians is trying to “correct” or “revise” Colossians.<sup>34</sup> The close relationship with Colossians is one of the reasons why most scholars reject a Pauline authorship. Why would Paul quote another letter so closely? It is much more likely that another author would do that. However, to merely argue that Ephesians – or both letters for that matter – is Deutero-Pauline, does not in itself explain the relationship between the two letters in a satisfactory way. The attempts at explaining, for example that “the author of Ephesians knew Colossians so well that phrases freely flowed into his pen,”<sup>35</sup> leave the question open why there are frequent allusions to other Pauline letters, but no verbatim quotes from other letters. Claiming that these were two scholars from the same Pauline school who shared a

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<sup>32</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1991), 177.

<sup>33</sup> Schnackenburg, *Der Brief an die Epheser*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Belz, “The Rhetoric of Gender in the Household of God,” 42; Andreas Lindemann, *Der Epheserbrief*, Zürcher Bibelkommentare, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Schnackenburg, *Der Brief an die Epheser*, 29.

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language and vocabulary, does not account for the big differences between the two letters.<sup>36</sup>

If the above hypothesis about the origin of Colossians and its household code is correct, what could this mean for the authorship of Ephesians and its household code?

It is possible that the letter exchange around Onesimus' return would have managed to calm some troubles in the congregations, to the detriment of the hopes of the slaves. The conflicts around slavery would have continued to simmer, but ultimately were decisively settled in favour of the powerful. It is likely that Paul himself and some of his co-workers were probably not very happy with the watering down of his theology in the letter to the Colossians and the omission of key concepts. However, another latent conflict could have erupted into the open in reaction to the household code in the letter to the Colossians: the question about the role of women and Christian marriage.<sup>37</sup>

There were many powerful women in leadership positions in the early Christian house churches. One example is Nympha who had a house church in Laodicea. She was singled out for a special greeting among the group in Laodicea: *Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house* (Col 4:15). Would such a woman have meekly accepted the call to submit? The hypothesis of this article is that the controversies which were generated by the letter to the Colossians – in particular the first household code, as well as the discomfort of Paul and the co-workers with having watered down his theology in the first letter – led directly to the writing of the letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians is a measured, carefully composed general letter, possibly workshopped by several co-workers together with Paul. It calls for unity and tries to formulate the Pauline concepts in ways which would be acceptable to the mainstream congregations. It draws heavily on Colos-

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<sup>36</sup> E. Best, "Who Used Whom? The Relationship of Ephesians and Colossians," *New Testament Studies* 43, no.1 (1997): 72-96.

<sup>37</sup> According to David G. Horrell, there are only isolated instances of "households" being an important category in the genuine Pauline letters, which more commonly use sibling language. With Colossians and Ephesians, the household became a crucial metaphor for Christian communities (David G. Horrell, "From Ἀδελφοί to οἶκος θεοῦ: Social Transformation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120 [2001]: 304-5).

sians in ways that suggest that the co-workers have kept a copy of the “first consensus document” – but modified its formulations in crucial ways. It also draws on most of Paul’s other letters, but in ways that were acceptable to the average Christian in the congregations in Asia Minor. For example, “justification by faith apart from the works of the law” (Rom 3:28) becomes “salvation by grace for good works” (Eph 2:8-10). The Holy Spirit becomes the “Spirit of wisdom and revelation” (Eph 1:17), not concerned with breaking down social hierarchies but with guaranteeing a good and ethical Christian living, being “grieved” by unethical behaviour (Eph 4:30).

Commentators have often spoken about the liturgical language of Ephesians<sup>38</sup> and it would have made sense to draw on liturgical formulations to try and show that Paul’s thoughts in the letter to the Ephesians are consistent with other Christian traditional teachings. The letter to the Ephesians draws on many Pauline letters and also makes use of Jewish traditions.<sup>39</sup> In such a scenario, the main purpose of the letter would be to save Paul’s legacy, and for that reason only Paul’s name is in the title line. It was probably a general letter to congregations in Asia Minor, but it is likely that it was the Ephesian congregation that was most active in preserving and promoting it, not having other Pauline letters addressed to them, leading to the association of this name with the letter.

