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Marriage made in heaven? The contemporary reception of Ephesians 5:21-33 among women

By Joanne Logan

Abstract

This thesis explores the contemporary reception of Ephesians 5:21-33, an ideologically loaded biblical text whose authority is variously assumed or questioned in relation to an important social institution (marriage). The research exposes and assesses a diversity of readings by women – both scholars and non-scholars – in order to answer the following question: in view of the continued use of this text in Christian communities, what are ethically the most responsible and theologically the most fruitful ways in which it can be read? The thesis first considers readings by contemporary female scholars, drawing attention to their hermeneutical framing of the text and the interpretative techniques they employ. Next, readings by non-scholars, gathered during fieldwork carried out among Christian and Muslim women in the South East of England, are similarly assessed. Together these two groups of readings offer a range of interpretative options for the text: while this is not representative of all reading approaches, it indicates interesting possibilities for hermeneutics which meet the criteria of the research question. Informed by these hermeneutics, especially ideas about textual themes other than marriage and the reading practice of *Sachkritik*, the concluding chapter offers one way of reading Ephesians 5:21-33 which both demonstrates ethical responsibility towards women and is theologically fruitful. This way of reading takes the theological subject matter of the text (or *Sache*) to be Christ's empowering love, which constitutes a theme of Ephesians as a whole and is reflected, albeit inconsistently, in the passage at the centre of this enquiry. The conclusion of the thesis is that the particular hermeneutical objectives outlined in the research question show promise of being met when Ephesians 5:21-33 is taken as illuminating themes other than marriage.

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Ephesians 5:21-33 among women**

By Joanne Logan

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Department of Theology and Religion

Durham University

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1. Introduction

1.1 A controversial text

Rarely does a minister in the Church of England reach the pages of the national press for quoting from the Bible during a sermon. However, in 2010, a curate in Kent achieved some notoriety for referring to Ephesians 5:22 from the pulpit:

‘he told his congregation...that the behaviour of modern women was to blame for Britain’s high divorce rate. He said: “We know marriage is not working. We only need to look at figures – one in four children have divorced parents. Wives, submit to your own husbands.”’¹

As The Daily Telegraph went on to report, the curate’s comments met with significant opposition:

‘the views of [the vicar] and his curate are understood to have prompted dozens of women parishioners to cancel their direct debit subscriptions...one disenchanted female parishioner said she was “disgusted” by the sermon. “How can they talk that way in the 21st century?” she said. “No wonder the Church is losing touch if this is the kind of gobbledegook they want us to believe...”’²

The curate’s attempt to counter the prevalence of divorce by promoting gender hierarchy in marriage seems to have had detrimental consequences for church finances – as women cancelled their giving. These women not only had a sense that historical gender inequalities had been superseded (‘in the 21st century’), they also had financial means at their disposal to support their view. It could be said that an effort to claim power for husbands over wives (apparently accorded by Ephesians 5:22) had encountered some powerful resistance.

This incident illustrates some of the issues at stake in using Ephesians 5:21-33 in the UK today. As the curate’s quotation shows, it is a passage which appears to prescribe a gender hierarchy in marriage – which does not sit comfortably with

¹ As reported in The Daily Telegraph on 12 February 2010. Taken from the website <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/7221802/Vicar-tells-women-to-submit-to-husbands.html> (accessed on 11 November 2017 at 14.44). ‘Wives submit to your own husbands’ is a quotation from Ephesians 5:22.

² As for note 1 above.

current cultural norms. Amid a general societal concern for gender equality – demonstrated, as I now write, by the attention given to closing the gender pay gap apparent within many UK workplaces³ – the curate’s application of verse 5:22 struck a discordant note. The curate’s use of the passage, perceived to reflect a way of life now past, thus reinforced an impression of a church with limited relevance to society now: ‘the Church is losing touch’. This raises questions of biblical hermeneutics – such as how (if at all) interpretation should take account of cultural shifts between the time of the text’s writing and today – and also taps into a contemporary debate about the role and place of the churches for which these ancient texts are sacred.⁴ In addition to these issues, Ephesians 5:21-33 is a passage about marriage – an institution both challenged and also undergoing a process of redefinition in the UK today. The challenges to marriage include divorce (as the curate mentions) and an increasing preference for co-habitation without marriage.⁵ The redefinition of marriage involves inclusion of same-sex partnerships. In its address to wives and husbands, Ephesians 5:21-33 presents marriage as exclusively heterosexual – an assumption disputed both in the UK and more widely.⁶

Factors such as these set Ephesians 5:21-33 at odds with ideological positions taken by many in the UK today. A further difficulty with the passage lies in its ethically problematic reception by some readers. As I worked on this thesis, there were media reports of the trial of ‘an evangelical pastor’ in South London accused of assaulting

³ The BBC News website for today (30 November 2017) reports that ‘Oil giant Shell says male staff working for the company on average earn 22% more than women in the UK... The UK’s biggest company is the latest to report its gender pay gap.’ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-42178622>, accessed on 30 November 2017 at 16.31.

⁴ The debate about the place of church in UK society today can be illustrated by the question of disestablishing the Church of England: in a recent article, Giles Fraser argued that Church of England members are now such a minority of the overall UK population that disestablishment is ‘ultimately unavoidable.’ Such proportionately low numbers of members reinforce the impression that churches in general are separated from mainstream social concerns and practice. See <https://theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2017/sep/07/the-disestablishment-of-the-church-is-now-necessary-and-inevitable>, accessed at 16.47 on 7/12/2017.

⁵ Figures from The Office for National Statistics show that in the 20 years from 1996 to 2016 co-habiting couple families rose from 1,475,000 to 3,301,000 (an increase of 124%) while the number of married couple families stayed almost the same (an increase of only 0.34%): taken from dataset on <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/familiesandhouseholds>, accessed on 22 November 2017 at 17.36.

⁶ As I write, Australia has become the latest country to legalise same-sex marriage on 7/12/2017 – as reported by Reuters - see <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-australia-gaymarriage/australia-celebrates-day-for-love-as-it-allows-same-sex-marriage-idUKKBN1E10RQ?il=0> (accessed on 7/12/2017 at 17.43). The UK parliament passed similar legislation in 2013, although Church of England churches are prohibited (by law) from conducting same-sex weddings.

women in the name of “Christian domestic discipline”, following Bible teachings of keeping women in their place.⁷ The website of Christian Domestic Discipline outlines a practice of marriage in which a husband can enforce authority over his wife by means of physical beating. The most prominent piece of biblical justification given for this practice (on the home page of the website) is Ephesians 5:22-29.⁸ While many Christians would repudiate any such use of this text, it has been, and continues to be, employed by some to justify the abuse of women. Arguably, the text itself provides openings for those who take it in such an ethically questionable way: certainly, determining its meaning is complicated by apparent contradictions within it, and by uncertainties about its literary features. The observations of many commentators warn against easy resolution of the difficulties of interpretation.⁹

Despite these significant drawbacks, for many Christians this controversial text cannot easily be dismissed as irrelevant, ethically compromised or irredeemably confused. It forms part of the canon of Scripture and is therefore viewed as having theological merit: something to say about God and/or human living in relation to God. It is used in the context of the public worship of churches: sometimes at Sunday services (as by the curate above) but perhaps more particularly at weddings, either as a passage identified for possible inclusion in the ceremony,¹⁰ or even as a fixed part of the service.¹¹ It is this continued use, or desire to use, the text which forms a major impetus for this thesis, which seeks to explore possibilities for the contemporary reception of this much-debated passage.

⁷ Taken from the London Evening Standard, 24 February 2016.

⁸ <http://www.christiandomesticdiscipline.com/home.html> accessed on 4/10/2013.

⁹ See, for example, Carolyn Osiek’s comment that ‘we are confronted with a formidable text,’ which she ascribes at least partly to ‘its complexity’ - in ‘The Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33): A Problematic Wedding’ *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32:1 (Sage Publications Ltd.: 2002) 29. Morna Hooker remarks that the passage is ‘by no means straightforward’ in ‘“Submit to one another”: The transformation of relationships in Christ (Eph 5:21-6:9)’ in (ed.) Michael Wolter, *Ethik als angewandte Ekklesiologie: Der Brief an die Epheser*, (Rome: Benedictina Publishing, 2005), 163. Sarah Tanzer notes the ‘complex nature and enigmatic questions it poses to all exegetes’ of Ephesians as a whole – see ‘Ephesians’ in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures, A Feminist Commentary* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1995), 326.

¹⁰ In the Church of England Common Worship liturgy, Ephesians 5:21-33 is one of 12 passages suggested as a possible epistle reading during the marriage ceremony – see *Common Worship Pastoral Services* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000) 142-3.

¹¹ Orthodox churches typically include Ephesians 5:20-33 in all wedding services – as demonstrated in a draft booklet on marriage prepared for the Assembly of Orthodox Bishops in the UK, included on the website for St John the Evangelist, Romanian Orthodox parish in Cambridge – see <http://en.orthodoxcamro.co.uk/marriage.html> accessed on 13/12/2017 at 10.48.

1.2 Aims of this thesis

1.2.1 Mapping contemporary reception in the search for a hermeneutic

This thesis aims to map a range of interpretative possibilities for the contemporary reception of Ephesians 5:21-33. This mapping is intended to help define a hermeneutic which might best support the continued use of the text: to offer one way out of the dilemma faced by those who wish to hold on to the text as in some way authoritative. The study as a whole could be described as part map, and part preferred course through it: it is a methodological study geared towards finding a way of reading this particular text. The second of these two parts implies the existence of the first: in order to suggest a hermeneutic for the use of this passage today, it seems preferable, even necessary, to discover first the interpretative strategies actually employed today. Thus this thesis primarily approaches the passage via (compiles the ‘map’ from) the responses of its contemporary readers.¹² The process of listening to different interpretative possibilities is as important as the goal of teasing out a hermeneutic. I set out to be as attentive as possible to a wide variety of readings, and to analyse them carefully, to enable an eventual conclusion on why some are more helpful than others in meeting certain criteria (defined below). As the ‘map’ is not the sole end of the project, the range of interpretative possibilities it covers is not representative of all views or readings – but is simply suggestive of potential ways in which the text might be understood today.

1.2.2 The research question

Charting a preferred course through the ‘map’ of contemporary reception necessitates the making of judgements: selecting one route and rejecting other possibilities. The criteria by which I set out to make these judgements are expressed in the research question underlying the project. This question asks: in view of the continued use of this text in Christian communities, what are ethically the most

¹² It would have been possible to approach the task differently – perhaps by utilising historical critical methods or consulting the history of the text’s interpretation in the search for a hermeneutic. However, while a focus on the historical setting of the passage or on its interpretation history could suggest hermeneutics fruitful for today, they are less directly geared to this end than contemporary reader–response. While this was my overall approach, some of the readers I consulted treat the text primarily as a historical document.

responsible and theologically the most fruitful ways in which it can be read?¹³ I assessed reading approaches according to how serviceable they were in composing a reading strategy which answers this question. There are therefore two criteria for the judgement of interpretation: ethical responsibility and theological fruitfulness. Ethical responsibility arose from an initial awareness of how this text has been implicated in the abuse of women – as illustrated in the reports of the court case in South London. My working definition of an ethically responsible reading was one which is life-giving rather than harmful for women.¹⁴ The criterion of theological fruitfulness was suggested by the status of the text for many of those who wish to continue using it (including me): as part of the canon of Christian Scripture, they look for it to have some theological value. My working definition of a theologically fruitful reading is one which contributes to our perception of God as revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

As a result of applying these criteria, this project could be described as working towards a theological hermeneutic, with the focus on the textual resources for that hermeneutic. It is not a project in theological ethics, nor does it concentrate on theologies of marriage, love, power or other themes which might be considered relevant. This is a project in the hermeneutics of a text in which I have an interest in its theological potential.

1.2.3 Consulting women

In identifying which readings to consult, I have decided to concentrate on those by women. This is not because I subscribe to an essentialist view of women's experience (characteristic of second-wave feminism);¹⁶ it is instead because the text itself, in differentiating between the roles of husband and wife in marriage, in effect divides its readers by gender. Two gendered groups are separately and differently addressed in Ephesians 5:21-33: the rhetoric of the text itself therefore invites

¹³ This question draws on a suggestion made by Dale B. Martin in his recent book *Biblical Truths* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017) – this is discussed in more detail in section 1.3.2 below.

¹⁴ I give a fuller description of, and rationale for, this definition in section 1.3.3 below.

¹⁵ I explain this definition further in section 1.3.2 below.

¹⁶ Deborah F. Sawyer describes the distinction of second wave feminism from third wave feminism as its assumption of 'essentialism [instead of]...relativism in relation to women's experience/s' – see 'Gender' in Sawyer, John F. A. (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 474.

reflection on the varying ways in which it may be heard by those two groups. This constitutes a literary argument for dividing the text's readers in this way: a gendered response is encouraged by the text. Furthermore, there is also a moral case for a specific focus on women readers of this passage. The text divides its readers in such a way as to establish a relationship of power between them. I am aware that not all interpreters would agree with the last part of this statement, but the vast majority of reception of the text, both historical and current (and whether accepting or critical of it), attests to its awarding some kind of power to husbands.¹⁷ It is this feature which, combined with uncertainties arising from its mode of expression, allows the text to continue to be used to justify the abuse of women.¹⁸ Given that husbands are accorded some form of power over wives by this passage, there is an ethical argument for consulting wives (or women more generally) about its meaning.

This kind of argument was made persuasively by Wayne Meeks in his analysis of the ways in which the biblical household codes have been used in debates about slavery.¹⁹ Meeks illustrates well the difficulties faced by the abolitionists when they turned to the biblical text to support their moral judgement, and found themselves confronted by 'proslavery spokesmen [who] were generally better exegetes than their opponents.'²⁰ The solution, proposes Meeks, is to adopt biblical reading methods which rely less on 'scientific exegesis'²¹ and more on 'a moral intuition appropriate to the gospel.'²² Integral to these intuitive reading methods would be 'the habit of listening to the weaker partner in every relationship of power' and so, Meeks

¹⁷ In describing the history of reception of Ephesians 5:22 and Colossians 3:18 in church tradition, Robert Evans notes that the enduring ethos up to and including the Reformation reflected Augustine's thinking: a 'benevolent patriarchalism' in which women were subordinate to 'the "naturally" superior male' – see *Reception History, Tradition and Biblical Interpretation: Gadamer and Jauss in Current Practice* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 187. While more recent exegesis may find signs in Ephesians 5:21-33 of mutuality between men and women, the passage as a whole is usually taken to advocate some form of patriarchy – see, for example, a survey of more recent scholarship set out with the following introduction by Charles H. Talbert: 'the problem that demands attention is the text's assumption of patriarchal authority' in *Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 149.

¹⁸ As Virginia Ramey Mollenkott put it, 'the interpretive history of Ephesians 5 is a bloody one' – see 'Emancipative elements in Ephesians 5:21-33' in Levine, Amy-Jill (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Deutero-Pauline Epistles* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 39.

¹⁹ Wayne A. Meeks, 'The "Haustafeln" and American Slavery: A Hermeneutical Challenge' in Eugene H. Lovering Jr. and Jerry L. Sumney (eds.), *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 232-253.

²⁰ Meeks, 'The "Haustafeln"', 233.

²¹ Meeks, 'The "Haustafeln"', 251.

²² Meeks, 'The "Haustafeln"', 252.

continues, ‘a fair moral argument about slavery must at the least entail listening to the slaves.’²³ Whether Meeks’ argument about avoiding close biblical exegesis is followed or not, his proposal of listening to the less powerful in any interpretation of biblical texts is justified, as he says, by one of the principles of the New Testament itself: ‘love of neighbour.’²⁴ As Meeks might have said had the focus of his enquiry been different, a fair moral argument about marriage must at the least entail listening to the wives.

Meeks’ argument supports the systematic listening to women in the interpretation of this particular text. However, the voices of women are not much in evidence in the history of published interpretation of this passage until feminist biblical scholarship began to achieve prominence around 30 or so years ago. Robert Evans cites what he believes is the earliest example of ‘a woman’s reception in English of the household paraenesis’ as that of Rachel Speght in 1617,²⁵ but notes that while her pamphlet only had one print-run, the publication to which it responded (*The Arraignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women* by Joseph Swetnam)²⁶ was reprinted ‘many times throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.’²⁷ This illustrates the problems faced by pre-twentieth century female biblical interpreters in attempting to be heard.²⁸

Since the 1970s, female biblical scholars have published significant analyses of the Ephesian household code. Such scholars adopt different hermeneutical approaches for the passage, including historical-criticism, literary and feminist analysis.²⁹ For

²³ Meeks, ‘The “Haustafeln”’, 252.

²⁴ Meeks, ‘The “Haustafeln”’, 253.

²⁵ Evans, *Reception History*, 198.

²⁶ Evans, *Reception History*, 199.

²⁷ Evans, *Reception History*, 200.

²⁸ As Evans notes, this is an example of ‘a counter-tradition [which] may have found it difficult to make itself heard, and more difficult still to be reproduced’ – see *Reception History*, 200.

²⁹ Examples of historical criticism (which is not feminist) include commentaries by Margaret Y. MacDonald – *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press: 2008) and PHEME Perkins – *Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997). Women scholars who take a literary approach (informed by historical considerations) include Annette Merz, ‘Why did the Pure Bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2) Become a Wedded Wife (Ephesians 5:22-33)? Theses about the Intertextual Transformation of an Ecclesiological Metaphor’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 79 (2000), 131-147 and Jill E. Marshall, ‘Community is a Body: Sex, Marriage and Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:7 and Ephesians 5:21-33’ in *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, 134 (2015), 833-847 An example of explicitly feminist analysis (albeit also using historical criticism) occurs in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s book *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 2nd ed. 1994), 251-270.

my purposes, the relevant distinction between these approaches is that avowedly feminist interpretation makes explicit a gendered perspective in a way that the other methods (by themselves) do not.³⁰ This differentiation made, there is then evidence that scholars who acknowledge or prioritise their standpoint as women (typically feminists) have received rather less attention from other scholars of Ephesians than those who do not. In 1999, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza claimed that ‘the contributions of critical feminist biblical studies are rarely recognised and even less acknowledged by the white-malestream academy and religious institutions.’³¹ Schüssler Fiorenza supported her assertion by referring to the omission of her own body of work on rhetoric from two reviews of rhetorical criticism in biblical studies.³² Her comments are, however, equally applicable to more recent work on Ephesians: Frank Thielman’s 2010 Baker Exegetical Commentary fails to mention any of the major feminist analyses of Ephesians 5:21-33 (in 24 pages of commentary on this passage)³³ and scholars such as Schüssler Fiorenza herself, Sarah Tanzer, Elizabeth Johnson, Clarice Martin, Virginia Ramey Mollencott and Elna Mouton do not appear at all in his bibliography.³⁴ By contrast, Thielman does refer to the work of other female scholars on Ephesians 5:21-33 – notably Margaret Y. MacDonald,³⁵

³⁰ Feminists are not the only women scholars of the passage who make their gendered perspective clear – see for example, Claire M. Powell’s commentary on Ephesians which features in a volume in which the introduction states that ‘in contrast to such efforts [of suspicious feminists] this commentary is written by women of faith,’ see Catherine Clark Kroeger, and Mary J. Evans, *The Women’s Study Bible* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xiv (Powell’s commentary is on pages 694-705). However, the work of feminists constitutes a significant proportion of the comment that is explicitly from a gendered standpoint. In addition to Schüssler Fiorenza’s work, other feminist biblical commentaries dealing with the passage include E. Elizabeth Johnson’s commentary ‘Ephesians’ in Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley eds., *The Women’s Bible Commentary* 3rd edn.. (Louisville/Westminster: John Knox Press, 2012), 576-580; Sarah J. Tanzer, ‘Ephesians’ in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures, A Feminist Commentary* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1995), 325-348; also articles by Virginia Ramey Mollencott and Elna Mouton in *A Feminist Companion to the Deutero-Pauline Epistles* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 37-87.

³¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 3. Schüssler Fiorenza claimed that this was the equivalent of the ‘silencing’ of women in previous centuries, only ‘accomplished differently.’

³² See note 10 in Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 3.

³³ Thielman’s analysis of Ephesians 5:21-33 begins at page 370 and ends at page 394 – see *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

³⁴ This tends to back up Schüssler Fiorenza’s point that it is avowedly feminist work which has been side-lined. The scholars I list here as excluded from Thielman’s commentary all describe their approach as feminist: in addition to those already mentioned, Clarice J. Martin’s article ‘The Haustafeln (household codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: “Free Slaves” and “Subordinate Women”’ can be found in *Stony the Road we Trod: African American biblical interpretation* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 206-231. It is also worth noting that E. Elizabeth Johnson’s commentary ‘Ephesians’ originally appeared in 1992.

