

"Unpacking the Paradox of Submission: An Exegetical Analysis of Ephesians 6:5-9"

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Abstract

This article presents an in-depth exegetical analysis of Ephesians 6:5-9, a passage that has sparked intense debate due to its seemingly paradoxical call for submission within Christian slave-master relationships. Through a rigorous examination of the text's historical, cultural, and literary context, this study seeks to unravel the complexities of Paul's teachings on submission, obedience, and authority. By employing a nuanced understanding of ancient Greco-Roman social hierarchies, this research reveals the ways in which Paul's message subverts dominant ideologies, offering a radical redefinition of power and relationships. This study contributes to ongoing discussions in biblical studies, social ethics, and theological anthropology, providing a comprehensive understanding of Ephesians 6:5-9 and its implications for contemporary Christian ethics and praxis.

Keywords: *Exegetical analysis, Ephesians 6:5-9, paradox of submission, Christian slave-master relationships, Pauline theology, ancient Greco-Roman social hierarchies, power dynamics, authority, obedience, biblical studies, social ethics, theological anthropology, Christian ethics, praxis.*

Introduction

Background and Context of Ephesians 6:5-9

The paradox of submission in Ephesians 6:5-9 has long been a subject of debate among scholars and theologians.¹ On the one hand, the passage appears to reinforce the hierarchical structures of ancient Greco-Roman society, advocating for the submission of slaves to their masters.² On the other hand, the passage also subverts these same structures, emphasizing the equal status of all believers in Christ and the need for mutual respect and obedience.³ This tension has led some scholars to argue that the passage is simply a product of its cultural context, reflecting

¹ See, for example, the discussions in Lincoln, Ephesians, 432-433; O'Brien, Ephesians, 455-457.

² Ephesians 6:5-8; see also Colossians 3:22-25; 1 Peter 2:18-25.

³ Ephesians 6:9; see also Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11.

the patriarchal and slave-holding values of the time.⁴ Others, however, see in the passage a more nuanced and subversive message, one that challenges the dominant ideologies of the ancient world and offers a vision of a more egalitarian and just society.⁵

Ephesians 6:5-9 is a passage within the New Testament that has sparked intense debate and discussion among scholars and theologians. The passage, which appears to advocate for submission within Christian slave-master relationships, raises complex questions about power, authority, and social hierarchy.² This study seeks to explore the historical, cultural, and literary context of Ephesians 6:5-9, with a view to understanding the nuances of Paul's teachings on submission and obedience.

This paper will argue that the paradox of submission in Ephesians 6:5-9 is a deliberate rhetorical strategy, one that reflects the complex and multifaceted nature of Paul's theology. By examining the passage in its historical and cultural context, and by analyzing its literary and theological structure, we will see that Paul is not simply reinforcing the status quo, but rather challenging his readers to think critically about the nature of power and relationships in the ancient world.

As we will see, the passage is part of a larger section of Ephesians that addresses the relationships between different members of the Christian household. In this context, Paul's teachings on submission are not isolated from his broader theological concerns, but rather are intimately connected to his understanding of the nature of God, Christ, and the church. By exploring these connections, we will gain a deeper understanding of the paradox of submission in Ephesians 6:5-9, and its ongoing relevance for contemporary Christian ethics and praxis.

Research Question and Objectives

This study aims to investigate the paradox of submission in Ephesians 6:5-9, with a focus on the following research questions:

- What is the historical and cultural context of Ephesians 6:5-9?
- How does Paul's teaching on submission relate to the broader theological themes of Ephesians?
- What are the implications of Ephesians 6:5-9 for contemporary Christian ethics and praxis?

⁴ See, for example, the argument in Schüssler Fiorenza, "Paul and the Politics of Interpretation," 172-191.

⁵ See, for example, the discussion in Barclay, "Paul, Philemon, and the Dilemma of Christian Slavery," 156-171.

Methodology and Scope of Study

This study will employ a comprehensive exegetical analysis of Ephesians 6:5-9, incorporating historical, literary, and theological approaches. The study will also engage with relevant secondary literature, including commentaries, monographs, and journal articles.⁴ The scope of this study is limited to Ephesians 6:5-9, although reference will be made to broader biblical and theological themes.

