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Co-Heirs of Grace: Reimagining Masculine Authority Through the Lens of 1 Peter 3:7 in African Christian Marriages

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Abstract

This study examines 1 Peter 3:7 as a theological lens for reimagining masculine authority in African Christian marriages. It addresses the tension between biblical teachings concerning headship and African patriarchal practices that often frame masculine authority as a role rather than a responsibility. Using a historical-grammatical and theological-exegetical method, the study analyses 1 Peter 3:7 within its Greco-Roman household context, its literary placement in the Petrine household code, and its key co-heirship expression, sygklēronomois charitos zōēs. It further traces the theology of shared dignity and inheritance from Genesis 1–2 through relevant New Testament texts, showing that co-heirship denotes shared participation in divine grace and inheritance, not graded spiritual status. The study argues that Peter does not abolish husbandly headship but reconstructs it as covenantal responsibility toward a theological equal, rather than superiority or cultural entitlement. In African Christian contexts, this reading challenges domination-based masculinity and calls churches, pastors, and marriage educators to teach headship as honour, service, protection, mutual accountability, and shared participation in the grace of life.

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Introduction

Recent African theological and gender studies have shown that Christian marital discourse in many African settings often receives biblical language of headship through existing patriarchal assumptions.[5] Within this interpretive environment, husbands may readily affirm that they are heads of their homes while less sustained attention is given to the obligations, accountability, and theological limits that Scripture places upon such authority. This imbalance produces an understanding of masculine authority that is culturally durable but theologically underdeveloped: broad in its claim to leadership, yet insufficiently attentive to the biblical demands of knowledge, honour, and accountability in 1 Peter 3:7. This imbalance, however, does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped by divergent scholarly interpretations of the New Testament household codes and by the African cultural contexts in which those interpretations are received.

The interpretation of marital authority in the New Testament household codes is commonly divided between complementarian and egalitarian readings. Complementarian interpreters generally affirm the equal dignity and spiritual worth of men and women while maintaining that Scripture assigns differentiated marital roles, including some form of male headship in the home.[6] Egalitarian interpreters, by contrast, argue that the redemptive movement of Scripture, especially its emphasis on mutuality, shared inheritance, and the equal standing of men and women in Christ, challenges hierarchical readings of marriage and calls for reciprocal partnership rather than authority-over.[7] Thus, 1 Peter 3:7 becomes a critical test case for whether marital authority should be interpreted hierarchically and, if not, what the designation of the wife as a "co-heir of the grace of life" means.

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[5] Solomon O. Ademiluka, "For the Husband Is the Head of the Wife: A Contextual Re-reading of Ephesians 5:22–33 among Nigerian Yoruba Christians," In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi 55, no. 1 (2021): a2613, https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2613; Elorm Ama Stiles-Ocran, "Theology and Women's Agency in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence in Ghana," African Journal of Gender and Religion 29, no. 1 (2023): 3–5, https://doi.org/10.36615/ajgr.v29i1.2423. Augustus Nzioki Muthangya et al., "Religious and Patriarchal Beliefs That Influence Christian Women to Persevere in Abusive Relationships: With Reference to Giriama People, Kenya," Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae 48, no. 3 (2022): 2–4, https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/10231.

[6] John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 35–52, https://document.desiringgod.org/recovering-biblical-manhood-and-womanhood-en.pdf?ts=1620230082; Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 55–78, https://store.faithlafayette.org/content/God_Marriage_and_Family_Excerpt.pdf.

[7] Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 95–117; Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 1–24; Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 133–164.

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Within many African Christian communities, masculine authority in marriage is received as both biblical and cultural. It is commonly defended through appeals to the New Testament household codes, reinforced by patrilineal expectations, and expressed through social practices that assign final domestic authority to the husband.[8] In its healthier forms, this authority may appear as protection, provision, and family leadership. In its distorted forms, however, it becomes a theological shield for domination, emotional intimidation, economic control, sexual entitlement, and even violence.[9] The problem is therefore not the mere existence of marital authority language but the way such language is interpreted, assumed, and embodied.