³⁵ See Thielman, *Ephesians*, 365, 368.

Annette Merz³⁶ and Carolyn Osiek³⁷ – but the work to which he points concerns the historical setting of the passage and is not explicitly feminist. The effect is that a major recent commentary on Ephesians 5:21-33 does not acknowledge women scholars who speak from an acknowledged gendered viewpoint.

Thielman is not alone: in an earlier commentary on Ephesians (in 2001) John Muddiman likewise fails to mention (in his 21 pages on Ephesians 5:21-33)³⁸ any of the work by Schüssler Fiorenza, Tanzer, Johnson or Martin, all of which pre-dated his own publication by some time (between 6 and 18 years). Again like Thielman, although Muddiman refers to some women's scholarship on Ephesians, he does not engage meaningfully with an explicitly gendered perspective on the text: he mentions Margaret MacDonald's historical work³⁹ and makes a passing reference to Cynthia Kittredge's rhetorical analysis of the concept of obedience.⁴⁰ While women have found a published voice on Ephesians 5:21-33 over the last 30 years, it appears that interpretation that prioritises issues of gender has found less of a hearing than work that is not so described.⁴¹

If there is some indication that a group of women scholars has been overlooked in the academy, then the voice of women who are not biblical scholars is almost non-existent. Some research has been carried out into the views of so-called 'ordinary' readers⁴² on Ephesians 5:21-33: the section on Ephesians in Daniel Patte's *Global*

³⁶ See Thielman, *Ephesians*, 368, 370.

³⁷ See Thielman, *Ephesians*, 365, 368.

³⁸ John Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London & New York: Continuum, 2001), 250-271.

³⁹ Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 251.

⁴⁰ Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 255. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge's work – *Community and Authority: The Rhetoric of Obedience in the Pauline Tradition* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998) – draws on the feminist perspective of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to view 'Pauline texts as rhetorical texts that construct a picture of history' – see page 9. However, when Muddiman refers to this book, he simply cites it as 'a more detailed treatment' of the issue of obedience to divine authority versus human authority: there is no acknowledgement of the feminist perspective that informs Kittredge's treatment of this issue.

⁴¹ Adrian Thatcher points out a different but related issue. In his search for a 'credible theology of marriage,' (see A. Thatcher, *Marriage After Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 11), he comments that 'the omission of women from the theology is at its most damaging in the theology of marriage' (see *Marriage After Modernity*, 42). He further notes that out of the works listed in his bibliography where the author's gender was clear, just under a quarter were written by women. Thatcher makes the point that women have not been sufficiently heard on the theology of marriage in general – not because their voices have been sidelined, but because there are significantly fewer such voices in the debate compared with those of men.

⁴² 'Ordinary reader' is a term used to denote 'nonscholars' by Gerald O. West in *Reading Other-wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with their Local Communities* (Atlanta GA: Society of

Bible Commentary is based on reports from five groups of such readers in Scotland, and they were asked to consider this particular passage.⁴³ However, most importantly for the justification of this thesis, this commentary does not differentiate between the views of women and men. The focus of the work is on the ‘ordinary’ readers as a group, with the result that the voices of women are not separately identified.

This thesis is therefore based on the following premises: first, that there is a literary and ethical case for consulting a group of readers (wives/women) who are separately defined and addressed by Ephesians 5:21-33, and placed as subordinate in a relationship of power.⁴⁴ Second, the voices of this group (in published interpretation of the passage) have received inconsistent attention: scholars writing from a specifically gendered standpoint have had less of a hearing (from other scholars) than those who do not, while the views of ‘ordinary’ women readers of Ephesians 5:21-33 generally do not feature at all. This thesis therefore seeks to attend to a spectrum of women readers of this text, including scholars – whether or not they privilege a gender-specific vantage point – and ‘ordinary’ readers. Wayne Meeks (as above) proposes a ‘habit of listening to the weaker partner in every relationship of power,’ but there is evidence that his proposal has only intermittently been heeded in relation to Ephesians 5:21-33. By concentrating on the voices of women, this thesis attempts to give them more comprehensive attention than in the past, in the hope that such ‘listening’ may in future become habitual.

1.2.4 Scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers

This thesis seeks to hear the views not only of women engaged in academic biblical studies but also of women who are not academics in this field – ‘ordinary’ women.⁴⁵

Biblical Literature, 2007), 2. West is the pioneer of a way of reading biblical texts with ‘ordinary readers,’ known as Contextual Bible Study – see section 1.3.1 below.

⁴³ See John Riches, *Ephesians*, in Daniel Patte (ed.), *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 473-481. Riches’ commentary is based on readings gathered using Contextual Bible Study, as he acknowledges on page 475.

⁴⁴ This case applies whether or not the women consulted demonstrate a strong element of self-consciousness of their own gender identity in their reading of the passage: the text demarcates its readers – how they then respond to this demarcation (whether they consider their own gender to be at all relevant to this) is the task of this study to find out.

⁴⁵ The term ‘ordinary’ is not intended to be disparaging in any way – it is used because it has gained a certain currency among those conducting research using methods similar to this thesis. Louise Lawrence prefers the term ‘folk’ reader to ‘ordinary’ reader. While ‘folk’ is particularly appropriate

Although in the past, some might have questioned the inclusion of ‘ordinary’ readings alongside those of scholars – on the grounds that ‘ordinary’ readers might not show the critical detachment typical of scholars – such views have largely been undermined over recent years. While ‘ordinary’ readers might lack some of the tools to enable careful, questioning reading (tools which can be provided in the method used for reading texts with them),⁴⁶ the idea that their readings fall short of supposedly ‘unbiased’ scholarly interpretations has been roundly criticised:⁴⁷ all readings are influenced by the interpreter’s experience and social/cultural location. As Louise Lawrence points out, ‘it is now widely accepted that an interpreter’s context inevitably affects meaning’⁴⁸ – acknowledgment of which exposes the privileging of scholarly readings on the basis of ‘impartiality’ as mistaken: ‘the strict division between community and folk readings and the so-called “scholarly” readings of the West masks a fallacy. For all these readings are themselves context-full...’⁴⁹

Many studies of the interpretation of ‘ordinary’ Bible readers now demonstrate the value to scholarship of the insights these readers bring.⁵⁰ John Riches describes the results of a group of scholars in Scotland listening to the insights of ‘ordinary’ readers of the Bible: the scholars were ‘learning to see and hear the texts afresh as they were reflected through other people’s experiences.’⁵¹ Lawrence concludes a survey of scholars who have read the Bible with ‘ordinary’ readers with these words, ‘the diverse respondent groups each “incarnate” the word anew in their own contexts and in turn open new vistas for others, to develop transforming ethical and

for her work, as she puts it ‘to celebrate ...community consciousness,’ it seems less fitting for a study where the focus is on individual views. See Louise J. Lawrence, *The Word in Place: Reading the New Testament in Contemporary Contexts* (London: SPCK, 2009), 23.

⁴⁶ Gerald West asserts that ‘ordinary Christians are not used to reading the Bible closely and carefully, either in its literary or its socio-historical dimensions’ – see ‘Contextuality’ in John F. A. Sawyer (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 409.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Gerald West who contests the notion that ‘ordinary’ readings are contextual whereas biblical scholarship ‘seeks to provide an objective and ideologically neutral reading of the Bible.’ West concludes that ‘the past couple of decades have destroyed any lingering notion of an “objective” reading of the Bible (or any text)’ – West, ‘Contextuality’, 399.

⁴⁸ Lawrence, *The Word in Place*, 13.

⁴⁹ Lawrence, *The Word in Place*, 19.

⁵⁰ Lawrence gives a summary of such studies over the 25 years or so up until 2009 – including Ernesto Cardenal’s readings with Nicaraguan peasants, Gerald West’s readings with residents of South African’s townships and M. Gnanavaram’s work with the Dalit people in India – see Lawrence, *The Word in Place*, 15-19.

⁵¹ John Riches, *What is Contextual Bible Study?* (London: SPCK, 2010), 7.

theological perspectives.’⁵² Susannah Cornwall’s judgement on the method she used for reading of the Bible with ‘a group of homeless and vulnerably housed people in...the South West of England,’ notes that ‘it has the potential to give room to new and unexpected encounters...it makes strange again what may have become over-familiar...’⁵³ The use in these three quotations of expressions like ‘afresh,’ ‘anew’ and ‘new and unexpected’ testify to the ways in which the perspectives of ‘ordinary’ readers can revitalise and re-orient academic study of the Bible.

In addition to these arguments for consulting ‘ordinary’ readers, it is difficult to see how an exercise in reader-response to a biblical text can justifiably limit itself to academic readers only. As Gerald West points out, ‘while real ordinary readers of the Bible have never been fully admitted to the guild of “proper” readers...the logic of [a reader-response] approach demands their presence.’⁵⁴ Mark Allan Powell echoes this point when he refers to ‘the task of reader-response criticism at its basic level’ as ‘identify[ing] the responses of real readers to the text.’⁵⁵ Granted that when Powell refers to ‘real readers’ he is distinguishing such readers from ‘implied readers’ (readers whom the text appears to assume), however it is clear that ‘ordinary’ readers are very much within his purview.⁵⁶

In this thesis, I intend to listen carefully to both scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers of Ephesians 5:21-33. I do this on the assumption that both these groups of readers have something to contribute to reflection on the problems and possibilities of the passage. Scholars bring their expertise in textual analysis and knowledge of the historical and theological contexts of the passage.⁵⁷ ‘Ordinary’ readers bring their experience of negotiating this text in relation to their own lived context, be that

⁵² Lawrence, *The Word in Place*, 23.

⁵³ Susannah Cornwall, ‘Contextual Bible Study: Characteristics and Challenges’ in *Modern Believing* 53 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012) 21.

⁵⁴ Gerald O. West, ‘Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourse of the Dominated,’ in Gerald O. West, and Musa W. Dube (eds.) “‘Reading With’’: An exploration of the Interface between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible: African Overtures’ *Semeia* 73 (1996), 27.

⁵⁵ Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 7.

⁵⁶ Powell states that ‘what [he] really want[s] is data concerning how multitudes of readers respond to the text’ (see *Chasing*, 7) and goes on to consult 50 clergy and 50 lay members of churches on the meaning of particular biblical texts – see *Chasing*, 28-56.

⁵⁷ Gerald West describes the contribution of scholars to Contextual Bible Study conversations with ‘ordinary’ readers as providing critical resources – of reading the text ‘fully, carefully and closely’ and ‘providing some historical and sociological resources for reflection on the type of society that produced the text.’ See ‘Reading the Bible Differently’, 34.

domestic, ecclesial and/or at work. It is from the process of attending to both that I hope to identify hermeneutical resources that could lead to ethically and theologically responsible readings and hence best underpin continued use of this text.

1.3 Situating the thesis

1.3.1 Contextual Bible Study

In describing this project as one of listening to scholars and to ‘ordinary’ readers, and in referring to their respective and distinctive contributions, I have already borrowed (as note references make clear) both ideas and terminology from the practice of Contextual Bible Study (‘CBS’). CBS has been developed over a period of some 40 years as a way of reading biblical texts in groups involving both scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers. Gerald West has been described as a ‘missionary’ of CBS:⁵⁸ in South Africa under apartheid, he began a practice whereby ‘socially engaged biblical scholars read the Bible with very poor and marginalized people.’⁵⁹ This reading together ‘gave people courage to oppose the harsh conditions under which they lived.’⁶⁰ The ‘ordinary’ readers involved in this practice were therefore explicitly the powerless – for West, ‘implicit in the notion of “contextual” as it is used in the phrase “Contextual Bible Study” is commitment to a particular context, the context of the poor, the working class and the marginalized.’⁶¹ Furthermore, the practice aimed at enabling those ‘ordinary’ readers to challenge the oppression they faced. Through CBS, the development of which sits within the broad frame of liberation hermeneutics, ‘the Bible becomes a resource...for social transformation.’⁶²

Following West’s lead, UK based scholars then used CBS, adapting the practice to suit their aims and environments. John Riches charts the history of using CBS in Scotland, including working with ‘middle class church people’,⁶³ and its development into ‘an inclusive movement, open to all kinds of readers in many different situations.’⁶⁴ CBS was thus employed beyond its original conception as aimed solely at the powerless, though it retained its aim of social transformation – Riches describes CBS as ‘the story of the power of Scripture, mediated through a uniquely enabling process, working to transform people’s lives, individually and

⁵⁸ Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 4.

⁵⁹ Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 4.

⁶⁰ Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 4.

⁶¹ Gerald West, ‘Contextuality’ in John F. A. Sawyer (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 401.

⁶² West, ‘Contextuality’, 401. West makes the connection with liberation hermeneutics in ‘Reading the Bible Differently’ *Semeia* 73, 26.

⁶³ Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 10.

⁶⁴ Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 22.

communally...'⁶⁵ For Louise Lawrence too, social change remains an aim of her use of CBS: 'folk readings...serve both to reinvigorate and to transform contexts and "place."' ⁶⁶

In this thesis, I have used CBS methods to read Ephesians 5:21-33 with 'ordinary' readers, and give more detail of this in section 1.4 below. Beyond simply the level of method, however, I argue that the project as a whole finds a place within the CBS tradition. CBS as conceived by Gerald West consists of a conversation between scholars and 'ordinary' readers to which each group contributes. West describes a dialogue to which 'ordinary' readers bring their ability to link the biblical text with their own context, and are then helped by scholars who provide 'access to the riches of the Bible in its literary and socio-historical contexts.'⁶⁷ Although CBS as used by John Riches in Scotland no longer necessarily involved academics in every group session, resources for the meeting were provided and the group facilitators were trained by 'professional theologians'; the CBS meetings therefore still represented interaction between scholarship and 'ordinary' readers, although this took a different form from that in South Africa.⁶⁸ While this thesis is not a conversation between scholars and 'ordinary' readers, it does consist of a dialogue with each group. In a way, I am acting as facilitator of the study as a whole (as well as actually facilitating the group discussions with 'ordinary' readers) – selecting and mediating the different voices, much as the practice of facilitating group discussion involves inviting different participants to speak and attempting to summarise what they have said.

In terms of the South African practice of CBS as especially involving the poor and marginalised, this thesis shows points of discontinuity and yet also arguably continuity with it. Female scholars are not powerless: their education and the privileged platform they enjoy for their views puts them far from the margins of society. Similarly, the particular group of 'ordinary' readers whose views are represented here are generally well-educated and from a relatively affluent part of the UK: as a group, they cannot be regarded as on the margins of society. This might put this study at odds with CBS as practised by Gerald West and others. However,

⁶⁵ Riches (ed.) *What is Contextual Bible Study?* 22.

⁶⁶ Lawrence, *The Word in Place*, 24.

⁶⁷ West, 'Contextuality', 412.

⁶⁸ See Riches (ed.) *What is Contextual Bible Study?* 12.

although the women included within this project may not be poor or powerless in terms of UK society, they do represent a constituency of readers of this text whose views have found only inconsistent recognition in scholarship to date; they might hence be seen as not enjoying the same influence as others. To this extent, there is a partial analogy with the work of Gerald West and others among socially marginalised readers.

That said, there are some important distinctions between this overall project and the CBS tradition to date, and they concern aims and agendas. The CBS tradition aims at praxis – at action (as noted above) which will help in the transformation of societies or of individuals. This aimed-for output reflects the CBS agenda of liberation from oppression which both motivates and underpins the reading process. By contrast, this project aims not at any action by those consulted, but instead at developing a hermeneutical proposal. This in turn reflects my differing agenda, which lies in finding an ethically and theologically responsible strategy for reading a contentious biblical text. These agendas overlap – my definition of an ethically responsible reading (as one which enables women to flourish without exposing them to abuse) could imply liberation from oppression, of one kind at least. However, whereas the CBS tradition typically seeks to address the problem of the on-going oppression of marginalised peoples using biblical texts as a resource, for this study the problem to be addressed *is* the biblical text, which appears anything but liberating.⁶⁹

The second part of my agenda leads to another difference from CBS practice elsewhere. I set out to identify a theologically fruitful hermeneutic which can support continuing use of the text: I am after a way of reading in which the passage can contribute in some way to our understanding of the character and/or purposes of God. As a result of this aim, I am doing more than simply listening to the readers of Ephesians 5:21-33; I am listening *out* for something that can lead to theologically and ethically responsible reading of this text. I am therefore (eventually) judging the

⁶⁹ CBS has not completely shied away from Ephesians 5:21-33, as already noted. However, its treatment when read with Contextual Bible Study groups in Scotland paired it with ‘a very different text’ – Galatians 3:23-29, see Patte (ed.), *Global Bible Commentary*, 475. One effect of such a pairing is, I would argue, to alter the problem with which readers are presented: they are no longer given a problem of questionable biblical ethics, but one of textual inconsistency, which allows them to continue to pursue an agenda of social liberation with biblical support.

views expressed according to how helpful they are for this aim. This kind of judgement does not often feature in other CBS work, in which group facilitators seek instead to listen well and offer their analysis back to those participating.⁷⁰ Defenders of CBS deny that it is uncritical, maintaining instead that ‘it does not accept every idea as right, or deny that some interpretations are more life-giving than others.’⁷¹ They however assert that the task of judging between interpretations is for the group of readers as a whole – ‘the key is that interpretations are tested and weighed by the reading group, which is likely to have a particular concern for social justice and praxis.’⁷² In this thesis, I will be doing the ‘testing’ and ‘weighing’ myself, and in a way that considers more than social justice alone. In these respects, I am going beyond what many CBS practitioners would advocate.

Despite these differences, this project can still be seen as fitting within the broad framework of CBS. Both CBS and this study are based on the conviction that ‘ordinary’ readers have at least as much to offer to the interpretation of biblical texts as scholars. Both CBS and this study therefore involve these two readerships in the interpretation process. Finally, both CBS and this study seek to listen to a variety of perspectives on the text, in the belief that from such a process will emerge something of value.⁷³ For CBS more generally this ‘something of value’ is often suggested action to challenge oppression; for this study, it might instead be liberating and theologically promising interpretation.

⁷⁰ As, for example, Louise Lawrence who wishes to highlight possible impediments to her listening well – ‘I must openly acknowledge that I may well have coloured my accounts of the fieldwork at certain points with elements of suspicion and correction.’ She goes on to say that ‘each community will be encouraged to read my analysis and respond to it,’ see *The Word in Place*, 132.

⁷¹ Cornwall, ‘Contextual Bible Study,’ 17.

⁷² Cornwall, ‘Contextual Bible Study,’ 17.

⁷³ The work of Louise Lawrence demonstrates the worth of such an approach. In responding to the charge that contextual readings might be seen as ‘solipsistic or isolationist,’ Lawrence argues for ‘a perspective which encourages the readings of a number of contexts inhabited by members to be brought together,’ see *The Word in Place*, 126. Her own consultation of four different reading communities adopts this method.

1.3.2 Theological interpretation of the New Testament

Part of the stated aim of this thesis – to identify theologically fruitful ways of reading Ephesians 5:21-33 – indicates both an assumption about the biblical texts in general, and a goal for this passage in particular. The assumption concerns the subject matter of the Bible as a whole, which I take to be primarily concerned with, as Kevin Vanhoozer puts it, ‘God, the acts of God in history, the gospel.’⁷⁴ It is this assumption which shaped my earlier definition of a theologically fruitful reading, as contributing to our perception of God as revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The thesis thus draws on a tradition of theological interpretation of biblical texts,⁷⁵ a tradition in which ‘interpretative goals...are governed by a conception of what the Bible is: Holy Scripture, God ministering his Word to human beings through human servants, and so sharing with them the goods of knowledge of himself.’⁷⁶

Defending theological assumptions

This approach to interpretation, and the assumption which underlies it, might be questioned (as far as this thesis is concerned) as to whether it is sufficiently critical to deal adequately with the textual and ethical difficulties of Ephesians 5. In response, theological interpretation of the Bible need not be uncritical. Although Vanhoozer may be right in his general statement that ‘theological interpretation of the Bible is more likely to be critical of readers than of biblical authors or biblical texts’,⁷⁷ there are many examples of theological interpretation of scripture which *is* critical of texts – George Lindbeck illustrates one kind of critical approach when, referring to ‘what scripture meant by the Church,’ he allows the possibility that ‘perhaps faithfulness to

⁷⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘Introduction: What is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?’ in Vanhoozer (ed.) *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 24.

⁷⁵ Daniel Treier identifies a ‘contemporary movement’ of scholars who practise ‘theological interpretation of Scripture – see ‘Daniel J. Treier, ‘What is Theological Interpretation? An Ecclesiological Reduction’ in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* vol. 12, no. 2 (April 2010), 145. Treier further locates two ‘starting points’ for this movement – in the work of Karl Barth and in recent Roman Catholic scholarship – see Treier, ‘What is Theological Interpretation?’, 149-150.

