



WEAKER VESSELS

Additional Note # 2 for *Scattered Bible Study #8* (1 Peter 3:1-7)

[This is an extract from Michael L Drake *The Misted World of Genesis One* Wycliffe Scholastic, Auckland, 2017, pages 205-208. Available as a *Kindle* e-book at <https://www.amazon.com/Misted-World-Genesis-One-ebook/dp/B076547K42>]

In 1 Peter 3:7, Peter calls wives “weaker vessels.” Is such a comment a put-down of women? No. Peter is identifying a characteristic of wives that is, according to the text, worthy of honour. In any biblical context, honour is accorded that which is honourable. It is not made worthy of honour by being honoured, but is honoured because it is worthy of honour. Nor is this some sort of gratuitous compensation for actually being less worthy. It is giving honour because honour is due. Wives are to be regarded as weaker vessels, and on that basis they are to be honoured. Their “weakness,” whatever that is, is an honourable thing, on account of which wives are to be actively accorded honour by their own husbands.

The likely reaction to this in contemporary culture is hesitation, cringe, or outright rejection as if in identifying wives as “weaker vessels” they are demeaned in some way. Yet that can hardly be the case, for it is because they are “weaker vessels” that they are worthy of honour. Whatever it is then that makes wives “weaker vessels,” it is something of value, something good, something to be treasured and nurtured, something worthy of respect and honour.

The NIV uses “respect” for “honour.” It would appear that “respect” is included in the concept but that on its own is too reserved for the context here, in which “honouring” is surely more than an attitude, and even more than respectful conduct, but an active attributing to the wife of honour. For a comparison, consider the difference between respecting God (in which cognisance is taken of who he is and how we conduct ourselves in his presence) and honouring God (in which our actions and words are directed to God in a manner that brings him praise and worship). So husbands are to actively give honour to their wives because of their “weakness.”

As always, the context is important. Here Peter is addressing the issue of the relationship of men and women in their marriages. It may be that there are general applications in this verse for understanding distinctives in gender and relationships. But the starting point is the relationship of a husband to his wife in marriage. Peter’s injunction is not a generalised one for all men to treat all women in a particular way, albeit there may be some such extrapolation available to the text. Peter addresses each husband with regard to his own wife. His concern is that each husband should actively accord his own wife honour, because she is the “weaker” of the two “vessels.” In what way?

Some see the weakness in terms of vulnerability to abuse, in that the submission enjoined in the previous verses could, if misapplied, leave the wife open to such abuse. While that is a valid concern, it does not appear to be what Peter is addressing here. It is difficult to see why a man would praise his wife because she is potentially vulnerable to his abuse. Others align this weakness to a claim, based on a gross misapplication of 1 Timothy 2:14, that women are more prone to sin than men. That fits neither 1 Timothy nor 1 Peter, for 1 Timothy is discussing the exercise of teaching authority in the church, and as already noted, 1 Peter is not discussing any impropriety but the very opposite: the need to give honour because honour is due.

The word translated “weakness” here is used with a range of meanings in the New Testament, always with some comparative sense of lack of strength. It can refer to inability to combat more powerful spiritual forces¹ but more commonly to an immaturity in faith² or spiritual effectiveness (actual³ or apparent⁴). It is also used for disease,⁵ sickness⁶ or basic physical weakness.⁷ And there are those passages where it could be either or both physical and spiritual, such as in Paul’s reference to a “thorn in the flesh.”⁸ That “thorn” which reinforces to him his “weakness” is likely some physical impediment that is having a spiritual impact.

That the “weakness” characteristic of wives is a thing of honour however, suggests that those uses indicating some form of spiritual deficiency, physical disability, or less than desirable maturity, just don’t fit. None are praiseworthy, albeit the manner in which such things are borne may well be. The only thing that might fit from this list is physical weakness, which in and of itself casts no aspersions on anyone other than those wanting to be recognised for outstanding bodily strength. Even so, why would physical weakness be a thing of praise?

Is Peter really asserting that to be an honoured wife a woman must necessarily be physically weaker than her husband? It is true that in general men are physically stronger than women, so it can be expected and observed that most husbands are physical stronger than their wives. Could it be that Peter is teaching that God has gifted husbands with a strength that fits them for their purpose of “husbanding”; wives have been fitted with something other than strength that fits them for “wifing,” making that worthy of praise? Husbands often have physical strength wives characteristically do not have, but in its place wives can be deemed to have an honourable weakness that is fitting for their calling. Generally, husbands are masculine, wives are not – not merely in lacking physical strength, but in possessing “the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.”⁹ Wives’ lack of masculinity *and* their contrasting attribute of femininity is a gifting of value that their husbands should treasure and honour. But that interpretation of Peter’s identifying wives as weaker vessels only works for a marriage in which the wife is actually physically weaker than the husband. It would make invalid any marriage in which the wife was physically stronger than the husband. Worse, it just doesn’t fit the context Peter is addressing in his letter.