The trajectory within African biblical and theological scholarship concerning African masculinities requires further work. African masculinities must be examined in relation to African patriarchal systems in which masculinity is formed by specific practices, social expectations, and gendered constructions of identity, and reinforced through individual actions and social interactions.[10] Within these patriarchal systems, masculine authority is not primarily experienced as an ethical obligation but as a social entitlement, a position inherited through cultural normativity and reinforced through communal structures of kinship, bride price, and economic control.[11] Many African patriarchal systems tend to normalise male dominance and female subordination, placing men in leadership positions while excluding women, with the patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity functioning as a social and political distinction between male privilege and female subjection.[12]

When this cultural construction of masculine authority encounters biblical texts, the result is a predictable pattern of selective reception. The texts that confirm male prerogative are foregrounded; the texts that generate demands upon the authority-holder are suppressed or reinterpreted as secondary. In the Petrine Haustafeln (1 Pet 2:11–3:7), this bias has created a noticeable imbalance in interpretation: the wife's responsibilities in 3:1–6 are emphasised as the main biblical guideline for marital ethics, whereas the husband's duties in 3:7—which importantly include recognising his wife as a co-heir of divine grace—are often overlooked.[13]

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[8] Stiles-Ocran, "Theology and Women's Agency," 3–5; Muthangya et al., "Religious and Patriarchal Beliefs," 2–4.

[9] Lufuno M. Mudimeli, "Cultural Dynamics of Gender-Based Violence and Pastoral Care in South Africa," HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 80, no. 1 (2024): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9353.

[10] G. A. Makama, "Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The Way Forward," *European Scientific Journal* 9, no. 17 (2013): 116–117.

[11] J. M. Wood, "Gender Inequality: The Problem of Harmful, Patriarchal, Traditional and Cultural Gender Practices in the Church," HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 75, no. 1 (2019): 4–5, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5177.

[12] Gabriel Nche, Chukwudi Njoku, and Charles Isiramen, "Biblical Equity in Africa: Operationalizing and Mainstreaming Selected Pauline Texts on Mutual Submission," *African Multidisciplinary Journal of Research* 7, no. 2 (2022): 26, https://journals.spu.ac.ke/index.php/amjr/article/download/174/142.

[13] Abeneazer G. Urga, "The Exhortation to the Husbands and Its Significance in the Conversation about the Household Codes: 1 Peter 3:7," Priscilla Papers 38, no. 4 (2024): 9,

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The purpose of the study is to examine the responsibility of Christian husbands in 1 Peter 3:7 and to ask whether Peter reinforces patriarchal domination or reconfigures marital authority through the designation of the wife as "co-heir of the grace of life." This study adopts a qualitative exegetical and theological method. The historical-grammatical component examines 1 Peter 3:7 within its Greco-Roman household context, its literary placement in the Petrine household code, and its grammatical relationship to 1 Peter 2:11–3:6. The theological-exegetical component analyses *sygklēronomois charitos zōēs*, with attention to its lexical, syntactic, and theological significance. The study then traces the broader biblical logic of shared dignity, inheritance, and covenantal responsibility from Genesis 1–2 through selected New Testament texts. African Christian marriage functions as the contextual field of application rather than as the controlling interpretive lens. This approach enables the study to ask how 1 Peter 3:7 challenges African patriarchal readings of masculine authority and reconstructs headship as responsibility toward a co-heir of divine grace.