⁷⁶ John Webster, ‘Editorial’ in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* vol. 12, no. 2 (April 2010), 117.

⁷⁷ Vanhoozer, ‘Introduction’, 22.

the central meaning of scripture, to Christ, requires that Christians now substitute some quite different way of thinking about Christian community.’⁷⁸

Especially relevant to this thesis is a kind of critical theological reading which has similarities with Lindbeck’s suggestion: a proposal made by Rudolf Bultmann – *Sachkritik*.⁷⁹ Bultmann suggested differentiating between the words of a text and the meaning (or *Sache*) they are intended to convey – thus, for example, the *Sache* of Pauline writing could be defined as ‘what Paul really meant or what he wanted to direct our attention to.’⁸⁰ With the *Sache* identified, Bultmann then advocated a critical process which ‘distinguishes between what is said and what is meant and measures what is said by its meaning.’⁸¹ This ‘measuring’ implies a readiness to find fault: the interpreter may conclude that a text fails to convey the *Sache* in a satisfactory way. As Robert Morgan puts it, ‘*Sachkritik* is always based on the distinction between the biblical texts and the gospel itself’⁸² – a distinction which also seems to underpin Lindbeck’s approach above: it is this differentiation which permits, and provides criteria for, criticism of particular texts.

Theological interpretation can, therefore, be critical of biblical texts. It can also, however, provide resources for continued use of problematic texts without denying their difficulty. Theological interpretation has a long history in the pre-modern era, and as David Steinmetz points out, early church interpreters found ways – via allegory, for example – of continuing to use passages ‘in which the literal meaning...is absurd, undercuts the living relationship of the church to the Old Testament, or is spiritually barren.’⁸³ Robert Morgan argues that *Sachkritik* can play a similar role in theological interpretation today. Allegory, as Morgan notes,

⁷⁸ George Lindbeck, ‘The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation’ in Stephen E. Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Cambridge MA & Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 40.

⁷⁹ As will become clear, this thesis is particularly indebted to an analysis of *Sachkritik* by Robert Morgan. Morgan traces the concept as it originated in dialogue between Bultmann and Karl Barth, developed in Bultmann’s own work, and has been expanded in approaches taken by scholars subsequently. See Robert Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik* in Reception History’ in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 (2010), 175-190.

⁸⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, ‘The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,’ in J. M. Robinson (ed.), *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 240

⁸¹ Bultmann, ‘The Problem’ 241. Referred to by Morgan in ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 180.

⁸² Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 180.

⁸³ David C. Steinmetz, ‘The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis’ in Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 29.

‘retained all scripture as a potential source of faith and devotion even while resisting what some texts actually say’⁸⁴ – this ‘resisting’ involved shifting reading method (from a literal interpretation to an allegorical one) rather than criticising the text. Although *Sachkritik* allows for criticism of the text, it also, like allegory, ‘attempt[s] to enable scripture to function as a source and norm’.⁸⁵ This suggests that it has considerable promise for providing a theological interpretation of a problematic text without losing sight of its difficulties.⁸⁶

Finally, important for this thesis is the capacity of theological interpretation for allowing diverse readings of the same text to be plausible. As Steinmetz convincingly argues, early church biblical interpretation proceeded on the basis that ‘the language of the Bible opens up a field of possible meanings’.⁸⁷ He then illustrates this with reference to four readings, from very different geographical and historical contexts (from Irenaeus to Luther), of the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-6), concluding, ‘if you were to ask me which of these interpretations is valid, I should have to respond that they all are.’⁸⁸ As both Steinmetz and Stephen Fowl point out, finding value in the work of premodern biblical exegetes is one result of rejecting ‘the modern quest for a single, eternally stable meaning’ in biblical texts.⁸⁹ While the ‘field of possible meanings’ posited by theological interpretation of the Bible has boundaries – set by its understanding of biblical subject matter – it does not assert that there is just one allowable interpretation. This has two implications for this thesis: first, the women consulted here are not included in order to be proved ‘wrong’, and secondly, the interpretation I offer at the end is intended as only one option within the theologically-possible field.

⁸⁴ Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*’, 185.

⁸⁵ Morgan, *Sachkritik*, 186.

⁸⁶ Morgan says of difficult texts, ‘perhaps like allegorical interpretation *Sachkritik* cannot enable problematic parts of scripture to function as a norm, but like allegorical interpretation, it can redirect attention to more central and less problematic texts and meanings’ (Morgan, *Sachkritik*, 185). This ‘redirecting of attention’ need not imply rejection of problem texts when *Sachkritik* is used – simply that such texts are best read as opaque renderings of theological truths better articulated elsewhere.

⁸⁷ Steinmetz, ‘The Superiority’, 31.

⁸⁸ Steinmetz, ‘The Superiority’, 35.

⁸⁹ See Stephen E. Fowl, ‘Introduction’ in Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, xvii.

A goal for Ephesians 5:21-33

Neither a theological approach to Ephesians 5:21-33, nor the use of *Sachkritik* as an interpretative method, guarantee that I would necessarily achieve my aim of finding ways in which this text can continue to be used. The ethical questions raised by the passage suggest that it would be possible to follow a critical theological approach and conclude that (applying George Lindbeck's words quoted earlier to marriage instead of the Christian community) 'faithfulness to the central meaning of scripture, to Christ, requires that Christians now substitute some quite different way of thinking about Christian [marriage]'⁹⁰ than that set out in Ephesians 5:21-33. A different route is, however, suggested in a recent book by Dale Martin. In *Biblical Truths*, Dale Martin asserts that 'the answer to difficult passages in the Bible...is not to get rid of the passages...but to learn proper ways to interpret the Bible in theologically and ethically fruitful ways.'⁹¹ One way of viewing my preferred course through the map of contemporary readings is, therefore, as an out-working of Martin's proposal in the case of one particular 'difficult' text. However, while there is significant similarity between Martin's overall approach and this thesis, it seems that we take a different line when reading Ephesians 5:21-33 itself (as further described below).

Martin describes his book as (among other things) a 'provisional theological interpretation of the New Testament' in which he is 'offering...the theological understandings I have held over many years that help me make sense of what I confess in church.'⁹² Martin reads the New Testament through the lens of his interpretation of expressions of orthodox Christian belief such as the creeds ('what I confess in church'),⁹³ only sometimes making use of historical criticism.⁹⁴ When the biblical texts and Christian orthodoxy appear to be in conflict with one another (Martin cites as examples parables which seem to liken God to a money-lender,

⁹⁰ Lindbeck, 'The Story-Shaped Church', 40.

⁹¹ Martin's statement is made in the context of an argument against reading the Old Testament in 'anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic ways' and thus dispensing with all or parts of it. However, he makes clear that he has more than the Old Testament in view ('difficult passages...are in the New Testament as well') and his comments appear to apply to all 'difficult' texts, not only those which might be read as 'anti-Jewish.' Martin, *Biblical Truths*, 81.

⁹² Martin, *Biblical Truths*, 32.

⁹³ Martin states 'what I mean by "orthodox" is nothing very exact. I simply mean the kind of Christian statements and claims made by classical Christian thinkers...' He then gives examples including Irenaeus' Rule of Faith and creeds such as the Nicene Creed, St Athanasius' Creed and the Apostles' Creed – see *Biblical Truths*, 36.

⁹⁴ Martin does not eschew historical criticism, but also does not rely exclusively on it – as made clear in *Biblical Truths*, 5, and again at 30-31.

slave-owner or unjust judge),⁹⁵ Martin advocates ‘following those early Christians we call orthodox’ and interpreting the texts ‘so that they render more adequate, edifying truths that reflect what we truly want to affirm about the God of our faith and confessions.’⁹⁶ This is necessarily a very truncated rendering of one aspect of Martin’s book. It does, however, elaborate on what he means by ‘theologically fruitful’ interpretation in the context of ‘difficult’ biblical passages: finding strategies which produce readings in line with ‘the God of our faith and confessions.’

I share with Martin a commitment to interpreting ‘difficult’ biblical texts rather than dismissing them, and to finding reading strategies which enable such texts to continue to be used in the service of Christian belief. In the light of such common ground, it is surprising that our approaches to Ephesians 5:21-33 are so divergent. Martin addresses the Ephesians passage in the context of ecclesiology, and finds it to be supportive of the ‘traditional household’ of the ‘ancient Mediterranean world’.⁹⁷ Martin’s comments on the passage indicate that he sees it as a thorough-going statement of patriarchy: he proposes that the Ephesian household code

‘which...builds upon the version from Colossians, is more elaborate, emphasizes even more the subordination of women, children and slaves, and makes the male patriarch practically an earthly version of Christ: “As the church is subject to Christ, so also women should be, in everything, subject to their men” (Eph 5:24).’⁹⁸

This is in contrast to other biblical sources: ‘Jesus, Paul and some of the Gospels seem opposed to traditional household structures.’⁹⁹ Martin goes on to argue that any ecclesiology based on the idea of the church as ‘household of God’ should ensure it avoids ‘the sins of patriarchal and sexist Christian history’ and instead be ‘a radical alternative to the traditional...household...’¹⁰⁰ A little later, Martin addresses the image of the church as the body of Christ, again referring to Ephesians 5:21-33. Dealing with the second half of the passage, Martin comments, ‘as Christ had “washed” and “cleansed” the dirty, feminine church, so men should similarly take care of the bodies of their women (5:25-33).’ He concludes that ‘this is a version of

⁹⁵ Martin, *Biblical Truths*, 115.

⁹⁶ Martin, *Biblical Truths*, 115.

⁹⁷ Martin elaborates on this kind of household at *Biblical Truths*, 316 and deals with the Ephesian household code at *Biblical Truths*, 318.

⁹⁸ Martin, *Biblical Truths*, 318.

⁹⁹ *Biblical Truths*, 319.

¹⁰⁰ *Biblical Truths*, 319.

the “church as body of Christ” we certainly should treat warily today, given its sexism and misogyny.’¹⁰¹

Although Martin is not here presenting a full interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33 and deals only with its implications for an understanding of church, he seems to find little to recommend in the passage. While it remains possible that Martin might find some theological value when treating the passage more fully, his comments that the passage ‘makes the male patriarch practically an earthly version of Christ’ and that it contains an image of the church which is steeped in ‘sexism and misogyny’ seem to suggest otherwise. Martin appears to view the passage as profoundly compromised by unmitigated patriarchy. With this text, Martin makes use of historical critical methods in seeing it as firmly supportive of the ‘traditional household’ of the ancient Mediterranean, which entailed patriarchy and sexism. He contrasts the image of the church as Christ’s body found in Ephesians 5 with that found in the Apostles’ Creed: the latter ‘can do much good work.’¹⁰²

In approaching Ephesians 5:21-33, I prefer to follow Martin’s previously articulated general suggestion for interpreting ‘difficult’ biblical passages – looking for ways in which they might reflect the core of Christian belief. I therefore see this thesis as following Martin’s general line for problematic texts, but departing from his particular treatment of Ephesians 5:21-33. I take Martin’s reading of the Ephesians passage to indicate that I am less ready than he is to draw on historical critical approaches for this text, and more hopeful of finding theological fruit within it. In his assessment of *Sachkritik*, Robert Morgan distinguishes between ‘theological *interpretation* of scripture’ and ‘theological *judgement* on a text made subsequently to interpreting a text historically’ [*Italics original*].¹⁰³ It seems to me that Dale Martin delivers the second of these when reading Ephesians 5:21-33, whereas I prefer to aim at the first. Even in the case of a difficult and complex biblical text like Ephesians 5, I prefer to read with the aim of finding theological fruit.

¹⁰¹ *Biblical Truths*, 321.

¹⁰² Martin, *Biblical Truths*, 321.

¹⁰³ Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*’, 185.

1.3.3 Ethical responsibility towards women

A theological ethic

Dale Martin's proposal that difficult Bible passages should be read in 'theologically and ethically fruitful ways', is prompted by 'anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic' biblical interpretation which distinguishes the 'God of the Old Testament' from 'the God of the New Testament'.¹⁰⁴ Thus, for Martin, theology and ethics are intertwined: a theology that posits a markedly different God in Old and New Testaments accompanies ethically questionable reading practices. A similar linking of the ethical with the theological underpins my criteria for judging between interpretations of Ephesians 5, and so my understanding of ethical responsibility towards women is both grounded in, and shaped by, theological concerns. The impetus for my interest in ethical responsibility towards women in general is a theological one, based – as it was for Wayne Meeks – on the New Testament's commanded 'love of neighbour'.¹⁰⁵ It is not enough to aim at an interpretation of Ephesians 5 which might be tolerable (or better) for me; such an interpretation needs also to be directed towards the benefit of all women, because of Jesus' instruction, 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39).

Theological considerations not only prompt my concern with ethical responsibility towards women, they also shape its content. If such ethical responsibility is understood as connected with love of neighbour, then a theological analysis implies that the term is directed towards what is life-giving for women. The link between God's love and the giving of life finds Christological expression in many parts of the New Testament. It is encapsulated in John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life'. In chapter 5 I cover in detail how this theme of God's love conferring life is developed in Ephesians as a whole: as an illustration, Ephesians 2:4-5 connect God's love with life and with Christ – 'but God...out of the great love with which he loved us...made us alive together with Christ'. It is this love of God that the author of Ephesians calls Christians to emulate in their relationships with one another: 'therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as

¹⁰⁴ Martin, *Biblical Truths*, 81.

¹⁰⁵ As noted above in section 1.2.3, Meeks based his argument that 'Christian moral formation' should include 'the habit of listening to the weaker partner in every relationship of power' on 'love of neighbor'. See Meeks, 'The "Haustafeln"', 253.

Christ loved us' (Ephesians 5:1-2). As a result, theologically, just as God's love results in life for humankind, so should our love for one another be life-giving. Ethical responsibility towards women, as I define it, therefore seeks what is life-giving for them.

The description 'life-giving' is, however, a broad term, and capable of many different understandings. It is even conceivable that an argument might be made that abuse (physical or emotional violence) contributes towards what is life-giving for women – indeed this seems to be one implication of statements made on the Christian Domestic Discipline website.¹⁰⁶ Further Christological definition of 'life-giving' helps to rule out this kind of possibility. When the actions of Christ are taken as the exemplar of life-giving love, then it is no longer plausible that such love might embrace abuse. Ephesians 5:21-33 itself thematises love in connection with Christ and with a particular action of Christ – that of 'giving himself up' (Ephesians 5:25). This in turn echoes Ephesians 5:2 – 'Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'. I offer in my own reading of the passage a more detailed account of what this 'giving himself up' might mean, but in general terms it suggests a surrender of self in order to benefit others. This 'benefit' is more than something only vaguely advantageous: the language of Ephesians implies the best imaginable good. God's love 'made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (2:5-6); the love of Christ 'surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (3:19). These descriptions, though their precise reference is debated (as I discuss further in chapter 5), suggest that Christ's actions result in life, a position of honour and importance, and receiving from God's abundance. Christ's actions involve maximising the potential of others.

'Life-giving', when Christologically understood, is thus a term with two main features. It implies surrender of self by the giver, and maximising the potential of the recipient. Such an idea of what is life-giving makes it incompatible with abuse, which serves to shore up the authority of abusers rather than involving their self-surrender, and which results in physical and/or emotional damage to those abused.

¹⁰⁶ The website argues that CDD can help 'in strengthening...marriages and improving the quality of ...relationships.' This suggests that 'spanking' women will ultimately benefit them, as it benefits their relationships with their partners – see <http://www.christiandomesticdiscipline.com/home.html> accessed on 4/10/2013.

Such an idea of ‘life-giving’ also aims at something beyond culturally-influenced standards which assert the rights of women in society. Aiming at what is life-giving for women implies more than affirming educational, legal, and financial entitlements, and more than acknowledging the right to be treated with respect; all these are included within the term, but it is directed at something still more demanding – the maximising of the potential of women, realising their best imaginable good. Such a ‘good’ is not, however, to be understood in terms of Enlightenment individualism which prizes independence as a goal: the goal is instead the strengthening of community, and of social bonds, through the realisation of the potential of its women members.

A feminist ethic

Such an ethic is not only theological, it is also, I would argue, feminist. It is directed at something more particular than some of the broader definitions of feminism, and yet stops short of the feminisms that would give women authority over the biblical text. So, for example, my definition of ethical responsibility towards women would fall within Carolyn Osiek’s inclusive understanding of ‘feminist’, which she offers when ‘examining the alternatives for feminist biblical hermeneutics’, among women in Christian communities who recognise the role the Bible can play in supporting patriarchy: ‘the term is to be taken here in its broadest sense, as concern for the promotion and dignity of women in all aspects of society’.¹⁰⁷ In theory, it would have been possible to adopt Osiek’s explication of ‘feminist’ as the definition of ethical responsibility towards women for the purposes of this project. However, seeking ‘the promotion and dignity of women’ is so broad that it does not do full justice to the Christologically-informed definition I have outlined above: it sets the bar too low. Osiek anticipates this kind of objection: she acknowledges that some of the interpretative positions she considers feminist might not be seen as ‘life-giving to women’, but responds ‘I would argue that such judgements are subjective and that as long as a significant number of women in or on the margins of the Western Christian tradition find one or other of these alternatives to be their way of functioning meaningfully within their context...it is a valid alternative for those who would take

¹⁰⁷ Carolyn Osiek, ‘The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives’ in *Religion & Intellectual Life* 6 no. 3-4 (US: The Associates for Religion & Intellectual Life, 1989), 100.

it.¹⁰⁸ Without denying that individual women are best-placed to make their own context-based hermeneutical choices, I am seeking a hermeneutic capable of application across different contexts and in various situations. Assessments of what is ‘life-giving’ need not be entirely subjective: they can be shaped in conversation with the biblical text. One way of doing this identifies Christological grounds for aiming at something more for women than ‘meaningful functioning’.

Osiek’s inclusivism has been questioned by Claudia Camp who refers to ‘what Carolyn Osiek would call feminist hermeneutics’, thus distancing herself from Osiek’s definition.¹⁰⁹ Central to Camp’s challenge of Osiek’s work is that its inclusivism makes her analysis insufficiently critical.¹¹⁰ Of particular relevance here is Camp’s questioning whether the interpretative options designated feminist by Osiek all ‘deal equally well with the sources of oppression’ and ‘provide equally adequate means to combat such oppression.’¹¹¹ Camp’s criticism has some justification, of which there may be an acknowledgement in Osiek’s judgement on one of the hermeneutical approaches she discusses – that ‘it tends to be innocent of the political implications of the types of social interaction and relationships that it advocates’.¹¹² Such innocence can unintentionally leave the door open for oppressive practices. In the light of the use of Ephesians 5:21-33 to justify abuse of women, it is especially important that ethical responsibility towards women is defined in such a way as to minimise the possibility of such use. The Christological definition offered above attempts to do this: it is therefore narrower than the inclusive feminism of Osiek and moves in the direction of the more critical feminist stance of Camp.

Despite this movement, my criterion of ethical responsibility towards women does not arrive at Camp’s position. My approach differs from that of Camp in its view of, and priority given to, the biblical text. Camp and the scholar whose influence she

¹⁰⁸ Osiek, ‘The Feminist and the Bible,’ 100.

¹⁰⁹ Claudia V. Camp, ‘Feminist Theological Hermeneutics: Canon and Christian Identity’ in Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 58.

¹¹⁰ Claudia V. Camp asserts that ‘the urge to include a wide range of women’s interpretative experiences must confront...the challenge of critical rigor, both in an intellectual and in a political sense - see Camp, ‘Feminist Theological Hermeneutics’, 58.

¹¹¹ Camp, ‘Feminist Theological Hermeneutics’, 56.

¹¹² Osiek, ‘The Feminist and the Bible,’ 103.

acknowledges, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,¹¹³ both support an ‘insistence on the authority of women over the Bible’, grounded on a ‘critical theory that refuses to validate its claims by appeal to a “transcendent other.”’¹¹⁴ In contrast with this approach, I do wish to ‘appeal to a “transcendent other”’ in judging between reading strategies, and in a way which would not grant women authority over the Bible. Using Vanhoozer’s expression, I hold that ‘the Bible’s original governing interest’ is theological – that it is possible to discern ‘the work and word of God in and through Scripture.’¹¹⁵ In general terms, I do not believe that there is necessarily a conflict between this ‘governing interest’ of the biblical text and the ‘interested perspectives’ of its women readers,¹¹⁶ though negotiating both of these in relation to Ephesians 5 is admittedly difficult.