## **The Ephesian Household Code**

Here it will be argued that one needs to read the Ephesian household code as a modified version after the reactions to the first code. Such reactions are likely to have been positive from the male heads of the households and negative from the woman leaders in the early churches. The Ephesian code does not take back the call to women to submit but tries to modify and explain what is meant by this. In doing this, the Ephesian code has probably developed the first Christian teaching on marriage, which was well-intended and far ahead of the average Jewish or Graeco-Roman views on marital relations, but which did cement the

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<sup>38</sup> Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, “Should Wives ‘Submit Graciously?’ A Feminist Approach to Interpreting Ephesians 5:21-33,” *Review and Expositor* 98, no.2 (2001), 267.

<sup>39</sup> J. Paul Sampley, “*And the Two Shall Become One Flesh*” – A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21-33, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

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hierarchies between husbands and wives and opened up the way to pushing back the gains that women had made in the early churches.

The differences between the codes in Colossians and Ephesians make sense if read against such a possible background, as depicted in the next sections.

### ***Slaves and Masters***

This section only differs in minor ways within the two letters. In Colossians 3:25 the phrase about there being “no favouritism” is found under the section on slaves, but it is ambiguous and could refer to slaves or masters. In the Ephesian code, this ambiguity is removed and the phrase on favouritism appears under the section on masters (Eph 6:9).<sup>40</sup> This seems to indicate that slaves had resigned themselves to the fact that Paul’s authority would not further advance their cause.

### ***Children and Parents***

The section on children obeying parents is markedly longer in Ephesians (6:1-3) than in Colossians (3:20) and is expanded with an Old Testament verse which includes mothers by name. However, while the part addressed to the children has the neutral term “parent” (γονεῦσιν – Eph 6:1), the verse about fathers (Eph 6:4) uses the male term πατέρες.

### ***Wives***

It is the section on wives and husbands which has been much expanded. The injunction to the wives has expanded from one verse to three. The authors of Ephesians reinforce the call to submit with the Pauline example from 1 Corinthians 11:3. Just as in the case of Romans 13, the examples to reinforce the traditional social order are to be found in Paul’s previous letters. This chapter in 1 Corinthians demonstrates that Paul was concerned about women causing disorder in worship, although he respected the female leaders. We do not know how easy it could have been for his co-workers to convince him to reinforce the call for women to submit, but it is probable that this is what happened.

### ***Husbands***

The section on husbands has expanded from one verse in Colossians to nine verses in Ephesians. This shows very clearly who the primary

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<sup>40</sup> Angela Standhartinger, “The Origin and Intention of the Household Code in the Letter to the Colossians,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 79 (2000), 128.

addressee is of the Ephesian household code, though this is not generally acknowledged. The primary purpose of the Ephesian household code seems to be to instruct husbands as to how to treat their wives and to deflect the probable criticism by the women that the Colossian household code has opened the way for men to abuse their power.

In nine verses, men are told to love their wives, and the verb that is used here is *ἀγαπάω* (referring to Christian love and respect – Eph 5:25), and not a verb like *πυπόμαι* (used by Paul in 1 Cor 7:9, referring to sexual desire). This is self-giving love, not a love that uses someone for one's own pleasure. The short injunction in Colossians, *Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them* (Col 3:19), uses the same term, but was acknowledged as not sufficiently strong to prevent misuse.

It is interesting to see that in the appeal to husbands, the code first speaks of the love of Christ (Eph 5:25), but then continues to argue that loving and caring for the wife is a form of self-love: *He who loves his wife loves himself* (Eph 5:28). This does seem to show a realistic worry, that Christ's example was not enough to combat potential male aggression. Unfortunately, this concern was borne out by the subsequent church history. The example of Christ's love for the church, which was a self-sacrificial love and not a dominating love, was unfortunately also subverted to cement a hierarchy. The relationship between Christ and his church is not an equal one, so it is assumed that the relationship between man and wife can also not be equal.<sup>41</sup> In the same way that Christians submit to Christ, women should submit to men. The bridal imagery of purity has also been an enduringly oppressive one to women (Eph 5:26-27).

It is almost touching to see the effort made in this household code to combat the possible negative effects of reinforcing the traditional hierarchies. There was probably a similar concern about women's emancipation as about restless slaves – a feeling that this battle was unwinnable and would result in a violent male backlash. However, the writers of Ephesians were probably convinced that this was not only a needed compromise, but in the long term, the only way for the church to survive in the world of the time, and that the traditional hierarchies were God's way to stabilise the society.

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her – A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1987), 269.