The Socio-Historical, Literary, and Theological Contexts of 1 Peter 3:7

Socio-Historical Context: The Greco-Roman household (*oikos*) was not merely a domestic unit; it was the fundamental social and economic institution of the ancient Mediterranean world, with internal hierarchies—master over slave, husband over wife, and patron over client—carefully regulated by cultural convention and Roman legal structures.[14] Within this household structure, women occupied a position of measurable social disadvantage. Many women were disadvantaged in Greco-Roman society, with considerably fewer privileges and rights than men, and Peter wanted husbands to acknowledge the more vulnerable situation of their wives so they would take care not to exploit them.[15]

First-century Greek and Roman philosophical traditions reinforced this disadvantage at the theoretical level: Aristotle held that women possessed the deliberative faculty, but not with full authority; hence, within his political anthropology, women were treated as constitutionally limited in rational deliberation and naturally fitted for male rule.[16] Dio Chrysostom, a native of Bithynia, one of the provinces to which Peter wrote, observed that "everyone would admit that man is stronger and more fitted to lead."[17]

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https://www.cbeinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/The-Exhortation-to-the-Husbands-and-Its-Significance-in-the-Conversation-About-the-Household-Codes.pdf.

[14] John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 21–58.

[15] Elritia Le Roux, "ἀπονέμοντες τιμήν: 1 Peter as Subversive Text, Challenging Predominant Gender Roles in the 1st-Century Mediterranean World," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 4 (2019): a5430, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5430.

[16] Aristotle, Politics 1.13.1260a12–14, trans. H. Rackham, *Loeb Classical Library* 264 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 1260a; see also Joshua Karbowski, "Aristotle on the Deliberative Abilities of Women," Apeiron 47, no. 4 (2014): 435–460, https://doi.org/10.1515/apeiron-2013-0012.

[17] Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 3.51, cited in Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 693.

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It is against this socio-historical backdrop that the ethical demands Peter places on husbands in 3:7 register as a significant departure from conventional expectations. The social world Peter inhabited offered little precedent for linking a husband's spiritual efficacy to the quality of his treatment of his wife. Peter's claim therefore draws from a deeply Christocentric ethic in which domestic privilege is made accountable to divine scrutiny.

Literary Context: First Peter 3:7 does not stand alone. It is the concluding unit of a carefully structured paraenetic section, widely known in scholarship as the Petrine *Haustafeln* (household codes) that runs from 2:11 to 3:7 and addresses three relational dyads: believers within civic society (2:13–17), slaves in relation to masters (2:18–25), and wives and husbands within the household (3:1–7). Understanding the literary position of 3:7 within this unit is essential for grasping its theological function.[18]

Within this literary unit, the structural relationship between 3:1–6 and 3:7 is governed by the conjunction *homoiōs* (ὁμοίως, "likewise" or "in the same way"), which opens the verse addressed to husbands. This particle appears three times in the Petrine paraenetic section—at 3:1 (wives), 3:7 (husbands), and 5:5 (younger men)—and each time it functions as a grammatical tether, binding its exhortee to the same ethical logic modelled in the Christ-passage of 2:21–25.[19]

Literarily, 3:7 is also significant for what it does not do. Unlike the wife's section (3:1–6), which runs to six verses and draws on multiple Old Testament examples (Sarah, the holy women of old), the husband's section is compressed into a single verse carrying four participial constructions and one telic clause. This compression does not indicate neglect; rather, it creates literary intensity. Peter does not elaborate the husband's obligations at length because the obligations themselves are dense enough to carry the entire ethical weight of the passage, especially because the purpose clause with which the verse closes (*eis* to *mē enkoptesthai*, "so that your prayers may not be hindered") places the husband under a form of vertical accountability that requires no further elaboration.

Theological Context: 1 Peter 3:7 is situated within Peter's broader theology of elect community, honourable conduct, and eschatological identity. First Peter consistently frames the Christian community as a people called out of darkness into light (2:9), constituted by divine election, and therefore obligated to embody a quality of communal life that testifies to the character of the God who elected them. The household is not merely a domestic arrangement within this theological vision but rather a site of theological witness, a place where the ethics of the new covenant community are expressed in the most intimate and formative of human relationships.[20] Within this theological context, the co-

[18] Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 15–30.
[19] Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 210–212.
[20] Abeneazer G. Urga, "The Exhortation to the Husbands and Its Significance in the Conversation about the Household Codes," 9–13.