In summary, ethical responsibility towards women is predicated on a theological analysis that such responsibility is somehow life-giving, and a Christological evaluation of what that life-giving might mean. Interest in what is ‘life-giving’ for women therefore signifies a genuine concern to maximise their potential, based on an understanding of love as involving self-surrender. In this thesis, ethical responsibility encompasses aims such as dignity and social entitlement for women, and so might be described as feminist, but it does not pursue a trajectory which ends with women having supremacy over the biblical text, or one which is directed towards individual rights at the expense of benefit to society. With these provisos, this is both a Christian and a feminist ethic.

¹¹³ Camp writes ‘I have come to a position in full accord with Schüssler Fiorenza’s critical stance’ – see ‘Feminist Theological Hermeneutics’, 58.

¹¹⁴ Camp, ‘Feminist Theological Hermeneutics’, 58.

¹¹⁵ Vanhoozer, ‘Introduction’, 22.

¹¹⁶ I take the expression ‘interested perspectives’ from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 27. The paper on which this chapter was based was first published in 1988 – as is made clear in Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 1. In this essay, Schüssler Fiorenza proposes an ethics of biblical interpretation which is both ‘aware of the plurality’ of interpretative methods and interpretations and yet also ‘seeks to give the text its due.’ I am seeking something similar in this thesis, except that the basis on which Schüssler Fiorenza suggests ‘giving the text its due’ is historical, whereas I prefer a theological approach.

1.4 Sources and Methods

1.4.1 Gathering data for the ‘map’

Interesting though it might be to find out, this research does not attempt to assess how a majority of women scholars and UK-based ‘ordinary’ readers today would interpret Ephesians 5:21-33. The ‘map’ of interpretative possibility at which it aims is not therefore intended to be a comprehensive guide to the terrain, more a sketch of some of its features. This study seeks to explore a range of *possible* meanings for the text, not the *probability* of those meanings occurring: at its centre are the interpretative ideas themselves rather than how widely they might find support. Accordingly, the most appropriate research method is a qualitative one, rather than quantitative: a method aimed at depth rather than breadth. For my qualitative sample of readings, I set out to gather data from two sources: published work by contemporary women scholars and the spoken reflections of groups of ‘ordinary’ women who volunteered to read and discuss the text with me. In this section I explain the composition of these sources, in terms of scope and selection.

Contemporary women scholars

In selecting work of women scholars for this thesis, I chose pieces I judged to be both ‘contemporary’ and ‘scholarly’. The term ‘contemporary’ has arguably here been broadly interpreted – to include work published from 1970 onwards. This reflects the long influence of some of the work discussed: as an example, no analysis of feminist interpretation of this passage would be complete without considering the contribution of ‘the doyenne of feminist biblical scholarship in the twentieth century,’¹¹⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Schüssler Fiorenza’s conclusions on this passage have continued to be discussed – with approval or otherwise – over the now nearly 35 years since they first appeared in print.¹¹⁸ The term ‘scholarly’ has been applied to work published either in book form or in an academic journal *and* included on (at least) one of three academic databases/catalogues.¹¹⁹ The resulting

¹¹⁷ Elna Mouton, ‘Reimagining ancient household ethos?: On the implied rhetorical effect of Ephesians 5:21-33,’ *Neotestamentica*, 48 (2014), 166.

¹¹⁸ Examples of continued discussion of Schüssler Fiorenza’s work occur in articles by Carol J. Schlueter in the late 1990s (see ‘Revitalising Interpretations of Ephesians 5:22’ in *Pastoral Psychology* 45 (1997), 333), by Virginia Ramey Mollencott in the early 2000s (see ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 43) and by Elna Mouton in 2014 (‘Reimagining ancient household ethos,’ 168).

¹¹⁹ The databases/catalogues consulted were the ATLA religion database and the library catalogues for Durham University and Cambridge University. In practice, the three databases were searched for

selection of work by 39 women does not claim to be exhaustive or even representative of all scholarly work by women on this text:¹²⁰ instead it seeks (as with the fieldwork among ordinary readers) to uncover a broad range of interpretative possibility among contemporary women.¹²¹

As a result of this selection process, the pieces of work considered vary in length (and therefore in level of detail), in intended audience (some are directed at a purely academic readership, others more broadly) and in purpose (some are commentaries, while others are articles directed at particular issues facing women but which make use of the text in their argument).¹²² As a result, not all offer a full reading of the passage. They do, however, all give enough detail to be able to draw conclusions about the main elements of their hermeneutical stance and methods.¹²³

‘Ordinary’ readers

The ‘ordinary’ readers who volunteered to participate in this study are mainly church attendees from the Hertford area of England (where I lived at the time). In seeking to recruit participants, I approached churches for both practical and ideological reasons. On a practical level, it seemed likely to make recruitment easier – church-goers might in general be more interested in reading and discussing the Bible than those not attending church;¹²⁴ church goers might also wish to find ways of continuing to use the particular text at the centre of this thesis. Ideologically, Ephesians 5:21-33 is the kind of text which might discourage further biblical reading for those unaccustomed to church, and confirm a stereotypical picture of the Bible (and Christianity more generally) as outdated and patriarchal. Although recruitment centred on those accustomed to church, when a Muslim friend offered to see if any of

material relating to Ephesians 5:21-33 (the passage reference was used as the criterion for one search, and the expression ‘Haustafeln’ for another search) which was then manually edited to exclude male authors.

¹²⁰ I have not, for example, included PhD theses published only online.

¹²¹ Some of the scholars thus selected had published twice on Ephesians 5:21-33. Where this was the case, I read both pieces by the same author. As a result, while the number of scholars reviewed was 39, the number of publications consulted was 43.

¹²² So, for example, an article by Angela E. Hunt which mostly targets the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the US constitution debated in the US Senate in the late 1970s and early 1980s: ‘All’s Not Wrong with Women’s Rights’ in *The Fundamentalist Journal* 2 (1983), 14-15.

¹²³ Those I read that did not do this were not included in the 39 on which this chapter is based.

¹²⁴ In relation to Scotland, John Riches concludes that reading the Bible is no longer a generally accepted practice for those not attending church: indeed it could be described as ‘counter-cultural and unnatural’ – see Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 6. There seems no reason why this should not also apply to non-church goers in England too.

her friends might volunteer for a group discussion, I felt this would be very helpful. Such a group from outside the Christian tradition could act as a kind of ‘control’, highlighting assumptions made by the church-going volunteers. Muslim women might be expected to have sympathy with the concept of a sacred text generally, and the Scriptural Reasoning project at Cambridge University has demonstrated the value gained when people of one faith read a text sacred to another.¹²⁵ This recruitment process (described in more detail at the start of chapter 3) resulted in 57 volunteers, from 7 different Christian denominations in addition to the Muslim group.

The spoken reflections of these volunteers were invited in two ways – in group discussion and in subsequent individual interviews. Both methods were used in order to get the benefits of group discussion without some of its pitfalls. Group discussion allows individuals’ views to be formed or refined through interaction with other people. As Elizabeth Long argued persuasively in her study of women’s reading groups in Houston, Texas, reading has wrongly been regarded as an exclusively solitary activity: reading is taught in social settings and ‘most readers need the support of talk with other readers.’¹²⁶ On the other hand, discussion in a group also has the potential to limit what people say: where there are strongly-held opinions, especially insistent voices, or simply not enough time, some members of the group can feel denied the opportunity to make the contribution they might like. Sometimes too, discussions on a subject like marriage might touch on experiences that people are reticent about sharing in front of a group of people. In such cases, individual interviews can enable participants to articulate views with more freedom. Of the 57 volunteers for group discussions, 42 subsequently offered to be interviewed.

In terms of structuring group discussions, CBS methodology provided resources. As already noted, CBS has been developed as a way of reading biblical texts in small groups, encouraging participants to read texts ‘closely and carefully.’¹²⁷ This makes it particularly suitable for a project which seeks to explore interpretation of one

¹²⁵ See the testimonials given on www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/en/sr accessed on 8 July 2014 at 14.15.

¹²⁶ Elizabeth Long, ‘Textual Interpretation as Collective Action’ in Jonathan Boyarin (ed.), *The Ethnography of Reading* (Berkeley and Los Angeles CA and Oxford, UK: University of California Press, 1993), 191.

¹²⁷ Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 3.

particular biblical text rather than the culture and practices of Bible-reading groups more generally.¹²⁸ However, while CBS suggested how discussions might be ordered and questions framed, one aspect of its methodology was not adopted here. In this project, ‘ordinary’ readers were not helped with additional scholarly resources, such as ‘access to the Bible in its literary and socio-historical contexts,’ as envisaged by Gerald West.¹²⁹ This was in order to avoid introducing views which might have been regarded as ‘expert’ and thereby discouraging participants from giving their own perspective. This potential drawback of CBS was addressed by West in ways not possible for this study – like only working with ‘organized communities, groups who can “talk back”’ and waiting for such groups to request the use of CBS.¹³⁰ My role was therefore limited to that of facilitator of the discussion.

In developing the questions for the group discussions, I drew significantly on the CBS methodology as set out in John Riches’ book, *What is Contextual Bible Study?* Riches distinguishes three ‘modes of reading the biblical text’¹³¹ which CBS groups have tended to adopt – first, reading behind the text where ‘the aim is to locate the text in its original setting’,¹³² secondly reading the text itself and so concentrating on ‘the words and images, characters, emotions and styles that can be found within it’,¹³³ and third, ‘reading in front of the text’ which start[s] with the readers and the interests and concerns they bring to [the text]’.¹³⁴ I formulated my questions with a focus on the last of these three ways of reading: my first two questions (before we turned to the passage) asked participants for their views on marriage today, thus setting the text against a backdrop of perceptions of contemporary married life. This focus reflects the research question at the heart of this study – to explore how the text

¹²⁸ Over the past 20 or so years, a number of qualitative studies of Bible reading have used an ethnographic approach to observe groups and reading practices which are already established – see, for example, James S. Bielo, *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009). As the focus of this thesis is on the hermeneutics of a text rather than the social dynamics of Bible reading groups, an approach was needed which involved direct interaction with participants not simply observation.

¹²⁹ West, ‘Contextuality’, 412.

¹³⁰ Bernard C. Lategan comments on the inherent difficulty presented by the power relationship between critic and reader and on the measures taken by West to mitigate this difficulty in ‘Scholar and Ordinary Reader – More than a simple interface,’ in West, Gerald O., and Dube, Musa W (eds.) “‘Reading With’: An exploration of the Interface between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible: African Overtures’ *Semeia* 73 (1996), 245.

¹³¹ Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 37.

¹³² Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 37.

¹³³ Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 40.

¹³⁴ Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 42-43.

might continue to be used today. In practice, this did not prevent groups from discussing its possible historical setting, or its literary genre and features: indeed, some questions invited comment in such areas. It did however try to avoid groups getting ‘lost in the past’¹³⁵ – one of the dangers identified by CBS practitioners when groups concentrate on the world ‘behind the text’. More detail on the questions and how they were composed is given in chapter 3: in overall terms, I aimed both at making questions ‘as open as possible’ and at drawing attention to specific (usually contested) textual features.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 40.

¹³⁶ John Riches gives the reasons for beginning with a question which is as open as possible – it encourages participation and puts contributions on a level, with none privileged above others – see Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 62-3.

1.4.2 The analysis process

Although the data collected as I have just described may be considered quite disparate, I applied one broad scheme of analysis to all of the readings – both scholarly and ‘ordinary’. I looked at how readers framed the text – both at their general hermeneutical line of approach, and at the specific hermeneutical techniques they employed to make sense of its mode of expression.

Textual frameworks

In the area of textual framing, I identified five possibilities, each of which is described in more detail at the start of chapter 2, but broadly summarised here:

Historical: readers approached the text primarily as historical document, asking about its meaning in its original setting.

Socio-critical: here readers approached the text as potentially damaging social prescription, asking about meaning in relation to contemporary standards of social justice.

Literary: interpretations in this category approached the text as a piece of writing, asking about meaning in its literary context, as part of the epistolary genre and in the light of the literary devices contained within it.

Theological: these interpretations dealt with the text as part of the biblical witness to God, asking about its meaning as, or when set against, word of God.

Lived experience: readers approached the text as a possible pattern for their own living, asking about meaning in the light of personal experience and of pragmatism.

These are not mutually exclusive frameworks, and readers often made use of several in dealing with Ephesians 5:21-33. However, in many cases it was possible to identify a predominant line of approach.

Applying the same textual frames to both scholarly and ‘ordinary’ readings raises the issue of whether two sets of data collected in such different ways are sufficiently comparable to make the same method of analysis appropriate. ‘Ordinary’ readers (as already noted) were not provided in this project with the literary and historical information available to scholars; ‘ordinary’ readers were asked specific questions not put to scholars; scholars (presumably) had time to consider and craft their responses to the passage while ‘ordinary’ readers did not. In response, I would argue that the differences just described as not as great as they might at first seem.

Addressing each point in turn, although there were no clear examples among ‘ordinary’ readers of the kind of detailed literary analysis put forward by some scholars (and I did not therefore use this particular frame in classifying ‘ordinary’ readings), there were ‘ordinary’ readers who offered thoroughgoing historical analyses of the passage and many who speculated more generally about the historical circumstances that may have prompted its writing. This meant that there were examples among both scholarly and ‘ordinary’ readings of all frames apart from literary. Secondly, the questions asked of ordinary readers were targeted at some of the exegetical questions that have puzzled scholars and so raised issues that the latter group are likely to address. Thirdly, this study did, in practice, give some time for readers to consider their responses to the passage – at least for those participants volunteering to be interviewed (and this was nearly 75% of the volunteer group as a whole). The time lapse between group discussion and the revisiting of the passage in individual interview (from 2 weeks to, on occasion, 2-3 months) gave ‘ordinary’ readers an opportunity to think about their views, even if this was not the sustained attention scholars might have been able to give to the text.

Common ground between scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers in this study was further provided by the level of education of the ‘ordinary’ readers participating. Demographic information demonstrated that as a group they were highly educated (68% to degree level or higher). This indicates a general familiarity with, and training in, skills of critical thinking, whether or not they had ever before applied these to biblical texts. Furthermore, Ephesians 5:21-33 might be expected to encourage the use of such skills in a way not necessarily true of some other biblical passages. If it is generally true that, outside the academy, the Bible is read in pursuit of spiritual devotion rather than intellectual rigour, then Ephesians 5 is well-suited to undermining this division: its ethical and literary difficulties render it less apparently suitable for spiritual devotion and more likely to encourage the use of intellectual resources to address its perceived problems.

Although it is therefore justifiable to analyse both scholarly and ‘ordinary’ readings according to the same hermeneutical criteria, it is still true that each group makes a distinctive contribution to the overall task. Indeed, analysis according to the same criteria highlights the areas of these contributions. While relatively few ‘ordinary’

readers suggested specific historical interpretations, and none detailed literary ones, many scholars did; conversely, while there were some scholars who adopted a ‘lived experience’ approach, it was ‘ordinary’ readers who had most to offer in this area.

Hermeneutical techniques

I did not set out with a prescribed list of hermeneutical techniques for which I looked in each of the readings considered, but preferred to look at how each reader handled the particular words and phrases of the text in arriving at their interpretation. That said, I was particularly alert to any potential instances of *Sachkritik*. I have already referred to *Sachkritik* as an overall approach to the theological interpretation of texts. Integral to this approach is a particular technique for handling words and phrases whereby they are judged according to the *Sache* of the text, or the meaning they are intended to convey. As I will argue in chapter 2, a number of scholarly readings which fell broadly within a theological frame seemed to make use of this technique.

As also became apparent, there were both scholarly and ‘ordinary’ readings which demonstrated the use of another hermeneutical technique which I have termed maximal construal. Maximal construal refers to a way of reading words and phrases which involves a significant degree of judgement or choice on the part of the reader. This results in apparent re-definition of those words when compared with their use in other contexts or with dictionary definition. In identifying this concept, I am drawing on the work of Walter Brueggemann and Richard Briggs: Brueggemann (in *Texts Under Negotiation: the Bible and Postmodern Imagination*) suggested that interpretation of biblical texts could involve a range of construal by a reader. At one end of this range is a ‘passive posture of receiving what is given:’ at the other end, ‘a more active, constructive position,’¹³⁷ involving more judgement on the part of the reader. Briggs developed ‘the notion of a spectrum of strengths of construal’¹³⁸ in his exploration of how speech-act theory can aid biblical interpretation. Maximal construal is my re-naming of the ‘active, constructive position’ in which meaning owes much to reader judgement. In chapter 2, I show how this technique is used by

¹³⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 16.

¹³⁸ Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech-Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh and York: T&T Clark, 2001), 124.

some scholars; in chapter 3, I show how ‘ordinary’ readings demonstrate a range of construal (as defined by Briggs), not only the maximal position.

1.4.3 Structuring the results

The ‘map’ of contemporary readings of Ephesians 5:21-33 is set out as follows. I begin in chapter 2 with the interpretations of the 39 women scholars, analysed according to hermeneutical framework and technique used. This chapter also includes detailed descriptions of each framework and technique. Chapter 3 is the first of two chapters describing and analysing the responses of ‘ordinary’ readers in the fieldwork for this thesis. Chapter 3 gives detail on how the fieldwork was set up, followed by two ‘thick’ descriptions: the first of the ideological and experiential context within which participants read the passage and the second of the range of responses they gave to the text itself. Chapter 4 then analyses their responses by hermeneutical framework. Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter in which I discuss which hermeneutical approach contributes most towards theologically fruitful and ethically responsible ways of reading this challenging text. I then illustrate how this might work by suggesting a reading of the text, and appraising in what ways this reading itself meets the theological and ethical criteria.

2. Compiling the map: hermeneutical approaches of women scholars

2.1 Introduction

Ephesians 5:21-33 is, according to Turid Karlsen Seim, a text ‘grinded...by a host of interpreters.’¹³⁹ Among the features of the passage which may account for a high level of scholarly interest are its addressees, its opacity and its history of (mis)use. The text has received considerable attention from feminist biblical scholars, partly because it is relatively rare among New Testament texts in that it ‘explicitly addresses women and is about women.’¹⁴⁰ Among scholars more generally, the difficulty of understanding the text may have made it attractive as an object of enquiry: as Morna Hooker remarks, the passage is ‘by no means straightforward.’¹⁴¹ Thirdly, there is the issue of the ‘often devastating legacies’¹⁴² of this and the other New Testament Haustafeln: the use to which this text has been (and continues to be) put can give ethical impetus to continued revisiting of its meaning.¹⁴³ This chapter examines a selection (determined as explained in chapter 1) of the proliferation of scholarly readings of Ephesians 5 by women. The readings are analysed according to hermeneutical framework (or overall line of approach to the passage) and hermeneutical techniques employed (to make sense of its language). Although the purpose of this chapter is to analyse the various readings rather than discriminate between them, the ultimate aim of the thesis is always in view – to determine which methods and techniques promise most help towards theologically fruitful and ethically responsible ways of reading the passage.

¹³⁹ Turid Karlsen Seim, ‘A Superior Minority? The Problem of Headship in Ephesians 5’ in *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology* 49:1 (1995), 168.

¹⁴⁰ Sarah J. Tanzer uses this to justify devoting almost the entirety of her commentary on Ephesians as a whole to this one text: see ‘Ephesians’ in (ed.) Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures, A Feminist Commentary* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1995), 325.

¹⁴¹ Morna D. Hooker, ‘“Submit to one another”: The transformation of relationships in Christ (Eph 5:21-6:9)’ in (ed.) Michael Wolter, *Ethik als angewandte Ekklesiologie: Der Brief an die Epheser*, (Rome: Benedictina Publishing, 2005), 163.

¹⁴² Margaret Y. Mac Donald, ‘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’ in *New Testament Studies* 57 (2011), 78.

¹⁴³ As, for example, for Virginia Ramey Mollencott who criticises ‘the most repressive possible interpretations of Ephesians 5’ for failing to help oppressed religious women. See ‘Emancipative Elements in Ephesians 5:21-33’ in (ed.) Levine, Amy-Jill, *A Feminist Companion to the Deutero-Pauline Epistles* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 38.

2.2 Frameworks for interpretation

2.2.1 Definitions

The work of the contemporary women scholars discussed here has been classified according to five hermeneutical frames of reference: historical, socio-critical, literary, theological and lived experience. These frameworks represent the interpreters' primary settings for the text: the locations within which its meaning is best appreciated. The frameworks are defined as follows:

Historical frameworks set the text in the historical circumstances of its origin. Meaning is determined by understanding the author, the intended original addressees and the culture and society of which they were a part. Included within this category are socio-scientific approaches which locate the text within a theory (or theories) of how societies and communities work.¹⁴⁴

Socio-critical frameworks set the text against contemporary standards of social justice and appraise it accordingly. Included here are feminist and womanist readings, some of which come from particular African and African-American perspectives. As its name implies, interpretations within this framework are typically evaluative of the text, which differentiates them from, for example, historical frameworks.