### **Mutual Submission**

The clearest sign that the writers of Ephesians were not intending to give the husbands a free reign to dominate, is the verse on mutual submission in Ephesians 5:21. This is a verse which some Bibles (and commentators) include at the end of the section on worship, while others put it as the heading of the household code. The Greek grammar shows that it can (and is probably intended to) be both. There is no active verb in that sentence, only a participle. Lisa Marie Belz argues that this shows that the whole household code is subordinate to the principle of mutual submission. She literally translates the passage of Ephesians 5:17-24 as follows:

<sup>17</sup>Therefore, do not be foolish but be perceptive as to what is the will of the Lord, <sup>18</sup>and do not be drunk with wine, in which is debauchery, but instead be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup>speaking to one another with psalms and hymns and inspired songs, singing and playing songs of praise to the Lord from the heart, <sup>20</sup>always giving thanks to our God and Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup>being subordinate to each other in the fear of Christ, <sup>22</sup>wives to your own husbands as to the Lord, <sup>23</sup>because a husband is the head of his wife as is also Christ the head of the Church, himself savior of the body, <sup>24</sup>but as the Church is subordinated to Christ, so also wives to their husbands in everything.<sup>42</sup>

Verse 22, which calls on wives to submit, has no imperative in the oldest Greek manuscripts.<sup>43</sup> However, later an imperative was added and, in most translations, verse 21 has been separated from the household code.

Just as Paul and his co-workers did not have the power to push for an end to slavery and settled on trying to limit its misuse, they were not able to push for full equality between men and women. Whether Paul would have wanted that, can be debated, but it is likely that the co-workers wanted a position that was more acceptable to the mainstream congre-

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<sup>42</sup> Belz, "The Rhetoric of Gender in the Household of God," 54. See also Katinka Nadine and Ellen Evers, "A Key and Classic Text: Ephesians 5:21-33," School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses, 2006, 7.

<sup>43</sup> P46 and Vaticanus omit the imperative. Sinaiticus already had the addition which became part of the Majority Text.

gations. They did not reverse the statement about the submission of women and kept the hierarchy intact. However, they tried to limit its misuse by placing it into a context of voluntary Christ-like humility and mutual submission. In its intention, the verse of mutual submission was a heading which should modify everything that follows it. However, because the politically impossible phrases, “husbands, submit to your wives,” or “husbands and wives are equal,” could not be included, the heading was easily ignored and eventually relegated to the previous paragraph. It is unfortunate that the Ephesian household code had only limited success in stopping the misuse of male power and was easily used to enable it, even though it probably had more benevolent intentions.

## **The Effect of the Household Codes**

Did the household codes open up possibilities for more equality in Christian marriages than what was normal in the Graeco-Roman society,<sup>44</sup> or did it move the early church backwards from what were more egalitarian beginnings?<sup>45</sup> The truth is probably more complex than either of these simple questions.

Kari Syreeni, warning about the oversimplification of complex historical processes, argues:

In addition to the deterministic bent, the risk I find especially impending in this case is that the trajectory conforms to a stereotyped plot which, depending on the interpreter, proceeds from paradise to fall or from youthful idealism to mature adulthood, with the end relating to the beginning either as a lump to the unholy leaven or as a great tree to a small seed. That makes a good story and an interesting scholarly case, but historical change is mostly a complex phenomenon, allowing many more stories.<sup>46</sup>

While women were very active in the early church, their participation was probably always controversial and contested, as it is clear in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. The article has tried to argue that the Ephesian code has cemented the traditional hierarchies while trying to combat the abuse of the man as being in the dominant position. There are both

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<sup>44</sup> Syreeni, “Paul and Love Patriarchalism,” 419.

<sup>45</sup> This is argued extensively in Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 249-79.

<sup>46</sup> Syreeni, “Paul and Love Patriarchalism,” 399.

“culturally compliant and culturally resistant elements” in the Ephesian code.<sup>47</sup> Only some of these will be highlighted in the following sections.

### ***Culturally Resistant Elements***

First, women are addressed as subjects, and not simply as a class of property. It is no longer simply the duty of the male heads of the house to ensure the well-being of the household.<sup>48</sup> The women are addressed first.