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heirship clause of 3:7 carries a specific weight that distinguishes it from anything in contemporary Greco-Roman moral philosophy.[21]

Peter grounds the husband's domestic obligations not in social convention, natural law, or cultural custom but in a theological reality: the wife's equal standing before God as a recipient of eschatological grace.[22] This ethical argument is fundamentally different. Social convention can be renegotiated; cultural custom can be revised; natural law can be disputed. But if the wife's co-heirship before God is fixed, established by divine grace rather than social agreement, then the husband's obligation to honour her is equally fixed, and his failure to do so places him not in tension with his culture but in conflict with the God who established her standing (1 Peter 3:7b).

This theological grounding also connects 3:7 to one of First Peter's most consistent pastoral concerns: the integration of vertical and horizontal relationships. Throughout the letter, how believers relate to one another is never separable from how they relate to God. The slave who suffers unjustly is sustained by the example of Christ (2:21–25); the community that loves one another "from a pure heart" (1:22) expresses the regenerating work of God's word. In 3:7, this integration reaches its sharpest domestic expression: the husband's treatment of his wife is so fully integrated into his relationship with God that his mistreatment of her obstructs that relationship directly. The household is not a domain insulated from divine scrutiny; it is, for the husband, the primary arena in which his theology is tested by his practice.

Exegetical Study of sygklēronomois charitos zōēs (co-heirs of the grace of life)

The phrase *sygklēronomois charitos zōēs* (συγκληρονόμοις χάριτος ζωῆς) occupies the theological centre of 1 Peter 3:7, though its grammatical position following the honour command and preceding the prayer-hindrance clause has caused many readers to treat it as an addendum rather than a premise.[23] Treating the phrase as a mere addendum is a grammatical and theological reduction of Peter's argument. Lexically, the construction *ὡς καὶ συγκληρονόμοις* may be rendered literally as "as also co-heirs," since *συγκληρονόμος* denotes a fellow heir, joint heir, or one who receives an inheritance together with another; contextually, however, *ὡς* bears a causal force, allowing the fuller sense "since they are also co-heirs."[24]

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[21] Ruth Anne Reese, *1 Peter*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 120–129.
[22] Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 123–124.
[23] Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 207–209; John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 37B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 554–556; Craig S. Keener, *1 Peter: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 232–234.
[24] Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.vv. "ὡς," "καί," "συγκληρονόμος"; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 57.134; Joseph

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The construction *hōs kai sygklēronomois* does not merely add another description of the wife after the command to honour her; it supplies the theological ground on which that command rests. Peter is not merely saying, "Honour your wife, and remember that she is also a co-heir." Rather, the logic of the verse is more forceful: "Honour your wife because she is also a co-heir." Several translations render the co-heirship clause causally.[25] The wife's co-heirship therefore functions as the theological premise of the husband's obligation. Once this clause is suppressed or treated as a secondary remark, the husband's ethical responsibility is severed from the very basis that gives it its binding theological force.

More explicitly, the noun *sygklēronomos* itself is a combination of *syn* (together with) and *klēronomos* (heir). It denotes full, equal, joint participation in an inheritance, not a derivative share, a lesser portion, or access mediated through another party.[26] The wife's inheritance of divine grace is her own, structurally equivalent to her husband's, and established independently by God. She does not inherit grace through her husband's spiritual covering or by virtue of his headship. She stands before God as a co-heir in her own right.