Literary frameworks place the passage in its context as part of a letter and/or as a piece of rhetoric. Readings in this framework draw on one or more literary theories to understand the text, its genre and the devices it contains. Their focus is on the text itself and on the ways in which it achieves its effects on a reader.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ In the case of other biblical texts, socio-scientific approaches would merit a category of their own because they deal with the general social setting of the text rather than the specific historical events occasioning its writing. However, in the case of Ephesians, the two approaches seem to overlap perhaps more than they might in the case of other New Testament material. This may be because so little is known about the precise original setting of Ephesians; assessments of its broader social setting are considered a more fruitful line of enquiry. As a result of merging these two categories, not all scholars included in this section would regard themselves primarily as historians. However, it seems that the socio-scientific approaches here discussed all retain an interest in the historical setting of the text, even if that is to explain its social purpose rather than to attempt specific historical reconstruction of its addressee community. As an example, Minna Shkul's *Reading Ephesians: Exploring Social Entrepreneurship in the Text* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 11-14 explicitly does not attempt such a reconstruction, but still relies on a historical location for the text within 'the social life of early Christ-followers in a post-Pauline Greco-Roman context' (13) in order to argue that it is an example of 'early Christian social entrepreneurship' (13).

¹⁴⁵ Which, according to David Jasper, distinguishes this kind of approach from 19th century and more recent biblical criticism which 'was more interested in the *context* within which the Bible was written...than the actual *text* of Scripture'. [Italics original] See 'Literary Readings of the Bible' in John Barton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 24.

Theological frameworks set the text either within an understanding of Christian doctrine or within a broader biblical context, or both. They seek to understand whether and how it might be inspired by and/or revelatory of God. This category encompasses interpretations which read the text in the light of some of the themes of Christian theology – Christological, Trinitarian for example – as well as interpretations which situate the text among a selection of biblical parallels (however defined). Also included here are readings which locate the text within the interpretative tradition or doctrine of a particular Christian church or group in order to determine meaning.

Lived experience frameworks set the text within the circumstances of the readers' own contexts. Personal experience, and often pragmatic concerns, determine meaning. Interpretation is guided by an apprehension of what 'works' in practice. As already discussed in chapter 1, it is now widely accepted that the personal contexts of all readers have an impact on their interpretation: what distinguishes readings in this category is that explicit reference is made to such contexts as in some way influencing the meaning readers find.

Three of these types of framework (historical, literary and theological) are based on categories generally recognisable from analyses of biblical interpretation.¹⁴⁶ Socio-critical frameworks are so-called in order to be broader than simply 'feminist:' the title was borrowed from Anthony Thiselton, who describes it as 'an approach to texts...which seeks...to expose their role as instruments of power, domination, or social manipulation.'¹⁴⁷ Although this description suggests an attitude of suspicion towards text and author, this need not necessarily result in finding the text at fault: setting it against standards of social justice might (and indeed does, in some cases examined below) exonerate the text instead. Frameworks of lived experience as a category can perhaps be thought of as reflecting a postmodern approach to biblical

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, the different 'lines of approach' set out in John Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), which include 'historical-critical approaches' and 'the social world of the Bible' (which broadly together correspond to my 'historical frameworks'), 'literary readings of the Bible' and 'the Bible and Christian theology'.

¹⁴⁷ Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 379 – italics removed. Thiselton goes on to distinguish between socio-critical and socio-pragmatic readings: socio-critical readings evaluate texts according to a 'metacritical dimension' whereas socio-pragmatic readings have no such dimension, but simply privilege the view afforded by a particular reader or group of readers - see *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 379-80. I make no such distinction, and so I have included within the category of socio-critical a reading that Thiselton would regard as more properly socio-pragmatic.

interpretation – one which ‘gives birth to the reader as active subject in the construction of meaning in the reading process’.¹⁴⁸ By privileging the varying contexts of readers, this kind of interpretation opens the possibility of insights more traditional frameworks (historical, theological) may miss.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ So Robert P. Carroll describes scholarship which combines both modernism and postmodernism - see ‘Poststructuralist Approaches: New Historicism and Postmodernism’ in John Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 61.

¹⁴⁹ Carroll makes a similar but rather more pointed observation when he argues that postmodern approaches may constitute ‘the rescue of the Bible from its ecclesiastical and academic captivities in hermeneutic forms which have grown sclerotic over the centuries’ – in ‘Poststructuralist Approaches’, 61.

2.2.2 Classifying the readings

Attributing the readings of Ephesians 5:21-33 to these categories has involved some judgement on my part, and so I set out below the main features of my classification.

Using scholars' self-description

Some authors described their own frame of reference either during their treatment of the passage itself or in the introduction to the volume of which it was a part. So, for example, Margaret MacDonald makes clear from page 1 of her commentary on Colossians and Ephesians that she is adopting 'a social-scientific approach.'¹⁵⁰ This is further supported by her conclusion on Ephesians 5:21-33: 'in my view Eph 5:21-33 can speak to a modern context only if the interpreter...makes every effort to understand its meaning in an early church context.'¹⁵¹ Her work therefore falls within an historical framework – it is dependent on setting the text in its original social context. Where scholars mentioned several hermeneutical frames of reference as influential in their work, they sometimes indicated one of these as more important than others. For example, Sarah Tanzer's comments at the start of her commentary on Ephesians suggest that several frames of reference are involved, but that a socio-critical (feminist) framework predominates (not least because the following quotation falls under the title 'feminist framework'): 'although I think of myself primarily as a historian, this feminist commentary on Ephesians pairs a feminist historical perspective with feminist theological reflection...'¹⁵² Sometimes self-description was implied by the title of the publication in which the work was included: for example, Mitzi Smith's commentary on Ephesians appears within *True to our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*,¹⁵³ which indicates the socio-critical framework she adopts.

¹⁵⁰ Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press: 2008), 1

¹⁵¹ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 341.

¹⁵² Tanzer, 'Ephesians,' 325.

¹⁵³ Mitzi J. Smith, 'Ephesians' in *True to our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2007) 348-362. It is, however important to note that the overall title of a publication was not taken as the only indicator of the hermeneutical framework of those writing inside it – sometimes authors combined the framework which might be assumed from the publication title with another frame when dealing with Ephesians 5:21-33.

Other indications of hermeneutical framework

Where explicit comment about their particular hermeneutical framework(s) is absent, the way in which scholars begin their interpretations often suggests their most appropriate categorisation. For example, Cindy Weber-Han's article 'Sexual Equality According to Paul'¹⁵⁴ moves straight into consideration of various biblical passages (among them Ephesians 5:21-33) which are judged to have a bearing on this issue. Although there is an awareness of 'sexual discrimination which predominates throughout the Christian society,'¹⁵⁵ and (later) some reference to the origin of the text 'in a patriarchal society,'¹⁵⁶ the overriding setting found for Ephesians 5 is neither historical nor socio-critical but biblical: it is read as part of a collage of related texts. I have therefore put it in the category of theological frameworks. Similarly, the title of Morna Hooker's article ('"Submit to one another": the transformation of relationships in Christ') suggests that her work on the passage might also be attributed to a theological framework: it indicates a Christological location for the text.¹⁵⁷

When categorising readings, I have been guided by the comments scholars make in their treatment of Ephesians 5, rather than in their other work. This is to avoid assuming that approaches they adopt elsewhere will necessarily also be applied to Ephesians 5. One scholar among those reviewed acknowledges that in reading Ephesians 5:21-33, she takes a direction which is new for her: 'here I move into unfamiliar territory, to the land of literary critics...'¹⁵⁸ Scholars' other work need not be determinative of their framework for reading Ephesians 5. Similarly unreliable as an indicator of framework was attitude towards the text, in terms of sympathy or suspicion. Although feminists often adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion, not every socio-critical reading was suspicious of the text,¹⁵⁹ nor was every suspicious reading

¹⁵⁴ Cindy Weber-Han, 'Sexual Equality according to Paul: an exegetical study of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 and Ephesians 5:21-33' in *Brethren Life and Thought*, 22, (1977), 167-170.

¹⁵⁵ Weber-Han, 'Sexual Equality' 167.

¹⁵⁶ Weber-Han, 'Sexual Equality' 170.

¹⁵⁷ Hooker, '"Submit to one another,' 163.

¹⁵⁸ Carolyn Osiek, 'The Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33): A Problematic Wedding' *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32 (2002), 33.

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, Virginia Mollencott's 'Emancipative Elements,' 37-58. This is an explicitly feminist analysis but, as the title suggests, with sympathy for the text rather than suspicion of it.

socio-critical.¹⁶⁰ In summary, I have used scholars' own designation of their work on Ephesians 5:21-33 wherever possible, and tried to avoid drawing conclusions based on the degree of suspicion they exhibit towards it.

Where readings fell within more than one framework

For just over half of the scholars reviewed, it was possible to identify one framework which primarily influenced their reading. The remaining scholars, however, gave interpretations which seemed to fall within two or more different frameworks. Some, for example, combined a socio-critical approach with a theological one, appraising Ephesians 5 on the basis of standards of social justice which they found elsewhere set out in the biblical text. Others adopted approaches which drew on both historical and theological frameworks, using historical context to identify theological issues that may have prompted the passage. As an example, Morna Hooker's reading fits both a theological frame (as outlined above) and also an historical one – as indicated by the references (in her second paragraph) to 'a first-century writer's cultural presuppositions' and to the question which governs her analysis: 'what *was* his intention in writing these verses?'¹⁶¹ [Italics original] In the following analysis, I have noted in each section the effect of such overlapping frameworks, where the impact of this is of interest.

¹⁶⁰Turid Karlsen Seim's interpretative framework is best described as historical rather than socio-critical but she remains suspicious of the text: for her, in the Christian (and other) household codes, 'patriarchy assumes the deceptive, friendly face of paternalism.' See 'A Superior Minority,' 175.

¹⁶¹ Hooker, 'Submit to one another,' 163.

2.2.3 Historical frameworks

Authorial motivation: the ‘defensive’ hypothesis

Two issues in particular occupy the attention of those reading Ephesians 5:21-33 within an historical frame of reference: the motivation of the author and the probable sources for the household code as a whole. A range of theories about authorial motivation is put forward by scholars, but many seem to be aligned in seeing the impetus for the code as in some way defensive. One of these ideas is that the Ephesian household code is, like the code in 1 Peter, ‘an apologetic accommodation to larger social mores.’¹⁶² As PHEME PERKINS goes on to explain, ‘conversion by inferior members of a household could be viewed as dangerous insubordination’ and so ‘exemplary behavior is being recommended in order to ameliorate tensions.’¹⁶³ By this account, the author was addressing those outside the early Christian community at least as much as those inside it, in order to reassure them that the Christian community was not socially subversive. This view is challenged in relation to Ephesians by Sarah Tanzer, who points out that the code ‘is part of a parenetic section exhorting Christians specifically to live in a way that is different from the non-Christian environment.’¹⁶⁴ Margaret MacDonald, who adopts a social-scientific approach, accepts Tanzer’s criticism of the ‘apologetic accommodation’ theory,¹⁶⁵ and proposes instead an alternative: that in order to ‘encourag[e] greater introversion’ among early Christian groups, the author ‘recommend[s] a stance that renders believers invisible within [their] given social setting.’¹⁶⁶ The text is then directed to the insiders – the Christians – rather than the outsiders, but remains ‘part of a defensive strategy in dealing with the Gentile world.’¹⁶⁷

A different kind of ‘defensive strategy’ is put forward as an explanation for the Ephesian household code by Turid Karlsen Seim. She locates the text in an early Christianity gradually coming to terms with a delay in the expected eschaton, and in

¹⁶² PHEME PERKINS, *Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 126.

¹⁶³ PERKINS, *Ephesians*, 126-7. PERKINS references here the work of David L. Balch *Let Wives be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* SBLMS 26 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981). She does, however, seem to distance herself somewhat from Balch’s view, at least as far as Ephesians is concerned, by her concluding remark on the code: ‘this ethic describes a well-ordered Christian household independent of the views or actions of outsiders.’ – See *Ephesians*, 140.

¹⁶⁴ Tanzer, ‘Ephesians,’ 330.

¹⁶⁵ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 337.

¹⁶⁶ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 338.

¹⁶⁷ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 338. MacDonald judges that PHEME PERKINS goes too far in asserting the code’s independence of outside opinion (see note 29 above).

which therefore ‘conventional ideals and definitions of social roles are reintroduced by New Testament writers as they explore the compromises of a life in this yet existing world.’¹⁶⁸ Karlsen Seim argues that this early Christian community was characterised by women outnumbering men,¹⁶⁹ and that this provided particular impetus for the author of Ephesians to encourage the male minority ‘to observe their ruling role in marriage and household.’¹⁷⁰ According to this theory, the text is less a general defence of the early Christian community to the society outside and more a particular defence of male superiority within the community, when challenged by a female majority and an ideology of mutual submission.¹⁷¹

Karlsen Seim’s analysis touches on a further ‘defensive’ possibility for all the New Testament household codes: that they are directed against ascetic tendencies within early Christian communities. For Karlsen Seim, this probably underlies all the codes, though the Ephesian household code is more specifically explicable as an attempt to shore up a threatened male-led hierarchy.¹⁷² Other scholars too address this anti-ascetic possibility – among the scholars consulted in this thesis, it is most comprehensively proposed by Annette Merz, though she does so primarily within a literary frame of reference.¹⁷³

This brief glance at some of the theories about historical background suggests some of the difficulties with which they are attempting to deal. As MacDonald notes, very little is known about the precise historical setting of the text so ‘any reconstruction of the circumstances underlying Ephesians must remain highly speculative.’¹⁷⁴ Defensive theories presuppose that the text is a response to some kind of threat: MacDonald addresses this by referring to other parts of the letter, in particular to Ephesians 6:10-18 where she notes that ‘the author of Ephesians is certainly

¹⁶⁸ Karlsen Seim, ‘A Superior Minority?’, 177.

¹⁶⁹ Karlsen Seim, ‘A Superior Minority?’, 169.

¹⁷⁰ Karlsen Seim, ‘A Superior Minority?’, 180.

¹⁷¹ For reference to the importance of the general principle of mutual submission see Karlsen Seim, ‘A Superior Minority?’, 177.

¹⁷² ‘The household codes should be read against the alternative option of ascetic renunciation of household obligations, even if this also has to be tested in each individual case.’ Karlsen Seim, ‘A Superior Minority?’, 170.

¹⁷³ The article is discussed further in the section on literary frameworks below – it is Annette Merz, ‘Why did the Pure Bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2) Become a Wedded Wife (Ephesians 5:22-33)? Theses about the Intertextual Transformation of an Ecclesiological Metaphor’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 79 (2000), 131-147.

¹⁷⁴ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (2008), 338.

convinced that believers are menaced by outside forces.’¹⁷⁵ While this statement is justified, the nature of these ‘outside forces’ is unclear – do they take a specific human/social form, or is the text instead concerned with spiritual powers without pinning down their precise earthly effect? As MacDonald notes, there is no mention of ‘earthly enemies per se’ nor is there ‘evidence that believers are experiencing persecution from political powers.’¹⁷⁶ This makes it at least questionable whether a specific social threat – whether internal from ascetics/a beleaguered male minority, or external from a suspicious wider society – prompted the writing of the Ephesian household code.

Authorial motivation – social entrepreneurship

The difficulty of identifying the precise historical setting of Ephesians is addressed by Minna Shkul in her reading of Ephesians.¹⁷⁷ Shkul’s alternative still locates the text within an ancient setting in which ‘Christ-followership was a minority position,’ but is not more specific about its particular circumstances than this, arguing that this ‘was sufficient enough to prompt writing of a legitimating discourse.’¹⁷⁸ Shkul asserts that Ephesians is best read as an example of ‘social entrepreneurship – deliberate shaping of ideological beliefs and social orientations’¹⁷⁹ on the part of an author seeking to establish the identity of a nascent social group. Despite its plausibility in explaining much of the letter, there are signs that Shkul’s argument may meet a challenge in Ephesians 5:21-33. There is perhaps a tacit admission of this when Shkul explains her focus on parts of the letter for which her ‘theoretical perspective will be most useful’ and the consequent limited treatment of the household code.¹⁸⁰ As a result, the disconnection which Shkul finds between the culturally-compliant code and the counter-cultural thrust of the rest of the letter¹⁸¹ is only partly addressed by her view of the code as a source of ‘countercultural values

¹⁷⁵ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (2008), 348.

¹⁷⁶ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (2008), 349.

¹⁷⁷ Minna Shkul criticises MacDonald’s reading of Ephesians for positing a ‘persecution setting’ which ‘sometimes lack[s] a specific textual base.’ She later continues by identifying a potential problem with all ‘implicit reconstructive reading’ – ‘vague textual components may lead to assumptions of specific circumstances.’ See *Reading Ephesians*, 8-9.

¹⁷⁸ Shkul, *Reading Ephesians*, 13.

¹⁷⁹ Shkul, *Reading Ephesians*, 12.

¹⁸⁰ Shkul, *Reading Ephesians*, 12, note 31.

¹⁸¹ Shkul, *Reading Ephesians*, 205.

[drawn] from spiritual realities not social relations.’¹⁸² It seems strange that an author so concerned with social relations earlier in Ephesians (Jew/Gentile and between Christians) would suddenly choose to concentrate on exclusively ‘spiritual realities.’

Sources: parallel ancient texts

Many scholars adopting an historical framework for Ephesians 5:21-33 assess the text’s relationship with other examples of ancient household codes, although the examples they choose and the conclusions they reach vary significantly.¹⁸³ Among scholars examined in this thesis, PHEME PERKINS seems to agree with what she describes as the majority view: ‘most scholars agree that the household code came to New Testament writers from Hellenistic Jewish sources.’¹⁸⁴ She also regards the Ephesian code as ‘taking over the material from Colossians.’¹⁸⁵ She concludes that the Ephesian household code does not represent a radical alteration of its sources: ‘the content and social implications of this parenthesis are not peculiar to the Christian variants.’¹⁸⁶ Kathleen O’Brien WICKER, on the other hand, compares the New Testament codes with Plutarch’s *Conugalia Praecepta* and concludes that the New Testament codes ‘radically transformed the ideal of marriage’ despite also supporting ‘a conservative social practice of marriage within Christianity.’¹⁸⁷ Carrie A. MILES distances her position from that of scholars who ‘see the texts labeled Ephesians 5:20 – 6:9 as the author’s mirroring of...codes’ written by ‘philosophers like Plutarch and Aristotle’.¹⁸⁸ Instead, she argues, ‘rather than supporting patriarchy, Paul was standing it on its head.’¹⁸⁹ Elna Mouton argues that the Ephesian household code has ‘transformative potential’ because unlike other ancient parallels, it features ‘address to subordinate groups directly,’ encouragement to mutual submission on the part of

¹⁸² Shkul, *Reading Ephesians*, 209.

¹⁸³ Margaret MacDonald notes that the ‘body of literature reflecting the topos of household management is complex and diverse’ – see ‘Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management,’ 69. She also points out two different groups of sources used by scholars of the codes: Stoic/Hellenistic Jewish documents versus Hellenistic sources such as Aristotle’s *Politics* – see ‘Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management,’ 68.

¹⁸⁴ Perkins, *Ephesians*, 126.

¹⁸⁵ Perkins, *Ephesians*, 127.

¹⁸⁶ Perkins, *Ephesians*, 140.

¹⁸⁷ Kathleen O’Brien Wicker, ‘First century marriage ethics: a comparative study of the household codes and Plutarch’s Conjugal Precepts’ in *No Famine in the Land: Studies in honor of John L. McKenzie* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press (1975), 149.

¹⁸⁸ Carrie A. Miles, ‘Patriarchy or gender equality?: the letter to the Ephesians on submission, headship and slavery’ in *Dialogue* 39 (2006), 76.

¹⁸⁹ Miles, ‘Patriarchy or gender equality?’, 76.

husbands and wives and a ‘command to husbands to *love* their wives.’¹⁹⁰ [Italics original]

These examples indicate the difficulty of drawing definitive conclusions about the relationship between the Ephesian household code and other ancient parallels. Which of these parallels are the most appropriate comparators?¹⁹¹ And are points of similarity important, or points of difference? From the scholars examined in this study, it seems that the second of these questions may sometimes be answered by recourse to another hermeneutical framework; the scholars quoted above who found that the Ephesian code radically altered tradition (Wicker, Miles and Mouton) also drew upon a theological frame of reference. This lends support to an observation made by Margaret MacDonald: ‘one senses differing ideologies of interpretation shaping treatments of the presence (or absence) of any “distinctively Christian” features of the codes.’¹⁹² Justified though MacDonald’s assessment may be, all of these readings (whether or not they make any claims of Christian distinctiveness for it) highlight that the Ephesian household code falls within an ancient tradition of such codes, and that the author was therefore working with inherited materials. This may at least provide a way of understanding some of the difficulties of the passage: its capacity for both theological and ethical fruitfulness is constrained by the ancient materials used in its composition.