Second, the long instruction to men on how they should treat their wives, undercuts the assumption that a woman belongs to a man and he can treat her in whatever way he pleases. Carol Schlueter points out that the Ephesian code places more responsibility on the man than on anyone else. The others in the code can act in the way that society expects. Men need to learn a “new way of being.”<sup>49</sup>

Third, while the comparison of the husband to Christ could cause problems, the “Christ” portrayed here is not the ruling but the serving, self-sacrificial Christ. The leadership that the husband should exercise is therefore not dominating, but servant leadership.<sup>50</sup>

Fourth, the term “love” binds the code in the entire letter to Ephesians with its focus on unity, mutuality, and peace. Everything needs to be read in the context of particularly Ephesians 5:21 – loving each other as you love yourself. In the rest of the letter, everyone is addressed as “equally worthy members of God’s household.”<sup>51</sup>

Fifth is the focus on mutual submission. This, as argued in the previous section was intended to be an introduction to the entire code, relativising the hierarchies contained therein. The call to a mutual submission was “startlingly different”<sup>52</sup> from what the Graeco-Roman society taught about the household.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> MacDonald, “Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management,” 67.

<sup>48</sup> MacDonald, “Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management,” 72; Mouton, “Reimagining Ancient Household Ethos?” 178.

<sup>49</sup> Carol J. Schlueter, “Revitalizing Interpretations of Ephesians 5:22,” *Pastoral Psychology* 45 (1997), 330.

<sup>50</sup> Mouton, “Reimagining Ancient Household Ethos?” 180.

<sup>51</sup> Mouton, “Reimagining Ancient Household Ethos?” 171.

<sup>52</sup> Dudrey, “Submit Yourselves to One Another,” 40.

<sup>53</sup> Campbell-Reed, “Should Wives ‘Submit Graciously?’” 270.

### **Culturally Compliant**

First, the code appropriates the symbol of the “head” from 1 Corinthians 11. In this passage, Paul is clearly setting up a hierarchy: God, Christ, man, and woman. This makes it difficult to defend the notion that the original genuinely Pauline tradition was always egalitarian. There have been attempts to make the “head” less of a hierarchical symbol. Joe Trull argues that “head” refers to origins and is a symbol of unity and mutuality.<sup>54</sup> Even if this was intended, there is no doubt about the way in which the term was generally understood in the Pauline texts. In the Ephesian code, this image is very clear in its intent – finding a theological reason for reinforcing the superior standing of the man.<sup>55</sup> Chris De Wet describes how the earthly *paterfamilias* became the “duplicate of Christ and his authority,” and that every other authority was devolved from this in a hierarchical order.<sup>56</sup>

Second, particularly as the writers of Ephesians seemed to be so clearly aware of the dangers of abuse, the phrase “be subject in everything” (Eph 5:24) is baffling. It is based on its parallel, that the church must be subject in everything to Christ. But this leads to equating Christ as head (a non-abusive servant leader) with the man as the head, who is clearly not always non-abusive. Steven Tracy argues that the authority of the man is limited by the Lordship of Christ,<sup>57</sup> and this was clearly the intention. However, the phrase “in everything” placed no limit on subjection, not even where it would violate the will of God. This phraseology was more clearly heard than its limiting context, and it was extremely damaging over centuries.

Third, the bridal image which is first used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:2, led to the parallel Christ-church/man-woman. It used the imagery of purity and being “holy and without blemish” which plays into the patriarchal ideology of sexual purity which was extremely oppressive to women, as the standard for women was always different from that applied to men, and the women were often blamed, even for being violated. While this passage is actually talking about the church, it tries to

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<sup>54</sup> Joe E. Trull, “Is the Head of the House at Home?” *Priscilla Papers* 14, no.3 (2000): 5-6.

<sup>55</sup> Syreeni, “Paul and Love Patriarchalism,” 418.

<sup>56</sup> Chris L. de Wet, “The Deutero-Pauline and Petrine Haustafeln: Early Christian Oikonomia, Pastoral Governmentality and Slave-Management,” *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 94 (2012): 399.

<sup>57</sup> Tracy, “What Does ‘Submit in Everything’ Really Mean?” 298-300.

engender nurturing and protective feelings in the man, but at the expense of demeaning the woman and making her less of a subject of her own destiny.

Fourth, the institution of marriage is grounded in creation and not simply in the social order.<sup>58</sup> In the context of hierarchy, it meant that the more egalitarian Genesis 1:27 – where both male and female were created in the image of God – is side-lined in favour of Genesis 2:22-24 where the woman was derived from the man. This too is an argument in 1 Corinthians 11, but the Ephesian code only alludes to verses 8 and 9 and not the more egalitarian counterargument that follows in verses 11 and 12.