The genitive phrase *charitos zōēs* ("of the grace of life") specifies the inheritance. *Charis* (grace) in the Petrine and Pauline corpus consistently denotes God's unmerited favour, inseparable from salvation, not a reward distributed according to social standing or domestic role, but a grace given equally, without gradation, to all who receive it.[27] *Zōē*, in its biblical sense, refers to the divine quality of life that proceeds from God and is imparted to those who participate in His saving grace.[28] Thus, Peter gives no theological basis for a hierarchy of inheritance between husband and wife. The husband does not receive a greater portion of divine grace because of headship, nor does the wife

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Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: American Book Company, 1889), s.v. "συγκληρονόμος."

[25] For example, the ESV renders the clause "since they are heirs with you of the grace of life"; the RSV has "since you are joint heirs of the grace of life"; the MEV reads "since they too are also heirs of the grace of life"; and the MOUNCE translation similarly reads "since you are joint heirs of the gracious gift of life." Other versions express the same causal force with "because" or "for," as in the GNT: "because they also will receive, together with you, God's gift of life," and the NCB: "for … she is also an equal heir of God's gift of life." See *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 1 Pet 3:7; *Revised Standard Version Bible* (New York: National Council of Churches, 1952), 1 Pet 3:7; *Modern English Version* (Lake Mary, FL: Passio, 2014), 1 Pet 3:7; William D. Mounce, trans., *The Mounce Reverse Interlinear New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 1 Pet 3:7; *Good News Translation* (New York: American Bible Society, 1992), 1 Pet 3:7; *New Catholic Bible* (Totowa, NJ: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 2019), 1 Pet 3:7.

[26] Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, s.v. "συγκληρονόμος."

[27] Keener, 1 Peter, 232–234; Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, 1 Peter: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, vol. 2, International Critical Commentary (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023), 19–22.

[28] Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, s.v. "ζωή"; Louw and Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, s.v. "ζωή."

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receive a lesser share because of her social vulnerability. They are co-heirs of the same grace and participants in the same life before God.

This exegetical observation has a precise implication for the theology of masculine authority: if husband and wife are equal co-heirs of the same grace, then masculine authority cannot be grounded in any theological anthropology that posits the husband's inherent superiority. The text leaves no ground for such superiority, for the very verse that addresses the husband's obligations also identifies the wife as his co-heir. What remains is authority that must be grounded in responsibility rather than privilege.

Co-Heirship in Genesis 1-2

The co-heirship Peter announces in 1 Peter 3:7 is not a theological novelty; it recovers, in redemptive form, the shared dignity and vocation distorted by the fall. To understand what co-heirship demands of masculine authority, one must begin at the beginning. A creation-order complementarian reading of Genesis 1–2 commonly maintains that man and woman, before sin enters the picture, are equal in divine image-bearing but differentiated in marital roles.[29] A closer reading of Genesis 1–2, however, yields a more nuanced picture.

Genesis 1:26–28 records God's creative declaration with grammatical precision that carries theological weight: "Let us make humankind" (*ʾādām*) "in our image" (*ṣelem*), "according to our likeness" (*dĕmût*), "and let them have dominion" (*wĕyirdû*). The plural form "let them have dominion" is not incidental, for the mandate of rule is given to humanity as male and female together, not to the male alone as representative of the race. Both image-bearers, male (*zākār*) and female (*nĕqēbâ*), are commissioned to exercise dominion (*rādâ*) over creation and to embody the vocation of the *imago Dei* in the world. The creation mandate is not differentiated by gender; it is shared.[30] This is the protological baseline, and Peter understands this divine design even though it had been marred by sin and social structure.

Genesis 2 is sometimes read as a qualification of this equality: the woman is created second and designated as *ʿēzer* (עֵזֶר) ("helper"), apparently positioning her as subordinate to the man. But the Hebrew term *ʿēzer* does not indicate subordination; it denotes indispensable, active strength. The fuller phrase *ʿēzer kĕnegdô* (כְּנֶגְדּוֹ עֵזֶר) means "a helper corresponding to him." It carries the preposition *kenegdo*, meaning "like opposite to him" or "corresponding to him." The word is used of God himself as Israel's helper in Psalms 121:2 and 124:8; it denotes a strength that the beneficiary demonstrably lacks and genuinely needs. This is language of complementary equivalence, not hierarchical subordination. Eve is not positioned beneath Adam but alongside him as his

[29] Köstenberger and Jones, God, Marriage, and Family, 25–36.
[30] Andreas J. Köstenberger and Margaret Elizabeth Köstenberger, God's Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 28–30.