Contemporary relevance

This review illustrates some of the issues confronting scholars who read Ephesians 5:21-33 within an exclusively historical frame of reference. In response to a lack of historical evidence about the precise origin of the letter, scholars adopting an historical approach often mine the text of Ephesians for signs of the historical background to the household code (which can make their interpretations look very similar to literary analyses), and/or rely on finding its source in other ancient parallel texts, or both. Neither of these offers a straightforward solution – the results of ‘mining the text’ in the case of Ephesians can look rather thin, especially when compared with other New Testament texts which are far more explicitly the response

¹⁹⁰ Mouton, ‘Reimagining ancient household ethos?’, 176.

¹⁹¹ Margaret MacDonald highlights the wide range of comparative literature used by different scholars in ‘Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management’, 71-72.

¹⁹² MacDonald, ‘Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management’, 66.

to a threat.¹⁹³ The fruitfulness of comparing the Ephesian household code with ancient parallels is also open to question – it can lead to the kind of ‘scholarly impasse’ which Margaret MacDonald seeks to move beyond by proposing a middle way: ‘the household codes....are best understood as encoding both culturally compliant and culturally resistant elements.’¹⁹⁴

These are difficulties, but need not be insurmountable. However, for the purposes of my enquiry, this review suggests that an historical frame of reference might have a particular limitation: a tendency to underplay the issue of the contemporary relevance of the text. Typically, an historical hermeneutical framework ‘does not concern itself with what the Bible *means* but, at best, what it *meant*’¹⁹⁵ [Italics original]. While there need be nothing to prevent those using this kind of framework from moving on to consider the implications of their readings for those using the text today, this is not their main focus. Thus Turid Karlsen Seim concentrates on explaining the text as a response to particular historical circumstances and does not discuss its use today – despite the potential of some of her findings to transfer into other settings.¹⁹⁶ Pheme Perkins’ 1997 commentary on Ephesians provides a further illustration. Perkins notes that the household code is ‘awkward’ for contemporary Christians. While she then contrasts this with the implications of the passage in the ancient world – ‘direct[ing] those in authority to moderate common forms of abusive power’¹⁹⁷ – she does not discuss any implications this might have today. Her closing comment on the passage might suggest that she views the code as an attempt to be prescriptive across social contexts, but this is unclear: ‘for Ephesians this ethic describes a well-ordered Christian household independent of the views or actions of outsiders.’¹⁹⁸

¹⁹³ See, for example, Galatians 1:7 which refers to ‘some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ’.

¹⁹⁴ MacDonald, ‘Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management,’ 67.

¹⁹⁵ This is Mark Allan Powell’s comment on historical criticism in *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 3.

¹⁹⁶ Karlsen Seim identifies ‘the purpose of the household code and its major point’ as addressing the question ‘how may a role of superiority in human relationships be maintained in a way that is still concordant with the general mutuality of submission and with the dominant theme of unity of the Christians?’ – see ‘A Superior Minority? The Problem of Headship in Ephesians 5,’ 177. This question need not necessarily be confined to one particular historical location.

¹⁹⁷ Perkins, *Ephesians*, 140.

¹⁹⁸ Perkins, *Ephesians*, 140.

Aside from noting its awkwardness, there is little specific comment here on the text's use today.¹⁹⁹

Similarly, Margaret MacDonald's commentary, while it does address contemporary reception of the passage, does so very briefly. MacDonald notes 'aspects of the text that are widely recognized by modern Christians as having continuing validity: the transformative power of love, the importance of using one's relationship with the Lord as a means of discerning how to treat others, and the value assigned to marriage in general...'²⁰⁰ She later also refers to 'the potential for abuse: the text can seem to justify male impunity in the face of female fallibility.'²⁰¹ None of these ideas is further developed: all appear in the closing two paragraphs of her interpretation of the passage and seem therefore to function almost as an appendix to the main argument.²⁰²

While scholars such as MacDonald, Perkins and Karlsen Seim all present coherent and well-argued theories of the text's ancient setting and purpose, they largely do not engage in debate about its contemporary reception: they concentrate instead on its use and purpose 2000 years ago. Although some make explicit reference to the injustice the text continues to be used to condone,²⁰³ and to the reliance put upon the passage for guiding marriages today, they do not pursue these issues further. It may be that some scholars opt for an historical framework in order to 'neutralise' the text: by relegating it to the past, they lessen its ability to perpetuate injustice towards women in the present. If this is the case, then they do offer one response to the

¹⁹⁹ Perkins's later commentary (published in 2000) is almost identical to her 1997 version (for Ephesians 5:22-33 at least) but includes a further section entitled 'reflections.' In this section, she does discuss the contemporary relevance of Ephesians 5. See PHEME PERKINS, 'The Letter to the Ephesians: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections' in *The New Interpreter's Bible* vol. XI (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 351-466. However, the absence of this in her previous treatment suggests that the text's use today is additional to (secondary to?) her primary reading strategy.

²⁰⁰ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (2008), 341.

²⁰¹ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (2008), 341.

²⁰² There is a possible issue here about the kind of publication in which these readings of Ephesians appeared: were commentaries such as MacDonald's, which are part of a series, written in conformity with guidelines that directed focus away from the issue of how the text is received today? There is no indication that this was the case, rather the reverse: the editor's preface to MacDonald's commentary gives as an explicit aim of the series, 'to provide access to Sacred Scripture for all the Christian faithful.' See Daniel J. Harrington, S. J., 'Editor's Preface' in MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (2008), 341, vii.

²⁰³ Margaret MacDonald, for example, refers to the 'often devastating legacies' of the Haustafeln texts – in 'Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management,' 78.

question of contemporary usage: the text should be treated as any other ancient artefact – of interest, but with little current influence. The problem with such a conclusion is that it is unlikely to be acceptable to those for whom the biblical text is in any way authoritative: for them, an historical frame of reference may side-step the question rather than answer it.

2.2.4 Socio-critical frameworks

Dealing with the text's use today

Rachel Muers asks of Ephesians 5:21-33, 'what do women-as-wives get that mitigates the terror of the text?'²⁰⁴ This question illustrates two significant features of the socio-critical readings examined in this study: a focus on the effects of the text today and evaluation, rather than simply explanation, of the text. Dealing with the former first, when compared with the historical readings analysed above, these socio-critical readings typically give far more prominence to the ways in which this passage is used in contemporary churches and homes.

This review highlights the wide range of contexts in which scholars have found Ephesians 5:21-33 to be influential today. Joyce Tzabedze argues that Ephesians 5:22 ('wives be subject to your husbands as to the Lord'),²⁰⁵ helps to underpin many kinds of discrimination against women in Africa: 'in the family, at work, in the State, and in the church women are denied full participation in key roles.'²⁰⁶ Elna Mouton's 2003 reading of Ephesians also cites 5:22 as 'serv[ing] to legitimate the secondary role of women in the home, church and society'²⁰⁷ in a South African context in which 'racial oppression has understandably been prioritized as the primary sin to be eradicated.'²⁰⁸ Clarice Martin points to the continuing influence of New Testament household codes concerning women in African American churches, in which 'theological ambivalence remains regarding women's participation in the most authoritative arenas of the ecclesiastical community.'²⁰⁹ In this context, Martin notes that 'New Testament narratives that prescribe hierarchical patterns of dominance-subordination between men and women have not been perceived to be as troublesome and offensive as those that prescribe hierarchical patterns of dominance-

²⁰⁴ Rachel Muers, 'Women Reading Texts on Marriage' in *Feminist Theology*, 17 no.2 (2009), 196.

²⁰⁵ J. Tzabedze, 'Women in the Church (1 Timothy 2:8-15; Ephesians 5:22)' in Oduyoye, Mercy Amba; Kanyoro, Musimbi (eds.), *Talitha Qumi: Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Daystar Press, 1990), 76.

²⁰⁶ Tzabedze, 'Women in the Church,' 77.

²⁰⁷ Elna Mouton, 'Re-Describing Reality? The Transformative Potential of Ephesians across Times and Cultures' in Levine, Amy-Jill (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Deutero-Pauline Epistles* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 86.

²⁰⁸ Mouton, 'Re-Describing Reality,' 85.

²⁰⁹ Clarice J. Martin, 'The Haustafeln (household codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: "Free Slaves" and "Subordinate Women"' in *Stony the Road we Trod: African American biblical interpretation* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 224.

subordination between slavemasters and slaves.²¹⁰ Martin's point is supported by Mitzi Smith in her more recent African American commentary on Ephesians: in her analysis of Ephesians 5:21-6:9, she says, 'in the black church, black male clergy continue to interpret the biblical text so as to keep women subordinate to male leadership.'²¹¹

In addition to its use restricting women to socially inferior positions, several scholars point to the role played by Ephesians 5 in justifying abuse of, and violence against, women in the home. Susan Thistlethwaite puts this issue at the forefront of her reading of the passage, introducing her article with the observation that 'all day long, every day, women are verbally intimidated, battered, injured, and killed by the men they live with.'²¹² In this context, she finds that 'the religious sanction in the household codes for the submission of women is a primary legitimation of wife abuse.'²¹³ While Virginia Mollencott contests Thistlethwaite's solution that women need 'liberation from' this text,²¹⁴ arguing that this 'leaves deeply religious abused women with no alternative other than to say that Ephesians 5 is wrong,'²¹⁵ she too is concerned with the same problem – the use of the text to support abuse of wives: 'abused women from conservative Christian churches have been given to understand on the basis of Eph. 5:21-33 that they must submit to their husband's abuse...'²¹⁶

These different scholars in their varying contexts together show the continuing, wide-ranging influence of Ephesians 5:21-33 to the detriment of women today. This is given further support by scholars who do not offer their own readings of the text, but who testify to its use. Hillary Potter conducted research among battered African American women, looking at the role of religion and spirituality in general (not

²¹⁰ Martin, 'The Haustafeln,' 225.

²¹¹ Smith, 'Ephesians,' 360.

²¹² Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, 'Every two minutes: battered women and feminist interpretation' in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), 96.

²¹³ Thistlethwaite, 'Every two minutes,' 105.

²¹⁴ Thistlethwaite, 'Every two minutes,' 104.

²¹⁵ Mollencott, 'Emancipative Elements,' 42.

²¹⁶ Mollencott, 'Emancipative Elements,' 39. Mollencott here references research by Marie Fortune in Seattle: *Keeping the Faith: Questions and Answers for the Abused Woman* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

exclusively Christian) in assisting them.²¹⁷ It is instructive that the one sacred text quoted in Potter's article is part of Ephesians 5:21-33, a passage described by Potter as 'commonly referenced...by religious leaders concerning spousal relations', and one which 'helps perpetuate the control of women by their husbands'.²¹⁸ Another example is provided by Carol Schlueter's 1997 article in *Pastoral Psychology*.²¹⁹ The article is aimed at giving 'pastoral counselors' resources to help them as they work with abused women: the particular resources offered here are suggested ways of handling Ephesians 5:22.²²⁰ That there is need of such an aid for those who help victims of domestic violence is testament to the destructive impact of some interpretations of this text today.

The socio-critical readings cited above all focus on and challenge aspects of the contemporary usage of Ephesians 5:21-33. In this respect, they are unlike the purely historical treatments of the text cited earlier. Some scholars combine an historical framework with a socio-critical one, assessing the text's historical setting but giving equal weight to its use today. Helga Melzer-Keller's reading offers an example of this: her analysis includes comment on the historical setting of the household code, but also on its contemporary use.²²¹ She concludes that through Ephesians 5:21-33 'the patriarchal order is anchored in Christology and ecclesiology' with the consequences that Thistlethwaite describes.²²² She therefore asserts that the text needs 'a critical exposure' today to liberate women from its results.²²³ Her interpretation – both feminist and historical – does address the issue of the contemporary use of the text.

An evaluative approach to the text

Readings within a socio-critical framework also consider to what extent the text is to blame for the oppression of women carried out in its name. Socio-critical readings

²¹⁷ Hillary Potter, 'Battered Black Women's Use of Religious Services and Spirituality for Assistance in Leaving Abusive Relationships' in *Violence Against Women* 13 (2007), 262-284.

²¹⁸ Potter, 'Battered Black Women's Use of Religious Services,' 266.

²¹⁹ Schlueter, 'Revitalising Interpretations,' 317-339.

²²⁰ Schlueter, 'Revitalising Interpretations,' 317.

²²¹ Helga Melzer-Keller, 'Ephesians: Community Spirit and Conservative Values as Survival Strategies in the Churches of Asia Minor' in (eds.) Schottroff, Luise and Wacker, Marie-Theres *Feminist Biblical Interpretation* transl. Lisa E. Cahill et al. (Grand Rapids MI & Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 767-783.

²²² Melzer-Keller, 'Ephesians,' 780.

²²³ Melzer-Keller, 'Ephesians,' 782.

do not simply explain the text, they evaluate it. Readings which do not display some kind of judgement of the text are not, in my view, socio-critical but belong in other categories, even if the scholars concerned avow feminism. This raises the question of how to distinguish between readings which evaluate the text and find it meets standards of social justice, and those which appear to be uncritically accepting of the passage. There is sometimes a fine line between these alternatives, and discriminating in particular cases has involved judgement on my part, so it may be helpful to illustrate how my decisions have been reached.

In deciding whether a scholar's work is evaluative of the text, I have relied on two indicators: first, whether they show any discrimination between elements of the Ephesians passage itself, and second, whether they demonstrate a point of judgement beyond the biblical text. For example, the interpretation of Gretchen Gaebelein Hull is a reading which I would not classify as socio-critical, although the scholar makes clear her feminist sympathies.²²⁴ Hull finds Ephesians 5:21-33 to be equitable for wife and husband, suggesting that mistranslation is largely to blame for conclusions other than this. If her 'translation possibilities' are used, 'the passage then emphasizes the couple's oneness as they identify with each other's interests.'²²⁵ That there is no obvious weighing of different parts of the text gives a prima facie indication that this reading may not be evaluative; more decisive, however, are Hull's comments about her general approach to the biblical texts – she asserts that 'any fear that Scripture will oppress women or minorities does not come from God's Prospectus but from an imperfect understanding of it.'²²⁶ All judgement is directed towards certain 'imperfect understanding[s]' and textual evaluation is thereby effectively ruled out. In contrast, Virginia Mollencott's reading does belong within the socio-critical category. Although her reading concentrates on 'emancipative elements' in the passage, they are just that – elements rather than the whole.²²⁷ She is unafraid to ascribe certain features of the passage to lack of insight on the part of its author – 'apparently the Ephesians author was blessedly unaware that certain

²²⁴ Gretchen Gaebelein Hull describes herself as 'a biblical feminist' – see *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (London: Scripture Union, 1987), 204.

²²⁵ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 195.

²²⁶ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 19.

²²⁷ Mollencott's focus is on particular verses or words within the text which are suggestive of the liberation rather than oppression of women. See 'Emancipative Elements,' 37-58.

experiences can cause people to hate and abuse their own bodies,²²⁸ and she makes explicit that her ‘concern is not to defend the Bible.’²²⁹ Although her interpretation focuses on aspects of the text which meet liberationist standards rather than fall short of them,²³⁰ she evaluates the text in a way Hull does not.

The ways in which Ephesians 5:21-33 is used to women’s disadvantage today suggest that an evaluative approach to reading it is needed. Interpretations such as Hull’s which assign all responsibility for the text’s use to mistranslation by its readers, are unpersuasive. This review has already indicated that it must, by Hull’s account, have been ‘mistranslated’ by a significant number of scholars and non-academics across a wide range of different contexts. Without prejudging the outcome of an evaluative approach, it seems that the issue of the text’s complicity in harm done to women must at least be considered: this is one feature of socio-critical readings which is justified.

The effect of the different feminisms

Although all evaluate the text, the readings considered here do not all share a single socio-critical perspective. Some scholars adopt a stance characteristic of second-wave feminism, while the viewpoints of others seem closer to third wave feminism. Using a broad definition, second wave feminism can be distinguished from third wave by its assumption of ‘essentialism [instead of]...relativism in relation to women’s experience/s.’²³¹ Among scholars reviewed for this thesis, Eileen Campbell-Reed’s work offers a clear example of a second-wave feminist stance – her assertion that ‘our entire Christian tradition needs to be rehabilitated to include women’s experience as a source for understanding the reality of God’²³² presupposes a single phenomenon ‘women’s experience.’ By contrast, Clarice Martin’s African American reading is self-designated ‘womanist,’ of which she offers a definition: ‘womanist theology searches in particular for the voices, actions, opinions,

²²⁸ Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 52.

²²⁹ Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 56.

²³⁰ Mollencott proposes a ‘liberationist hermeneutic’ – see ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 58.

²³¹ Deborah F Sawyer, ‘Gender’ in Sawyer, John F. A. (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 474.

²³² Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, ‘Should Wives ‘Submit Graciously’?: A Feminist Approach to interpreting Ephesians 5:21-33’ in *Review & Expositor*, 98 no.2 (2001), 272.

experiences and faith of black women.’²³³ This challenges the notion of the single category ‘women’s experience’ by emphasising the particular experience of black women.²³⁴

In relation to their readings of Ephesians 5:21-33, however, these two perspectives are not as far apart as might first appear. In reading this text, they are both engaged in a search for ‘liberation:’ Campbell-Reed for a ‘liberating impulse’ within the text,²³⁵ and Martin for the application of a ‘liberating biblical tradition’ within which this particular passage might be read.²³⁶ Their feminisms both challenge the text’s potential (and actual) oppression of women by accepting the gender categories which it assumes. In this sense, they meet the text on its own terms rather than taking issue with its presupposed designations of male (husband) and female (wife), as another kind of third-wave feminism might do.²³⁷ In this respect, Martin’s approach seems more closely related to second-wave feminism than to the third-wave feminism of, for example, Judith Butler.²³⁸

Perhaps second-wave feminist assumptions are better suited to reading Ephesians 5. Some scholars have questioned the value of third-wave feminisms which disavow any notion of ‘women’s experience’ in combatting the gender inequalities in evidence in the world today. So, for example, Rachel Muers asks whether, if it is no longer possible to universalise women’s experience or concerns, there is ‘a risk that the real achievements of feminist theology, including its ongoing challenge to sexist practices and structure within Christian communities, will be lost?’²³⁹ Martha Nussbaum suggests another difficulty with some third-wave feminisms when she

²³³ Martin, ‘The Haustafeln,’ 227.

²³⁴ Rachel Muers points to the influence of postmodern philosophy’s ‘emphasis on difference and multiplicity’ on feminist theology – in ‘Feminism, Gender and Theology’ in David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (eds.), *The Modern Theologians 3rd edn.* (Malden, MA, Oxford, UK and Carlton, Australia: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2005), 434.

²³⁵ Campbell-Reed, ‘Should Wives ‘Submit Graciously?’’, 269.

²³⁶ Martin, ‘The Haustafeln,’ 225.

²³⁷ Rachel Muers describes ‘the ongoing debate around the category of “women”’ which has been ‘rendered problematic both by postcolonial feminist discourses and by queer theory.’ See ‘Feminism, Gender and Theology,’ 445.

²³⁸ Deborah F Sawyer argues that ‘there is no hard and fast division between second-wave and third-wave feminism in the area of biblical hermeneutics.’ She illustrates this by referring to the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza which appears to reject universalising women’s identity while embracing a universal struggle for liberation - see ‘Gender,’ 474. Clarice Martin’s stance seems to be similar to this assessment of Schüssler Fiorenza’s position.

²³⁹ Muers, ‘Feminism, Gender and Theology,’ 446.

challenges the ideas of Judith Butler: Butler, argues Nussbaum, is ‘adamantly opposed to normative notions such as human dignity’, preferring instead ‘to wait to see what the political struggle itself throws up’. This ‘wait-and-see’ position is described by Nussbaum as ‘moral passivity’.²⁴⁰ Take away the concept of general standards of morality, and the grounds for action are removed: there is nothing against which behaviour can be measured, or structural oppressions challenged. This, together with other aspects of Butler’s philosophy, leads Nussbaum to conclude that ‘the great tragedy in the new feminist theory in America is the loss of a sense of public commitment’.²⁴¹ Whether Nussbaum’s appraisal contains a fair reflection of Butler’s work is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider; however, her analysis of the logical implications of rejecting universal standards seems justified. In the absence of some general idea of human dignity, texts like Ephesians 5:21-33 might remain unevaluated and unchallenged.