As much as the Ephesian code was probably an attempt to limit misuse, the two household codes in Colossians and Ephesians without a doubt played an important part in cementing the hierarchical structures of society. The comparison of Christ and church to husband and wife set up a hierarchy which could no longer be eradicated. Although the “mutual submission” sentence at the beginning tries to place the whole code into a more egalitarian setting, the spirit of the verse in Galatians 3:28, [7]here is no male or female, was irreversibly compromised. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes that the “christological modification of the husband’s patriarchal position and duties does not have the power, theologically, to transform the patriarchal pattern of the household code, even though this might have been the intention of the author. Instead, Ephesians christologically cements the inferior position of the wife in the marriage relationship.”<sup>59</sup> Undoubtedly, Paul and his co-workers would have believed this to be necessary. It is impossible to state whether or not they hoped that it would be temporary. They were people of their time and must have believed that this was the only way to regain unity and peace.

How would women like Nympha and others have reacted to the code in Ephesians? They were probably satisfied to some extent that the potential for abuse that they had sensed in the Colossians code was somewhat dampened. However, the continuing development of the church makes it unlikely that they have accepted this as a permanent and inevitable compromise. The later hard-hitting texts particularly in the Pastoral Letters make it likely that the controversy only got more intense as the

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<sup>58</sup> Nadine and Evers, “A Key and Classic Text,” 11.

<sup>59</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 270.

years went by. In the end, independent women's leadership was suppressed completely, and as we all know, many men have been very good at quoting verses 22 to 24 and ignoring the verses addressed to them.

## **A Deutero-Pauline Reading of the Household Codes**

This article has argued that both Colossians and Ephesians were written by co-workers with the cooperation of Paul during the time of his Roman imprisonment. However, some of the above arguments can also be accepted even if one holds to the hypothesis of a Deutero-Pauline authorship, that is if one dates the letters to the late first or early second century. If Colossians was written by a Deutero-Pauline author, it must have been someone who wanted to draw on Paul's teachings in a conflict-ridden time while downplaying his more controversial theology. Whatever may have prompted the writing of Colossians, it must have been during a time when the question of the status of Christian slaves had grown acute. If groups of Pauline followers were studying his letters during this time, they would have come across both the letter to the Romans with its call to submit to authorities and the letter to Philemon with the request to accept the runaway slave back "as a brother" (Phm 16). The letter to the Colossians may have been an attempt to reconcile these two positions. In the early church, there was no dispute about Colossians and Ephesians, as they were accepted as an authoritative part of the Pauline collection. This may have been a result of a successful reconciliation of opposing positions – again ultimately to the detriment of slaves and women.

Once Colossians was circulating and becoming accepted as part of the Pauline tradition, groups of Pauline scholars could have realised the shortcomings of the letter to the Colossians in terms of a Pauline theology as well as the need to address the issues of women and marriage more thoroughly. The need to draft a letter which rephrased the Pauline theology in a way that could unify the church would have led to the general circular letter that later became known as the letter to the Ephesians. There is no doubt that Ephesians became a very influential letter. In all collections it is placed at the head of the prison epistles.

## **Conclusion**

The intention of this article was to open up a new way to understand the disputed Pauline letters, Colossians and Ephesians, trying to find a

reason why the form “household code” came to be such a prominent part of Christian tradition, for better or for worse. A lot more testing of this hypothesis needs to be done, particularly in determining whether it can make sense of the similarities and differences in parallel texts in Colossians and Ephesians.

An important assumption at the base of this hypothesis is that early Christian documents were not written by scholars who were abstractly reflecting on theological issues, but in the furnace of the conflicts of a new movement trying to define its identity and practices in a hostile environment. It makes Paul and his co-workers and all early Christian theologians human, people reactive to pressure and change, and in search of greater unity. This may open up new ways of appropriating their legacy in more positive and less oppressive ways. The codes should not be read as static prescriptions for today, but as a dynamic mirror on early Christian conflicts. We can learn to appreciate the difficulties of the early church and their ways of trying to find a way to be Christian in the world. Our ways can be inspired by theirs, but are allowed to, and need to be our own. We can and should move beyond what may have been a necessary compromise in that situation, but which was never intended to be a prescription for all times.

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