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counterpart – different, necessary, and his structural equal in the created order.[31]

In other words, Genesis 1–2 presents corresponding partners whose distinctiveness creates a unique interdependence. Each brings to the other what cannot be realised in isolation, so that human companionship, vocation, and covenantal life are fulfilled through mutuality rather than domination. Genesis 3, however, does not establish male domination as God's creational design; it describes what sin does to the co-regency God designed. When God says to the woman, "your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen 3:16), this is a diagnosis of the fall's consequences, not a prescription of creation's intent. The redemptive trajectory of Scripture moves not toward the entrenchment of that distortion but toward its correction, and the co-heirship clause of 1 Peter 3:7 is a specific New Testament expression of that corrective trajectory.[32] Peter's argument coheres with this divine design, even though that design had been marred by sin and social structures.

Co-Heirship Across the Pauline Corpus

Co-heirship runs as a consistent thread through the Pauline corpus, and tracing it illuminates both its meaning and its implications for the theology of masculine authority. In Romans 8:17, Paul writes that believers are "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ." This statement of eschatological equality is sweeping: the co-heirship with Christ is not distributed along lines of gender, ethnicity, or social standing. Schreiner comments that it is the common inheritance of all who are led by the Spirit, with no gradation among recipients.[33] The inheritance is identical, and the co-heirship is structurally complete on both sides.

Ephesians 3:6 extends this language explicitly to the Gentiles: *sygklēronoma* ("fellow heirs"), *syssōma* ("fellow members of the body"), and *symmetocha* ("fellow partakers"). Hoehner shows that the new covenant community is constituted precisely by the removal of covenantal exclusions that formerly separated Jew and Gentile.[34] Therefore, if co-heirship in the New Testament can dismantle the deeply entrenched covenantal boundary between Jew and Gentile, it becomes exegetically difficult to argue that the same theological category leaves untouched a hierarchical boundary between husband and wife within the covenant community.

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[31] For Hebrew lexical data in this paragraph, see Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), s.vv. "ezer," "neged," and "kaph"; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000), s.vv. "ezer" and "neged"; David J. A. Clines, ed., The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993-2011), s.vv. "ezer" and "neged."

[32] Jobes, 1 Peter, 207–209; Keener, 1 Peter, 232–234; Williams and Horrell, 1 Peter, 19–22.

[33] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 425–426.

[34] Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 454–455.

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Galatians 3:28 states the underlying principle with programmatic force: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The principle of co-heirship is echoed here in "all are one in Christ." Bruce notes that Paul does not abolish human differentiation; he abolishes the hierarchical valuation of that differentiation as a basis for determining standing before God or status within the covenant community.[35] This theological equality and shared standing before God are evident in Peter's use of co-heirship as the ground of the husband's obligation to honour his wife.

Furthermore, the book of Hebrews (traditionally assigned Pauline authorship – although disputed by recent scholarship) offers some insight on the subject. For instance, Hebrews 11:9 employs co-heirship language when it describes Isaac and Jacob as "co-heirs" or "fellow heirs" with Abraham of the same promise. This usage here shows co-heirship as a shared participation in one and the same promised inheritance, not graded access to different levels of inheritance. Isaac and Jacob do not receive a lesser promise because Abraham comes first in the patriarchal sequence; instead, they participate with him in the same divine promise.

In summary, the lexical and theological force of co-heirship, across Scripture, identifies those who share the same inheritance together. When 1 Peter 3:7 applies this language to husband and wife, the wife's co-heirship cannot be treated as secondary or derivative; it places her alongside her husband as a full participant in the grace of life. This understanding is crucial for a reorientation of masculine authority in Christian marriages.