Vessels of Purpose

Word studies like this do little on their own to define the sense intended in a particular passage. Context, vocabulary, and concepts of the whole passage most likely indicate which of a range of semantic meanings is intended. Because of our cultural setting we are inclined to focus on the “weakness” but Peter links it to “vessel.” Therein lies more than a clue.

We tend to think of a vessel as a container, but New Testament usage predominantly has in mind not merely containing, but function, utility and purpose. In other words, when Peter refers to husbands and wives as “vessels” it is unlikely he views them as containers of – or receptacles for – something of value. Rather, he views them as possessing qualities of value that have honourable *purpose*.

By referring to husbands and wives as “vessels” there is both a sense of purpose in their being, and a sense of their having been created with that purpose. Both are called and equipped by God to serve God: they are both vessels through which God is working out his purposes. One is a vessel of headship and the other a vessel of submission.

¹ Matthew 26:41

² 1 Corinthians 8 & 9

³ Galatians 4:9; Hebrews 7:18

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:27

⁵ Acts 28:39

⁶ Numerous instances including Matthew 25:36; Philippians 2:26,27

⁷ Hebrews 11:30

⁸ 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

⁹ 1 Peter 3:4

Peter has just addressed the issue of slaves, who are instructed to submit to their masters, good and bad alike.¹⁰ The slaves are in a weaker position in the relationship than their masters, not because of abuse (albeit some slaves are, Peter acknowledges, subject to abusive masters) but simply because a place of submission is one where preference and assertion give place to submission and service. He then points to Christ who submitted himself to abuse for our sakes without retaliating or threatening, entrusting “himself to him who judges justly.”¹¹ Again, it is a relationship in which the one who is in submissive service exhibits a weakness in authority and power, sacrificing self for the good of those served, while trusting God to resolve any injustice involved. Then as Peter turns to wives, it is firstly to wives who are in submission to unbelieving husbands: theirs is to be a gentle submissive service of a quiet spirit. In comparison to their husbands, such wives are on the weaker side of a relationship that requires headship by one and submission by another. So they are to put their trust in God and adorn themselves with gracious and winsome helping.

It is in this context that Peter instructs husbands to honour their wives as the weaker vessels. In the relationship in which they offer submission, wives are dependent on the decisions and leadership of their husbands in all their strengths and weaknesses. The leadership a husband gives, the decisions he makes, and the way he does those things impact on his wife through her willing submission. So each husband is to *honour* his wife: he is to lead her with the deliberate intent of doing good to her and for her. He is to honour her with an awareness of his wife’s dependence upon his words, actions and attitudes. She is worthy of honour because in herself and in her submission is treasure beyond measure. Such honouring, I would suggest, will not only seek to do and say what benefits his wife, and will not only make known to her and to others how greatly he esteems her, but will mine his wife’s wisdom and grace for help that he might otherwise fail to accept from a vessel who exhibits service and submission in place of assertion and control.

Wives’ weakness is not a flaw. Nor is it an absolute, but a comparative weakness in the relationship of husband and wife. Wives are not to be pitied or abused as if they have an undignified weakness, but honoured because they give place to their husbands. This is indeed a weakness that is dignified by femininity: but it is the femininity of a helper of Christ-modelling service and submission that is not necessarily linked to the superficial behaviours any particular culture might expect women to exhibit. So the outstanding wife of Proverbs 31 is unmistakably a woman, is unmistakably her husband’s helper, is unmistakably industrious and multi-skilled, is unmistakably involved in the management of business and staff, is unmistakably a decision-maker and trader, and is unmistakably honoured by a husband who trusts her.

How is a husband’s honour to be given? In the same way we honour God. How do we honour God? By faithful service, by clarity of testimony to others, and in giving him praise for his attributes and his works. In like manner, Peter’s direction for husbands to honour their wives is fulfilled when each husband, as the head of his wife, leads her faithfully; it is fulfilled when his response to her submission is care, protection, and attentiveness to her help in its various forms; it is fulfilled when he tells others how he is helped by her God-given gifts, so that together they are what he could never be on his own; and it is fulfilled as he makes known to her how he values – no, treasures – her faith, work, insights, wisdom, grace, personal attributes, and perhaps above all, her personhood.

ABOUT “SCATTERED”

Scattered is a series of Bible Studies that you can do alone at home, or with others in a group. They don’t depend on a leader or someone affirming the right answer. The title of the series comes from Peter’s addressing his letter to “*strangers in the world, scattered throughout*” the world. Christians will always be scattered in this world in all sorts of ways. Writing the series started during the Covid-19 lockdowns when we were as isolated as if we had been scattered. But Peter highlights the fact that it is our separation *to Christ* that separates *us from the world*. So he sees Christians as scattered strangers struggling in an alien world, and sets out to encourage us to live faithful and holy lives in Christ. The series is available (free) here: <https://www.michaeldrake.name/scattered>

¹⁰ 1 Peter 2:18

¹¹ 1 Peter 2:23