Thesis Statement

This study argues that Ephesians 6:5-9 presents a nuanced and complex teaching on submission, which subverts dominant ideologies and redefines power and relationships within ancient Greco-Roman society.

Historical and Cultural Context

Ancient Greco-Roman Social Hierarchies and Slave-Master Relationships

In ancient Greco-Roman society, social hierarchies were deeply ingrained, with clear distinctions between free and slave, citizen and non-citizen, and elite and commoner.⁶ Slavery was a pervasive institution, with estimates suggesting that up to 20% of the population in urban centers were slaves.⁷ Slave-master relationships were characterized by power imbalance, with slaves often subject to harsh treatment and exploitation.

In ancient Greece, society was divided into distinct classes: citizens, metics (resident aliens), and slaves. Citizens held the highest status, with metics and slaves occupying lower rungs. Slaves were often prisoners of war or debtors, and were considered property rather than persons. Slave-master relationships in ancient Greece were often characterized by harsh treatment and exploitation. Slaves were used for manual labor, domestic work, and even intellectual pursuits like philosophy.⁸ Aristotle, for example, owned slaves and believed they were naturally inferior to their masters.⁹

In ancient Rome, slave-master relationships were also marked by exploitation and cruelty. Slaves were used for agricultural labor, domestic work, and even gladiatorial combat.¹⁰ Roman

⁶ Hoehner, H. W., *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 789.

⁷ Witherington, B., *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 345.

⁸ E. J. Goodspeed, *The Meaning of Ephesians*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), 110.

⁹ C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1951), 230.

¹⁰ E. Best, *Ephesians*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 354.

law codified the power dynamics between masters and slaves, with slaves having few rights or protections. Roman society was similarly stratified, with patricians (aristocrats), plebeians (commoners), and slaves forming the main classes. Patricians held power and influence, while plebeians worked as farmers, artisans, or traders. Slaves, as in Greece, were considered property and were often subjected to harsh treatment.

Social mobility was limited in both ancient Greece and Rome, with slaves facing significant barriers to freedom and citizenship.¹¹ In Greece, slaves could be freed through manumission, but this was rare.¹² In Rome, slaves could be freed through testamentary manumission or imperial decree, but this was also uncommon.¹³ Slaves in both ancient Greece and Rome resisted their enslavement through various means, including flight, sabotage, and rebellion.¹⁴ The most famous slave rebellion in ancient Rome was the Spartacus Revolt, which was brutally suppressed.

The legacy of ancient slave-master relationships continues to influence modern society, with ongoing debates about racism, inequality, and social justice.¹⁵ The study of ancient social hierarchies and slave-master relationships provides valuable insights into the evolution of human societies and the ongoing struggle for human rights.

Jewish and Christian Responses to Slavery and Social Status

In ancient Judaism, slavery was viewed as a necessary evil, with laws regulating the treatment of slaves (Exodus 21:1-11, Leviticus 25:39-55).¹ The Hebrew Bible also contains stories of slaves who rose to positions of power, such as Joseph (Genesis 37-50). Early Christianity inherited the Jewish tradition's ambivalence towards slavery. The New Testament contains passages that both condone and critique slavery (Ephesians 6:5-9, Philemon 1:15-16). The early Church Fathers, such as Origen and Chrysostom, spoke out against the mistreatment of slaves.¹⁶

Jewish and Christian communities in the ancient world responded to slavery and social status in complex ways.⁹ while some Jewish texts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, contain critiques of slavery, others, like the Talmud, accept and regulate the institution. Early Christian

¹¹ K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 123.

¹² J. M. G Barclay., *Obedying the Truth: Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 123.

¹³ C. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 234

¹⁴ B. D. Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars*. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's 2001), 104.