Reimagining Masculine Authority in African Christian Marriages

In many African Christian settings, discussions of masculine authority in marriage tend to revolve around role designation. In many cases, the husband is regarded as the leader, even when he does not provide the ideal leadership; the status of "husband" is often treated as sufficient justification for authority, while the wife is expected to submit and support. These roles are thought to have been assigned by God at creation, are supported by the New Testament household codes, and define the social architecture of the Christian marriage.

The problem with role language, particularly as it operates in African Christian contexts, is structural. Webster's dictionary defines role as "a socially expected behaviour pattern usually determined by an individual's status in a particular society."[36] However, in this study, the term "role" is not used merely in the dictionary sense of a function performed by a person, but in the social-theoretical sense of a pattern of expectations, responsibilities, behaviours, and positions assigned to persons within a given social order. Gender-role scholarship shows that roles are culturally produced and socially reinforced through expectations about what men and women should do, where they

[35] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 187–190.
[36] Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "role," accessed June 25, 2026, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/role.

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should belong, and how they should behave. Similarly, the term "right" is not used as a synonym for male privilege or patriarchal entitlement. In discussions of marriage, masculinity, and authority, a right must be distinguished from culturally inherited claims of dominance. A right is best understood as a legitimate moral, theological, or relational claim that carries corresponding responsibility and accountability, whereas patriarchal entitlement turns social power into presumed male advantage.[37]

When masculine authority is framed primarily as a role, its content is inevitably shaped by the ambient cultural expectations of the community reading the biblical text. In African contexts, where patriarchal social systems often define the husband's role as custodial authority over the wife, the "role" language of complementarianism is readily assimilated into pre-existing cultural normativity. The result is not necessarily a biblically transformed understanding of masculine authority but a culturally conditioned one clothed in biblical language. When headship is reduced to role occupancy, it can be exercised without sufficient ethical content. A man can occupy the role of head without knowing his wife (*kata gnōsin*), without honoring her (*aponemontes timēn*), and without recognizing her co-heirship (*sygklēronomois*), and still insist, on cultural and assumed theological grounds, that he is the head of the home. The role confers the title without necessarily generating the obligation.

This study takes a different approach by looking at masculine authority or headship, not as a title or mere social role, but as a responsibility. This idea is not new; it is embedded in the grammar and theology of 1 Peter 3:7, and it aligns with the original design described in Genesis. Peter does not merely require husbands to lead; he requires them to do so with protective honour,[38] a carefulness expressed in the metaphor of the "weaker vessel." This means that the husband's headship requires a love that prompts him to protect his wife just as he would protect what is deeply valuable to him. When Peter writes that the husband must live with his wife *kata gnōsin* ("according to knowledge"), he is not describing a role. He is imposing a responsibility: the husband must know his wife specifically, attentively, and concretely enough that his knowledge results in behavioural adjustment toward her. When he commands *aponemontes timēn,* which is the active, habituated bestowal of honour, he is not describing a social position. He is imposing a practice that costs the husband something: the deliberate, ongoing attribution of worth to a person whom his culture has not trained him to see as independently honourable. And when he grounds both demands in *sygklēronomois charitos zōēs*, he is providing the theological reason that these responsibilities are non-negotiable. The wife's co-heirship before God is a fixed theological reality that the husband's conduct must conform to, regardless of cultural convention.

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[37] Anna Cardelli, Amanda Nerini, and Camilla Matera, "Gender Stereotypes and Professional Aspirations, Interests and Choices: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 36, no. 3 (2026): e70262, doi:10.1002/casp.70262; Emma A. Renström, "Exploring the Role of Entitlement, Social Dominance Orientation, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, and the Moderating Role of Being Single on Misogynistic Attitudes," *Nordic Psychology* 76, no. 2 (2024): 250–266, doi:10.1080/19012276.2023.2186816.