Revealing the conflict within the text

One of the most significant features of the group of socio-critical readings surveyed in this thesis is the way in which they highlight the conflict about gender within Ephesians 5:21-33. Set this text against standards of liberation for women and it is quite possible to read it as largely complying with those standards, and yet also to conclude that it falls far short of them. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s highly influential interpretation wrestles with this issue. For Schüssler Fiorenza, Ephesians 5:21, which she translates as ‘be subject to one another in the fear of Christ,’ does not mitigate what follows: this instruction is then ‘clearly spelled out for the Christian wife as requiring submission and inequality.’²⁴² In commenting on 5:22, (‘wives, be subject to your husband as you are to the Lord’) she concludes that ‘the instruction to wives...clearly reinforces the patriarchal marriage pattern and justifies it christologically.’²⁴³ However, in dealing with the address to husbands, Schüssler Fiorenza finds the opposite to be true: when ‘Christ’s self-giving love for the church’ is held up as the pattern for a husband’s love of his wife, ‘patriarchal domination

²⁴⁰ Martha C. Nussbaum, ‘The Professor of Parody’ in *The New Republic* (February 22, 1999), 42.

²⁴¹ Nussbaum, ‘The Professor of Parody,’ 44.

²⁴² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 2nd ed. 1994), 269.

²⁴³ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her,*’ 269.

is...radically questioned.’²⁴⁴ Her conclusion is that in the end, ‘this 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.’²⁴⁵ Although this is her final assessment, there is still enough in the passage to suggest that the author’s intention might have been otherwise.²⁴⁶

Virginia Mollencott argues that Schüssler Fiorenza’s conclusion does not make enough of the features of the text that challenge patriarchy: she asserts that Schüssler Fiorenza fails adequately ‘to lift up the liberating possibilities in the text.’²⁴⁷ Mollencott herself details three ‘emancipative elements’ within the text: the mutual subjection required by 5:21,²⁴⁸ the ‘husband’s self-emptying’ (suggestive of, among other things, ‘voluntary servanthood’) indicated in 5:25 (which she translates, ‘husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and *gave up life for it*’ [Italics original]),²⁴⁹ and ‘the interdependence of head and body’ which she argues lessens any hierarchical thrust in the passage.²⁵⁰ Of these three aspects of the text, the most important seems to be the first: ‘Eph. 5:21-6.9 is governed by the opener about subjection to one another out of reverence to Christ,’²⁵¹ which leads Mollencott to assert that ‘had it been obeyed, the principle of mutual subjection would have ended male supremacy among Christians within one generation.’²⁵²

Schüssler Fiorenza and Mollencott illustrate two contrasting ways of reading Ephesians 5:21-33 within a socio-critical feminist perspective: the former finds the text (while containing conflicting elements) to be fundamentally patriarchal, whereas the latter argues that it can, and should, be read as liberating for women. Other interpreters line up on either side of this debate, but do not necessarily make the same exegetical moves in reaching their conclusions. Sarah Tanzer does not find a

²⁴⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*,’ 269.

²⁴⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*,’ 270.

²⁴⁶ A feature pointed out by Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 47.

²⁴⁷ Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 43. Mollencott also criticises the readings of Susan Thistlethwaite (‘Emancipative Elements,’ 41-3) and Elizabeth Johnson (‘Emancipative Elements,’ 53-56) on similar grounds.

²⁴⁸ Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 45.

²⁴⁹ Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 48.

²⁵⁰ Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 50-53.

²⁵¹ Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 47.

²⁵² Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 48.

liberating ethos in the text: she is explicit in her agreement with Schüssler Fiorenza's assessment of the instructions to wives, 'which use the Christ-church analogy to motivate and theologically justify the subordination of wives to their husbands in everything.'²⁵³ Tanzer, however, removes verse 5:21 – a key emancipatory verse for those who argue that the passage contains such features (as above) – from her discussion of the household code, arguing that it better belongs with the passage which precedes it.²⁵⁴ Tanzer also regards the instructions to husbands as 'almost entirely directed to the church rather than the marital pair.'²⁵⁵ in terms of the marital relationship, they are less a counter-balance to the instructions to wives, and more emphatic of the wife's role as 'very passive,' in contrast to that of her husband.²⁵⁶ Helga Melzer-Keller agrees that the text is far from liberating for women: a significant feature of her argument, however, is that unlike Schüssler Fiorenza, she does not regard the comparison between a husband's love and that of Christ (in 5:25) as modifying patriarchy: Christ's love 'does not relativize the power inequality between him as the "head" and the church as his "body"'.²⁵⁷

On the other hand, some scholars reach conclusions similar to Mollencott – and find in Ephesians 5 aspects which are liberating for women. Although verse 5:21 often forms part of their arguments, it is by no means the only feature to which they point. Joyce Tzabedze asks, 'I wonder why people capitalise on verse 22 and neglect...21 which is really a summary of the relationship between the two parties?' She later continues, 'male domination does not find full support if verse 21 is taken into account especially as an overarching idea.'²⁵⁸ In her 2003 treatment of the passage within its broader Ephesians context, Elna Mouton looks not only at 5:21 but also at the other end of the household code and detects a 'framing' within which the text is set: 'Eph. 5.21 and 6.9b frame the household code by reinterpreting its patriarchal structure from a christological perspective.'²⁵⁹ Mouton does not assert that this alters the patriarchal nature of the verses between 5:21 and 6:9, but she feels that at least

²⁵³ Tanzer, 'Ephesians,' 335.

²⁵⁴ Tanzer, 'Ephesians,' 333-4. Tanzer asserts that the household code from 5:22 onwards is the work of a different, later author – see 'Ephesians', 340.

²⁵⁵ Tanzer, 'Ephesians,' 336.

²⁵⁶ Tanzer, 'Ephesians,' 338.

²⁵⁷ Melzer-Keller, 'Ephesians,' 780.

²⁵⁸ Tzabedze, 'Women in the Church,' 78.

²⁵⁹ Elna Mouton, 'Re-Describing Reality?', 69.

this ‘creates tension and a sense of inconsistency and distance’.²⁶⁰ Rachel Muers’ focus is on an altogether different verse in the passage: she detects at the end of verse 5:23 a phrase with liberating potential for women, when Christ is described as ‘saviour of the body.’²⁶¹ She notes that this expression is used ‘only here...in the entire New Testament’ and finds in it ‘an avowal, addressed at least indirectly to women, that, in Christ, bodies are saved.’²⁶² This, she argues, is ‘disruptive of more than the Christ-husband comparison, and of more than a particular model of “being in subjection”’. It is disruptive of whatever and whoever does violence to women’s bodies....²⁶³

The scholars whose work has been considered here are divided on the question of whether Ephesians 5 can be read as liberating for women. Together they illustrate the difficulties this passage presents for anyone looking to it for a definitive answer about gender roles. I will say more about their particular hermeneutical techniques later, but in principle, arguments on both sides are plausible. It seems that the text itself is inconsistent. As Muers puts it, ‘even if there is one dynamic in this text that is trying to keep all the asymmetrical relations where they always were...there is another dynamic that is disturbing the order or threatening to re-order it’.²⁶⁴ These socio-critical readings begin to suggest that in order to move beyond these tensions, a bigger hermeneutical framework may be needed – if this text is to be more than just self-contradictory.

²⁶⁰ Elna Mouton, ‘Re-Describing Reality?’, 70.

²⁶¹ Muers, ‘Women Reading Texts on Marriage,’ 196. Muers’ argument is strengthened by her rendering of the Greek text, which she transliterates as ‘himself the saviour of the body.’ See ‘Women Reading Texts on Marriage,’ 193.

²⁶² Muers, ‘Women Reading Texts on Marriage,’ 196.

²⁶³ Muers, ‘Women Reading Texts on Marriage,’ 197.

²⁶⁴ Muers, ‘Women Reading Texts on Marriage,’ 198.

2.2.5 Literary frameworks

Intertextuality

If socio-critical readings of Ephesians 5:21-33 draw attention to its equivocal position on gender, literary and rhetorical readings highlight both its uneasy relationship with its broader biblical context and the complexity of analogies contained within it. Taking the first of these, several scholars use theories of intertextuality to explain the relationship between the Ephesians passage and other biblical texts concerned with marriage or gender relationships in general. If ‘intertextuality’ broadly refers to the reading of one text in the light of another text (or texts),²⁶⁵ then the scholars surveyed here focus particularly on Genesis 2:24 and on 1 Corinthians 6-7 in their readings of Ephesians 5:21-33. The Genesis verse is quoted both at Ephesians 5:31 and at 1 Corinthians 6:16, although the variation in its use in these two contexts arguably reflects differing attitudes to marriage between 1 Corinthians and Ephesians. It is the apparent contrast between support for marriage in Ephesians 5:21-33 and a preference for celibacy set out in 1 Corinthians which prompts much of the intertextual analysis.

Gillian Beattie views the author of Ephesians as an ‘early interpreter’ of Paul.²⁶⁶ She stresses the differences between Paul’s statements about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 and the Ephesians passage, arguing that the latter is intended to have lasting effect in a way the former is not. Thus the analogy between husband/wife and Christ/church in Ephesians 5 ‘gives the teaching an air of permanence which Paul’s provisional instructions lack.’²⁶⁷ Ephesians, she asserts, is the product of a post-Paul accommodation by the church: ‘the exalted view of marriage expressed in Ephesians contrasts strongly with that found in 1 Corinthians and suggests the belief that the church has a future in the world with which it needs to come to terms.’²⁶⁸ For Beattie, the vestiges of Pauline instruction in Ephesians 5:21-33 are minimal: ‘the call for mutual submission in 5:21 is the last echo to be heard of the laboured

²⁶⁵ ‘Intertextuality’ is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘the need for one text to be read in the light of its allusions to and differences from the content or structure of other texts; the allusive relationship between esp. literary texts.’ Oxford English Dictionary online at 11.47am on 7/12/16 at <http://www.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/view/Entry/240987?redirectedFrom=Intertextuality#eid>

²⁶⁶ As indicated by the title of her book: see Gillian Beattie, *Women and Marriage in Paul and his Early Interpreters* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

²⁶⁷ Beattie, *Women and Marriage*, 77.

²⁶⁸ Beattie, *Women and Marriage*, 82.

reciprocity of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7.²⁶⁹ Beattie also finds contrasts between Ephesians 5 and later chapters of 1 Corinthians: these include removal by the author of Ephesians of the reference (at 1 Corinthians 11:3) to Christ as head of the man, so that 'Christ and man are effectively presented as analogous equals.'²⁷⁰ Beattie's account thus concentrates on the differences between the Pauline material and that of his 'interpreter.'

Annette Merz also finds Ephesians 5:22-33 to be an interpretation of parts of 1 Corinthians, though she detects in the Ephesians text 'an anti-ascetical apology for marriage.'²⁷¹ She argues that Paul's somewhat ambiguous position on the merits of marriage in 1 Corinthians 6-7 sparked later disagreements: 'in the subsequent reception of Paul, both supporters of marriage and ascetics laid claim to him.'²⁷² Concentrating on Ephesians 5:31-2, Merz asserts that it represents a 'fictional self-reference,' which she describes as 'one particular form of intertextuality found in pseudepigraphical literature.'²⁷³ A 'fictional self-reference' is a device by which one author (for example, the author of Ephesians) refers to the work of another author (for example, Paul) under the pretence that he is that other author. Thus, as Merz puts it, 'fictional self-references make it possible for pseudonymous authors to try to establish their own interpretation as the definitive meaning of the original statements.'²⁷⁴ The purpose of the 'fictional self-reference' at Ephesians 5:31-2 is two-fold: first, it "'neutralizes" what Paul says at 1 Cor. 6.15-17,'²⁷⁵ where the different use of the same Old Testament verse – Genesis 2:24 – might cast some doubt on the virtues of marital sexual union.²⁷⁶ Secondly, its portrayal of the church 'as the wife who has become "one flesh" with her husband through sexual union'²⁷⁷ alters the image of the church from 'pure bride' in 2 Corinthians 11:2-3 to 'wedded

²⁶⁹ Beattie, *Women and Marriage*, 77.

²⁷⁰ Beattie, *Women and Marriage*, 78.

²⁷¹ Merz, 'The Pure Bride of Christ,' 133.

²⁷² Merz, 'The Pure Bride of Christ,' 134. In this context, Merz finds features of the Ephesians text to be indicative of the author's rhetoric against alternative arguments – especially Ephesians 5:32, which, in her opinion, 'refers directly to competing positions: by means of the clause ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω, the interpretation of Gen. 2.24...is set in contrast to other expositions...' See Merz, 'The Pure Bride of Christ,' 135.

²⁷³ Merz, 'The Pure Bride of Christ,' 140.

²⁷⁴ Merz, 'The Pure Bride of Christ,' 141.

²⁷⁵ Merz, 'The Pure Bride of Christ,' 146.

²⁷⁶ At 1 Corinthians 6:16, Genesis 2:24 is used in relation to sexual union with a prostitute, which is then contrasted (in 1 Corinthians 6:17) with spiritual union with Christ. This might have implied, argues Merz, that 'marital sexuality resembles πορνεία.' See Merz, 'The Pure Bride of Christ,' 146.

²⁷⁷ Merz, 'The Pure Bride of Christ,' 145.

wife.’ Both these aspects of the ‘fictional self-reference’ serve to support a married rather than an ascetic life-style.

Like Merz, Klara Butting attempts to explain the differing uses of Genesis 2:24 in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, although she does not draw the same conclusions.²⁷⁸ Butting traces the use of Genesis 2:24 in New Testament texts. She argues that although Mark 10:6-9 quotes Genesis 2:24 in relation to marriage,²⁷⁹ Paul broadens its use beyond a marital reference: at 1 Corinthians 6:17 (‘but anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him’), he uses Genesis 2:24 in a way which ‘breaks open its interpretation with reference to marriage as an ordering of life.’²⁸⁰ Butting also asserts that Paul’s allusion to Genesis 2:24 in Galatians 3:28²⁸¹ demonstrates that he regards the Genesis verse as suggestive of reconciliation between the genders, rather than of procreation: ‘men and women can encounter one another as brothers and sisters; their life together and their reconciliation cancel out the processes of procreation.’²⁸² In the light of this, Butting suggests that that author of Ephesians both regards Genesis 2:24 as speaking of reconciliation – he relates it to Gentile/Jews reconciliation at Ephesians 2:14²⁸³ – and yet also ‘tries to recapture [it] as promise for married people’ at Ephesians 5:31.²⁸⁴ By citing the Genesis verse at 5:31, the author of Ephesians therefore ‘in the context of a gender ordering marked by domination...hold[s] open the mysterious possibility...for reconciliation to take place within the community between marriage partners.’²⁸⁵

Both Merz and Butting view the author of Ephesians as to some extent ‘glossing’ the 1 Corinthians reference to Genesis 2:24; for Merz, however, he is correcting a pro-ascetic implication, whereas for Butting he is ‘reclaiming’ (from 1 Corinthians’

²⁷⁸ Butting, Klara, ‘Pauline Variations on Genesis 2:24: Speaking of the Body of Christ in the Context of the Discussion of Lifestyles’ in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 79 (2000), 79-90.

²⁷⁹ Mark 10:6-9 is translated by Butting as ‘From the very beginning of creation he made them male and female. This is why the man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife. And the two become one flesh. What God has yoked together, no human being may separate.’ See Klara Butting, ‘Pauline Variations on Genesis 2:24: Speaking of the Body of Christ in the Context of the Discussion of Lifestyles’ in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 79 (2000), 82.

²⁸⁰ Butting, ‘Pauline Variations on Genesis 2:24,’ 83.

²⁸¹ Butting’s translation of Galatians 3:28, with her italics, is ‘then there is neither Jew nor Greek, then there is neither slave nor free, then there is not *male and female*. For you are *all one* – in Christ Jesus.’ See Butting, ‘Pauline Variations on Genesis 2:24,’ 87.

²⁸² Butting, ‘Pauline Variations on Genesis 2:24,’ 88.

²⁸³ Butting, ‘Pauline Variations on Genesis 2:24,’ 89.

²⁸⁴ Butting, ‘Pauline Variations on Genesis 2:24,’ 88.

²⁸⁵ Butting, ‘Pauline Variations on Genesis 2:24,’ 89.

broader referents) an original focus on the marriage relationship. By Butting's account, other allusions to Genesis 2:24 in the New Testament – particularly those she finds at Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 2:14 – imbue the verse with a sense of 'reconciliation' which is therefore imported into Ephesians 5. This introduces into the Ephesian household code the suggestion that, within the Christian community, something other than a strictly patriarchal marriage hierarchy might be possible. Thus Merz and Butting frame the intent of the intertextual referencing in Ephesians 5 differently: for Merz, the citation of Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31 aims to modify a previous use of the verse; according to Butting, however, previous uses of Genesis 2:24 serve to modify the thrust of the Ephesian household code.

Theories of metaphor

Whereas intertextual approaches reveal difficulties in reconciling Ephesians 5:21-33 with other New Testament texts concerning marriage, scholars who focus on theories of metaphor show something of the inner complexity of the passage. Jill Marshall employs both intertextual and metaphor theories in her discussion of the metaphor 'community is a body' which appears both in 1 Corinthians 6-7 and Ephesians 5.²⁸⁶ Marshall uses Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which proposes that metaphors are both linguistic and cognitive phenomena: the language they use steers a cognitive response from a reader.²⁸⁷ Under this theory, a metaphor has a 'source' and a 'target' domain: 'the source domain provides the image schema and structure for comprehending the target domain.'²⁸⁸ For the particular metaphor in which Marshall is interested, 'the source domain is BODY and the target domain is COMMUNITY.'²⁸⁹ The author of Ephesians, argues Marshall, employs this as the 'central conceptual metaphor' of 5:21-33,²⁹⁰ and chooses to emphasise three aspects of the image created. The first is that bodies are male or female, with the result that Christ is male/husband and the church is female/wife; the second is that the 'head' is 'the ruling, authoritative part of the body,' with the result that 'Christ is the ruling figure of the church,'²⁹¹ the third emphasis is on the care people give to their bodies, with

²⁸⁶ Jill E. Marshall, 'Community is a Body: Sex, Marriage and Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:7 and Ephesians 5:21-33' in *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, 134 (2015), 833-847.

²⁸⁷ See Marshall, 'Community is a Body,' 837.

²⁸⁸ Marshall, 'Community is a Body,' 837.

²⁸⁹ Marshall, 'Community is a Body,' 837.

²⁹⁰ Marshall, 'Community is a Body,' 839.

²⁹¹ Marshall, 'Community is a Body,' 839.

the consequent portrayal of the ‘church...[as] a dependent body...who relies on a caregiver’ (Christ).²⁹² These three features of the metaphor are then, argues Marshall, ‘blended,’ a process which includes reversal of domains – for example, ‘Christ is a husband,’ becomes a ‘husband is Christ:’ in this instance, ‘the audience may conclude that the husband takes on characteristics of Christ: he is the savior of the wife.’²⁹³

Marshall’s reading presses the analogies in Ephesians 5 beyond their explicit statement in the text: Conceptual Metaphor Theory contributes to such ‘pressing’ because it does not regard a metaphor as confined to the language in which it is expressed but as filled out or completed in the mind of a reader. Thus the idea that a husband might act as saviour of his wife is not set out in the text – it is instead supplied by readers at the suggestion of the text’s analogies. It is therefore possible to argue that Marshall’s reading strays too far from the text, although such an argument would be undermined by those ‘ordinary’ readers in the fieldwork for this thesis who inferred from the passage that a husband in some way ‘saves’ his wife.²⁹⁴ Marshall’s interpretation highlights the difficulty of putting limits on these analogies.

Hard though it may be, Carolyn Osiek argues that such limits are necessary, and can be justified textually by careful distinction between metaphor (implicit comparison) and simile (explicit comparison, and arguably more circumscribed than metaphor).²⁹⁵ Osiek points out that ‘the whole passage [Ephesians 5:22-33] is one great simile’ in which ‘it is never said or implied that the wife is the church or the husband is Christ;’²⁹⁶ however, she goes on to note that ‘in ongoing religious imagination, the whole analogy has acquired the force of metaphor.’²⁹⁷ The simile contributes to what Osiek describes as ‘a foreground metaphor...the application of the sacred

²⁹² Marshall, ‘Community is a Body,’ 839.

²⁹³ Marshall, ‘Community is a Body,’ 840.

²⁹⁴ So, for example, “‘Christ is head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour’ – so there’s responsibility on the husband to act as the saviour, which...is pretty hard on him’ [57]. This is explored further in chapter 3 section 3.4.4.

²⁹⁵ Carolyn Osiek, ‘The Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33): A Problematic Wedding’ *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32:1 (Sage Publications Ltd.: 2002) 34. Osiek thus seems to side with arguments put forward by some literary theorists that a simile is more limited and has less ‘force’ than a metaphor – see ‘The Bride of Christ,’ 34.