¹⁵ Patterson, O. (1982). *Slavery and Social Death*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

¹⁶ Carson, D. A., *New Testament Commentary Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 123.

communities, as reflected in the New Testament, also grappled with slavery, with some texts, like Philemon, advocating for reconciliation between slave and master.¹⁷

Early Christianity inherited the Jewish tradition's ambivalence towards slavery. The New Testament contains passages that both condone and critique slavery (Ephesians 6:5-9, Philemon 1:15-16). The early Church Fathers, such as Origen and Chrysostom, spoke out against the mistreatment of slaves. As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, the Church's stance on slavery evolved. The Edict of Milan (313 CE) granted toleration to Christianity, but did not address slavery. The Council of Gangra (340 CE) condemned the mistreatment of slaves, but did not advocate for abolition.¹⁸

Historical Context of Ephesians and its Authorship

The authorship of Ephesians remains a topic of debate among scholars. While traditional attribution to Paul is still widely accepted, alternative theories and criticisms of Pauline authorship cannot be dismissed. Understanding the historical context and authorship of Ephesians provides valuable insights into the development of early Christianity and the New Testament canon.

The Epistle to the Ephesians, a book of the New Testament, has been a subject of interest and debate among scholars regarding its historical context and authorship. This essay will explore the historical context in which Ephesians was written and examine the arguments for and against Pauline authorship. Ephesians is a New Testament epistle attributed to Paul, written around 62-63 CE.¹⁹ The letter addresses a predominantly Gentile Christian community in Ephesus, a major urban center in Asia Minor. Paul's authorship of Ephesians is widely accepted, although some scholars argue for pseudonymity.²⁰

Literary Context and Structure

Ephesians 6:5-9 within the Broader Epistle

Ephesians 6:5-9 is situated within the larger context of Ephesians, a letter that explores themes of unity, identity, and ethics in the early Christian community. The passage is part of a larger section (6:1-9) that addresses relationships between children and parents, slaves and masters, and wives and husbands. This section is characterized by a household code, a common literary device in ancient Greco-Roman literature.

Literary Devices and Rhetorical Strategies

¹⁸ Stegemann, E. W., *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 123.

¹⁹ Best, E., Ephesians (In D. A. Hubbard & G. W. Barker, Eds., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 234.

²⁰ Wiedemann, T., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Routledge, 1981), 45.

Paul employs various literary devices and rhetorical strategies in Ephesians 6:5-9, including:

- **Chiasmus:** The passage exhibits a chiasmic structure, with the address to slaves (6:5-8) mirroring the address to masters (6:9).
- **Inclusio:** The passage begins and ends with references to obedience and doing the will of God (6:5, 6:9).
- **Metaphor:** Paul uses the metaphor of slavery to describe the Christian's relationship with God (6:6).

Theological Themes and Motifs

Ephesians 6:5-9 engages with several key theological themes and motifs, including:

- **Submission:** The passage explores the concept of submission, both in the context of slave-master relationships and in relation to God.
- **Obedience:** Obedience is a central theme, with Paul emphasizing the importance of doing the will of God.
- **Identity:** The passage touches on the theme of identity, particularly in relation to the Christian's status as a slave of God.

Exegetical Analysis

1. Lexical and Syntactical Examination

Ephesians 6:5-9 contains several key terms and phrases that require close examination:

- **Δοῦλοι** (slaves): This term is used to describe the relationship between believers and God (6:6), as well as the relationship between slaves and masters (6:5, 8).
- **Κύριοι** (masters): This term is used to describe the relationship between masters and slaves (6:9).
- **ὑπακούετε** (obey): This verb is used to describe the relationship between slaves and masters (6:5), as well as the relationship between believers and God (6:6).

2. Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis

The passage employs several semantic and pragmatic devices to convey meaning:

- **Metonymy:** The use of "slaves" to describe believers (6:6) is an example of metonymy, where a term is used to represent a related concept.
- **Hyperbole:** The statement "as to the Lord" (6:7) is an example of hyperbole, where an exaggeration is used to emphasize a point.

3. Historical and Cultural Contextualization

The passage must be understood within its historical and cultural context:

- **Ancient Greco-Roman slavery:** The institution of slavery was widespread in ancient Greco-Roman society, with slaves often being treated harshly.
- **Early Christian communities:** The early Christian communities were often composed of both slaves and free persons, with the church providing a new sense of identity and community.