[38] Ademiluka, "For the Husband Is the Head of the Wife," a2613.

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Headship is more a responsibility than a right. A "right" is often understood as something one may claim or demand as due.[39] When headship is viewed as a sacred trust in which the husband is called by God to lead, honour, and sacrifice for his wife, the tone and mood of the home is radically improved. Headship is authority for service: power to care, not to crush; to nurture, not to dominate; to promote flourishing, not to frustrate or destroy it. Although 1 Peter 3:7 does not itself use the language of "headship," it speaks directly to the ethical content of husbandly authority within Christian marriage.

Balancing Headship Through the Co-Heirship Lens

There is no biblical basis for denying that the husband bears a form of headship responsibility within the family. However, this headship must be understood in light of Christ's relationship to the church and, more specifically, through the co-heirship lens of 1 Peter 3:7. As Christ is the head of the church in self-giving love, sacrificial care, and redemptive responsibility, so the husband is called to exercise headship not as superiority over his wife but as responsibility toward one who stands with him as a theological equal before God. Properly understood, headship is not authority over a social subordinate but covenantal responsibility toward a co-heir of the grace of life. Therefore, in contexts where patriarchy has diminished the value, dignity, and agency of women, Christian marriage should become a redemptive space in which the husband honours, protects, and elevates his wife as one who shares the same divine grace and inheritance. In this sense, the husband's responsibility is not to dominate the wife but to affirm her full worth before God, the family, the church, and society.
The co-heirship clause provides the internal biblical criterion for evaluating whether masculine authority is being exercised responsibly. The question is not merely whether the husband occupies the position of head; the question is whether his exercise of that position accords with the theological reality that his wife stands before God as his equal co-heir. Does his knowledge of her (*kata gnōsin*) reflect the seriousness of her status? Does his treatment of her (*aponemontes timēn*) communicate the worth that her co-heirship demands? How is his relationship with God reflected in the way he treats the woman who shares equally in the grace he receives?

These are the questions that a responsibility-centred account of headship asks. They are, notably, the questions that a role-centred account often fails to ask because a role-holder needs only to occupy the position, while a responsibility-bearer must account for how the position is exercised. For African Christianity, where masculine authority has often been sustained by role language that insulates the husband from ethical accountability, the shift from role to responsibility is not a peripheral hermeneutical adjustment. It is the correction that the text itself demands.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that 1 Peter 3:7 does not abolish husbandly responsibility; rather, it redefines such responsibility through knowledge, honour, restraint,

[39] Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "right," accessed June 25, 2026, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/right.

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accountability, and co-heirship. The wife is not presented as a subordinate object of male control but as a co-heir of the grace of life. This means that whatever differences may exist between husband and wife in function, responsibility, or marital vocation, such differences cannot be interpreted as superiority, domination, or divinely graded position. This is especially important in African Christian contexts, where biblical teachings on headship are sometimes interpreted through cultural patterns of patriarchy, male privilege, and domestic hierarchy. When these cultural assumptions dominate the reading of Scripture, headship may become a theological shield for emotional intimidation, economic control, sexual entitlement, and even violence. Against such distortions, 1 Peter 3:7 calls for a redemptive reconstruction of husbandly authority.

Therefore, African churches, pastors, theologians, and marriage educators should teach headship through the lens of co-heirship. In practical terms, African churches should revise premarital counselling manuals, marriage seminar outlines, and pulpit teaching on headship to include explicit instruction on 1 Peter 3:7. Husbands should be taught that failure to honour, understand, protect, and dignify their wives is not merely a domestic weakness but a spiritual failure that affects their relationship with God. Marriage educators should also distinguish between culturally inherited male privilege and biblically accountable husbandly responsibility. In this way, Christian marriage becomes a redemptive space in which difference is preserved without domination, leadership is expressed through service, and both spouses are honoured as shared recipients of the grace of life.

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