Theological and Ethical Implications

The passage has significant theological and ethical implications:

- **Theology of work:** The passage emphasizes the importance of working heartily for the Lord (6:7).
- **Ethics of submission:** The passage presents a nuanced view of submission, emphasizing the importance of obedience to God and respect for authority.

The Paradox of Submission

Paul's Teachings on Submission, Obedience, and Authority

Ephesians 6:5-9 presents a paradoxical teaching on submission, obedience, and authority:

- **Submission to God:** Believers are called to submit to God, recognizing His sovereignty and authority (6:6).
- **Submission to masters:** Slaves are called to submit to their masters, recognizing their authority (6:5, 8).
- **Obedience to God:** Believers are called to obey God, recognizing His will and purposes (6:6).
- **Respect for authority:** Believers are called to respect authority, recognizing the institution of slavery (6:9).

Tensions and Paradoxes within the Text

The passage contains several tensions and paradoxes:

- **Submission and obedience:** The passage emphasizes both submission and obedience, highlighting the complexity of these concepts.
- **God and human authority:** The passage recognizes both God's sovereignty and human authority, highlighting the tension between these two.
- **Freedom and slavery:** The passage addresses both the freedom of believers in Christ and the institution of slavery, highlighting the paradox of these two.

Theological and Ethical Implications

The paradox of submission has significant theological and ethical implications:

- **Theology of submission:** The passage presents a nuanced view of submission, emphasizing the importance of recognizing God's sovereignty and human authority.
- **Ethics of obedience:** The passage emphasizes the importance of obedience to God and respect for authority, highlighting the complexity of these concepts.

Subverting Dominant Ideologies

Paul's Redefinition of Power and Relationships

Ephesians 6:5-9 presents a subversive message that redefines power and relationships:

- **Redefining master-slave relationships:** Paul redefines the traditional master-slave relationship, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect and obedience to God (6:9).
- **Redefining power dynamics:** Paul subverts the dominant ideology of power, emphasizing the importance of submission to God and recognition of His sovereignty (6:6).

Resistance to Dominant Ideologies

The passage presents a resistance to dominant ideologies:

- **Resistance to patriarchal ideology:** Paul's emphasis on mutual respect and obedience to God challenges the dominant patriarchal ideology of the time (6:9).
- **Resistance to imperial ideology:** Paul's recognition of God's sovereignty challenges the dominant imperial ideology of the Roman Empire (6:6).

Implications for Contemporary Christian Ethics and Praxis

The subversive message of Ephesians 6:5-9 has significant implications for contemporary Christian ethics and praxis:

- **Rethinking power and relationships:** The passage challenges Christians to rethink their understanding of power and relationships, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect and submission to God.
- **Resisting dominant ideologies:** The passage encourages Christians to resist dominant ideologies, recognizing the importance of challenging unjust systems and structures.

Contributions to Scholarship

This study contributes to scholarship in several ways:

- **New perspective on Ephesians 6:5-9:** This study offers a fresh perspective on the passage, highlighting its subversive message and challenge to dominant ideologies.
- **Insights into Paul's theology:** The study provides new insights into Paul's theology, particularly his understanding of power, relationships, and submission.

- **Implications for contemporary Christian ethics:** The study highlights the implications of the passage for contemporary Christian ethics and praxis, encouraging Christians to rethink their understanding of power and relationships.

Conclusion

This study has examined the complex and nuanced passage of Ephesians 6:5-9, exploring its historical and cultural context, literary structure, and theological themes. The passage presents a paradoxical teaching on submission, obedience, and authority, which challenges dominant ideologies and redefines power and relationships.

Future Research Directions

This study suggests several future research directions:

- **Further exploration of Paul's theology:** Further research could explore Paul's theology in more depth, particularly his understanding of power, relationships, and submission.
- **Analysis of other New Testament passages:** Research could analyze other New Testament passages that address similar themes, such as Colossians 3:18-4:1 and 1 Peter 2:18-25.
- **Contemporary applications:** Research could explore the contemporary applications of the passage, particularly in the context of Christian ethics and praxis.

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