²⁹⁶ Osiek, ‘The Bride of Christ,’ 34.

²⁹⁷ Osiek, ‘The Bride of Christ,’ 35.

marriage.²⁹⁸ Thus, ‘the historical Jesus, of whose celibacy so much has been made in Christian history, has been transformed into the glorified Christ who is bridegroom ready for the bridal chamber.’²⁹⁹ This metaphor, asserts Osiek, has had a negative impact on women within the church: ‘casting the church as feminine, and above all as bride of Christ, has...done harm to perception of the capacity of women to image the divine.’³⁰⁰ The original textual simile therefore now needs to be recovered, and the metaphor of church as bride of Christ ‘downplayed or abandoned.’³⁰¹

The work of Marshall and Osiek reveals certain dilemmas associated with interpreting the imagery in Ephesians 5:21-33. Marshall illustrates the suggestive nature of the analogies – they can be read as implying far more than is clearly stated in the text. Osiek in a sense acknowledges this when she refers to the way in which the analogies have fed ‘ongoing religious imagination.’ Whereas Marshall then traces the possible ‘trajectory’ of Ephesians’ metaphoric reference,³⁰² Osiek prefers to place boundaries on the imagery – boundaries which assert women’s equality with men in the church.³⁰³ Osiek’s account therefore has recourse to a socio-critical frame of reference to determine the ‘reach’ of the textual imagery. Both Marshall’s and Osiek’s readings indicate that any attempt to conclude on the best use of the passage today will need to assess how far its analogies can helpfully be taken; Osiek’s reading suggests that broader hermeneutical concerns may play a part in such an assessment.

Rhetorical theory

In an article in 2014, Elna Mouton explores the Ephesian household code not from the perspective of its intertextual or metaphorical reference, but by seeking to discern its ‘implied rhetorical effect.’³⁰⁴ Mouton draws on both feminist and postcolonial

²⁹⁸ Osiek, ‘The Bride of Christ,’ 35.

²⁹⁹ Osiek, ‘The Bride of Christ,’ 35.

³⁰⁰ Osiek, ‘The Bride of Christ,’ 38.

³⁰¹ Osiek, ‘The Bride of Christ,’ 38.

³⁰² For Marshall, ‘the salvific and evangelical relationship of Christ and the church read back onto the marital and procreative relationship of husbands and wives’ can give rise to the statement in 1 Timothy 2:15 – ‘women will be saved through childbirth.’ See ‘Community is a Body,’ 847.

³⁰³ Osiek argues that ‘it does no good to affirm the full dignity and equality of women with men if our language, our imagery, and our metaphors continue to perpetuate inequality.’ See ‘The Bride of Christ,’ 38-9.

³⁰⁴ Elna Mouton, ‘Reimagining ancient household ethos?: On the implied rhetorical effect of Ephesians 5:21-33,’ *Neotestamentica*, 48 no. 1 (2014), 163-185.

reading strategies, in particular on Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's idea of 'a spirituality of ethical interpretation that accounts for the *implied rhetorical effect* of the biblical writings, for what they wished to do in the lives of their audiences in terms of justice and well-being.'³⁰⁵ [Italics original] She supplements this by considering 'postcolonial readings of the household codes [which] have...challenged long-held views about their implied function by subverting imperial strategies...'³⁰⁶ Mouton discerns a 'literary ambivalence' in Ephesians – between 'the radical theological-rhetorical thrust of the letter' and 'the hierarchical language of Eph 5:21-6:9.'³⁰⁷ Without denying the latter, Mouton asserts that 'the author seems rhetorically to challenge his audience in various ways to hear the reinterpreted code *against* the grain of its environment.'³⁰⁸[Italics original] She supports this by pointing to features such as Ephesians' portrayal of God as inclusive and without favouritism,³⁰⁹ the household code's 'direct address to members of all social classes,'³¹⁰ and 'the focus on mutual submission.'³¹¹ Mouton thus argues that the household code's 'explicit theological thrust' should be used 'as a rhetorical *lens* to read against its patriarchal grain and history of reception.'³¹²

While Mouton also has recourse to socio-critical and historical (socio-cultural) frames of reference to support her assertions, her main argument is literary and theological. In her search for implied rhetorical effect, she acknowledges that a conclusion is neither straightforward nor obvious – that 'the household code is ideologically complex.'³¹³ In the end, it is her theological framing of the household code which determines the rhetorical aims she deduces: she understands the text to be part of 'an ongoing, faithful struggle to interpret God's radical presence in the world.'³¹⁴

³⁰⁵ Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos,' 166.

³⁰⁶ Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos,' 168.

³⁰⁷ Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos,' 172.

³⁰⁸ Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos,' 178.

³⁰⁹ Mouton refers to 'inclusive God images' [Italics removed] at 'Reimagining ancient household ethos,' 178, picking up on an earlier argument about God's lack of favouritism at 170-1.

³¹⁰ Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos,' 178.

³¹¹ Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos,' 179.

³¹² Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos,' 181.

³¹³ Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos,' 1.

³¹⁴ Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos,' 181.

Signs of textual indeterminacy

Whether their focus is on intertextual features, metaphor theory or rhetoric, several of these readings demonstrate recourse to other hermeneutical frames of reference in order to make sense of the text. Annette Merz' reading of intertextual references places the passage firmly in an historical setting characterised by anti-asceticism; Carolyn Osiek limits the text's metaphors according to socio-critical standards of justice for women; Elna Mouton looks to theology to help determine implied rhetorical aims. Sometimes, these literary readings also illustrate more specific interpretative aims on the part of the reader. Gillian Beattie's stress on the differences between Ephesians 5:21-33 and 1 Corinthians 7 provides resource for the wish she expresses for her thesis as a whole: 'it is my hope that this project may make some contribution to the dilution of [the] essence [of canonicity],' and, as a result, that 'the canonical texts' position of privilege is no longer beyond question.'³¹⁵ Perhaps the literary complexities of the passage, which these divergent readings demonstrate and which many scholars acknowledge,³¹⁶ tend to reveal the ideological positioning of its interpreters, and the other hermeneutical frames they use, more readily than a more straightforward passage might.

These readings suggest that the passage invites judgement on the part of readers about how far to press its metaphors, the significance of its intertextual references and the nature of its rhetorical aims: concentration on the questions raised by these features highlights the indeterminacy of this particular text. This indeterminacy can lead in ethically problematic directions. Jill Marshall's reading draws attention to how this can happen: if pressing the metaphors in Ephesians 5:21-33 could ultimately lead to the assertion (as in 1 Timothy 2:15) that women will be saved through childbirth,³¹⁷ then that can leave wives exposed to harmful and abusive relationships with husbands in the name of their 'salvation'.

This sense of textual imprecision is underlined by the way in which several of the scholars pit the text against its history of reception. Thus Carolyn Osiek suggests that the text's primary simile should be recovered, in place of the metaphor of which

³¹⁵ Beattie, *Women and Marriage*, 161.

³¹⁶ Beattie describes the texts on women and marriage that she examines as having both 'complexity and ambivalence.' See *Women and Marriage*, 2.

³¹⁷ Marshall, 'Community is a body,' 847.

reception history has made much: the church is bride of Christ. Elna Mouton sets the ‘explicit theological thrust’³¹⁸ of the text against ‘its life-threatening history of interpretation,’³¹⁹ arguing that there is enough ‘transformative potential’³²⁰ in the text of the household code to justify reading it as ‘an ongoing invitation to critique and resist any form of exploitative power in contemporary as well as ancient empire.’³²¹ Klara Butting too sets the text (in her case, Genesis 2:24) against its reception history: ‘the promise formulated in Gen. 2.24, that it is possible to overcome domination in the relation between the genders, has been destroyed by the prevalent ecclesiastical reception of this text.’³²² These scholars do not argue that the text is blameless for the ways in which it has been used: they are instead asserting that some of its features have been unhelpfully supplemented (Osiek) or overlooked (Mouton), or some of its allusions missed (Butting). That the text can be received in such differing ways adds to the sense that it is unclear in its expression.

Two of these scholars also suggest that the text (or part of it) is best understood as representing something extra-linguistic – for Butting this is a vision of reconciliation between genders; for Mouton, a re-thinking of relationships from a Christological perspective.³²³ They each imply that it is this extra-textual ‘something’ which should be the focus for a reader: failure to do this risks treating ‘vision’ as ‘regulation’ (Butting)³²⁴ or solidifying a ‘dynamic process’ (Mouton).³²⁵ These accounts propose that the text is read less as a fixed social blue-print (an end in itself) and more as a kind of work in progress, pushing towards something which it does not fully or clearly express. Seeing the passage as an indicator of direction rather than a statement of destination offers a way of framing its uncertainties. It also opens up creative possibilities for resolving these uncertainties when allied with a theological line of approach.

³¹⁸ Mouton, ‘Reimagining ancient household ethos,’ 181.

³¹⁹ Mouton, ‘Reimagining ancient household ethos,’ 181.

³²⁰ Mouton, ‘Reimagining ancient household ethos,’ 180.

³²¹ Mouton, ‘Reimagining ancient household ethos,’ 181.

³²² Butting, ‘Pauline Variations on Genesis 2:24,’ 89.

³²³ See Mouton, ‘Reimagining ancient household ethos,’ 177.

³²⁴ Butting criticises particular church guidelines which in her view ‘pervert the vision into a regulation.’ She continues, ‘instead of promising women and men reconciliation, heterosexuality and marriage are prescribed for them’ – see Butting, ‘Pauline Variations on Genesis 2:24,’ 89.

³²⁵ Mouton, ‘Reimagining ancient household ethos,’ 181.

2.2.6 Theological frameworks

The context of tradition

‘The theme of the letter [to the Ephesians]...is “the mystery of God’s will”.’³²⁶ Morna Hooker’s thematic setting for her discussion of Ephesians 5:21-33 illustrates that for some scholars, questions of the historical origin, social justice or literary form of Ephesians 5 need to be supplemented with, or are secondary to, questions of theology. Those whose reading of the passage I have classified as theological together constitute a broad category. The doctrinal and biblical themes to which they refer in their readings vary, as do the conclusions they reach about the text’s use today. I have subdivided this category according to the particular contexts within which scholars place the passage – such as biblical texts about gender, aspects of Christian doctrine and, for this first section, the interpretative tradition of a specific church denomination. Theological readings in the context of tradition use the teaching or generally-held principles of a certain Christian church or group in order to determine meaning.³²⁷

Of those included in this survey, two scholars read Ephesians 5:21-33 in the context of the teaching of the Roman Catholic church, as set out by Pope John Paul II. Within this setting, the passage assumes great importance: Mary Shivanandan notes that it ‘has been called a *summa* of Church teaching on marriage’³²⁸ and that ‘Ephesians 5 provides [John Paul II] with the greatest insight into the nature of marriage.’³²⁹ The text has significance, however, beyond the topic of marriage: the husband/wife and Christ/church analogy (in which ‘the redemptive and spousal dimensions of love are brought together’³³⁰) means that it also addresses much broader anthropological issues: as one scholar puts it, ‘John Paul II says that the “linking of the spousal significance of the body with its ‘redemptive’ significance is equally essential for the understanding of man in general...”’³³¹ The passage

³²⁶ Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 169.

³²⁷ This sub-category was suggested by Anthony Thiselton’s ‘hermeneutics of tradition,’ denoting reading taking place ‘within the theological boundaries of a stable tradition.’ See Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 22.

³²⁸ Mary Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage: a Reflection on Ephesians 5:21-33’ in *Diakonia*, 29 no 1 (1996), 7.

³²⁹ Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage,’ 15.

³³⁰ Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage,’ 16.

³³¹ Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage,’ 16, quoting from John Paul II, *The Theology of Marriage and Celibacy* (Boston: St Paul Editions, 1986), 269-299.

therefore speaks not only about husband and wife, but about ‘the significance of the masculinity and femininity of the human person.’³³²

The scholars draw out some wide-ranging implications from their reading of John Paul II’s treatment of the passage. In one article, Mary Shivanandan responds to ‘the challenge of modern contraception,’ which, she asserts, shaped aspects of John Paul II’s theology.³³³ She emphasises ‘the total nature of the gift of spousal love’³³⁴ which John Paul II deduces from the Christ/church and husband/wife analogy, arguing that use of contraception indicates love that is only partial: ‘when a couple use contraception, they say to one another....I reject your fertility. In other words their love is not total.’³³⁵ Her article concludes with arguments in favour of ‘natural family planning’ instead of contraception.³³⁶ In a later article, Shivanandan deals with Ephesians 5:21-33 as part of her contention that ‘women’s true dignity first and foremost is fidelity to the vows of either sacramental marriage or consecrated virginity.’³³⁷ Here again it is the Christ/church analogy that gives additional significance to marriage vows: ‘a sacramental marriage between two baptized Christians both images and participates in the “great mystery” of Christ and the Church.’³³⁸ Shivanandan understands John Paul II to be affirming that a woman’s ‘openness to self-gift is expressed above all in motherhood....her feminine dignity is bound up with fulfilling her vocation to physical and spiritual motherhood.’³³⁹ Vows – marriage or religious – enable this vocation to be exercised, with the result that other career options for women must come second to these, if ‘the disorder’ in our culture (exemplified by the prevalence of divorce and casual sex)³⁴⁰ is to be remedied.³⁴¹

This conclusion has some similarities to that reached by a second Roman Catholic scholar in an article of 2010. Lisa Lickona uses John Paul II’s extrapolation of the

³³² Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage,’ 16.

³³³ Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage,’ 18-9.

³³⁴ Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage,’ 17.

³³⁵ Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage,’ 19.

³³⁶ Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage,’ 20-21.

³³⁷ Shivanandan, ‘A Civilization of Vows,’ 390.

³³⁸ Shivanandan, ‘A Civilization of Vows,’ 389.

³³⁹ Shivanandan, ‘A Civilization of Vows,’ 388.

³⁴⁰ Shivanandan, ‘A Civilization of Vows,’ 377-79.

³⁴¹ Shivanandan, ‘A Civilization of Vows,’ 392.

Christ/church and husband/wife comparison – that the author of Ephesians ‘indirectly confirms through this analogy *the truth about woman as bride...it is she who receives love, in order to love in return.*’³⁴² [Italics original] From this, Lickona deduces that ‘a man’s love enables a woman to be fully herself.’³⁴³ This leads eventually (supplemented with arguments from her own experience – see section 2.2.7 on frameworks of lived experience below) to a conclusion in favour of a purely domestic role for women: ‘we can mother our children, maintain our homes, and shine in the world of men. But...buying wholeheartedly into this modern ideal is precisely the feminine temptation...’³⁴⁴ This suggests that a career outside the home represents ‘the world of men,’ and entering it is a ‘temptation’ to be resisted.

In these accounts, the comparison between Christ/church and husband/wife is pivotal. The importance of the image to the Orthodox (as well as Roman Catholic) tradition is further illustrated in an article by Eva Šuvarska of the Orthodox Church in Czechoslovakia in 1984. Šuvarska makes clear that Ephesians 5 has a significant place in Orthodox wedding liturgy, and introduces her quotation from the passage by emphasising the image it contains: ‘during the wedding ceremony the union of man and wife is compared to the union of Christ and the church.’³⁴⁵ For all these readers of Ephesians 5:21-33 there is a great deal theologically and liturgically at stake in Christ/church and husband/wife comparison. It is not only an image: it is variously a signal of participation in the relationship between Christ and the church (thus underpinning an understanding of marriage as a sacrament and therefore indissoluble),³⁴⁶ an anthropological statement about masculinity and femininity, and a lynchpin of the wedding ceremony. This comparison thus helps to shape assertions about the place and role of women in general today, assertions which confine women to the home or convent.³⁴⁷

³⁴² Lisa Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5 and Headship’ in *Ave Maria Law Review* 8 (2010), 399, note 26, quoting from John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem: Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women* (1988), 29.

³⁴³ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5,’ 399.

³⁴⁴ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5,’ 402.

³⁴⁵ Eva Šuvarska, ‘Women’s Christian service in the modern world’ in *The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, no.4 (1984), 67.

³⁴⁶ As Shivanandan remarks in ‘A Civilization of Vows,’ 389.

³⁴⁷ This line is taken by Šuvarska too: ‘A woman is revered most of all as a mother. Her physical motherhood is associated with spiritual motherhood.’ See ‘Women’s Christian service,’ 67.

The context of biblical texts about gender

Biblical consistency

Instead of church doctrine, several scholars in this survey read Ephesians 5:21-33 within the context of other biblical texts relating to gender. Some use these other texts to develop a biblical theology of gender; others simply note points of parity or disparity between the different passages. Whichever approach they take, the most interesting hermeneutical divide arises between those who argue that Ephesians 5:21-33 has a place within a consistent biblical treatment of gender and gender relationships, and those who conclude that it is part of an inconsistent overall biblical approach to the issue.

Several scholars propose that Ephesians 5 is part of a consistent biblical witness to gender equality. Gretchen Gaebelein Hull approaches Ephesians 5:21-33 by first asserting that the Genesis creation accounts imply full gender equality: ‘in Eden there was no portrayal of dominance or subordination. Of exactly the same substance as man, woman was an equal human being.’³⁴⁸ Pointing to the first Genesis creation account and to other texts which do not differentiate between women and men (such as 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 and Hebrews 7:25), she argues that ‘both sexes are....equally human and equally redeemed.’³⁴⁹ This forms the setting for her reading of Ephesians 5:21-33, which, she argues, broadly fits within this picture of gender equality. Hull makes much of the reference to mutual submission in Ephesians 5:21³⁵⁰ but also proposes ‘possible alternate meanings of *kephalē* and *hupotassō*’ the former being ‘source’ instead of ‘head’ and the latter “‘identify with” or “become one with”” instead of ‘submit.’³⁵¹ Hull supports her rendering of ‘*kephalē*’ by referring to its use in 1 Corinthians 11:3 where it describes the relationship of God to Christ, in which notions of hierarchy would not support Trinitarian doctrine.³⁵² For ‘*hupotassō*,’ Hull draws on the work of Catherine Clark Kroeger who refers to the use of the word at Romans 8:20 and Luke 2:41-51, where,

³⁴⁸ Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (London: Scripture Union, 1987), 182.

³⁴⁹ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 194. She also addresses some ‘hard passages’ from the New Testament – 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:33b-36, and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, concluding that numerous exegetical and theological difficulties with these passages mean that they cannot be definitive - see *Equal to Serve*, 189.

³⁵⁰ See Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 190-1 and 194.

³⁵¹ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 195.

³⁵² Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 193-4.

she asserts, the word more appropriately conveys attachment than submission.³⁵³ When these translations are applied to Ephesians 5:21-33, any hierarchy within the passage is flattened, since a husband is ‘source’ for a wife (a reference to the second creation account in Genesis)³⁵⁴ rather than an authority figure, and a wife has to ‘identify with,’ rather than submit to, her husband.

Other scholars who argue for a consistent biblical witness to gender equality may choose a different biblical frame for Ephesians 5 but make similar interpretative moves when dealing with the passage itself. Cindy Weber-Han situates the passage within Pauline thought, seeking to exonerate the apostle from blame for ‘the sexual hierarchy which is presently operating in most denominations.’³⁵⁵ Her context for the passage comprises Pauline texts such as Paul’s descriptions of ‘the body of Christ’ at 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 (in which ‘he is referring to all Christian people, male and female’), Galatians 3:28 (‘...there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’), and Romans 16 (which lists his ‘female co-workers’).³⁵⁶ In these (and other) passages, Paul ‘speaks of equality.’³⁵⁷ In her consideration of Ephesians 5:21-33, like Hull, Weber-Han begins with emphasis on 5:21, which represents ‘Paul’s main point of mutuality or equality in the marriage relationship.’³⁵⁸ She then moves on to ‘the word “head”,’ noting that it ‘could also mean “point of beginning or origin”.’³⁵⁹ In dealing with ‘what Paul means by submission/subjection,’ she looks to other biblical passages (such as Titus 3:1-2) where Paul’s references ‘to subjection/submission convey the meaning of following, faithfulness, and serving.’³⁶⁰ The instruction to husbands in Ephesians 5:25 is read as emphasising ‘serving the other as the expression of love.’³⁶¹ In effect, in this interpretation of Ephesians 5, submission and love become synonyms, and the passage makes the same demands of both husband and wife.

³⁵³ Hull includes a paper by Catherine Clark Kroeger in an appendix to her book – the relevant section is at *Equal to Serve*, 281-2.

³⁵⁴ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 195.

³⁵⁵ Cindy Weber-Han, ‘Sexual Equality according to Paul: an exegetical study of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 and Ephesians 5:21-33’ in *Brethren Life and Thought*, 22, no. 3 (1977), 167.

³⁵⁶ Weber-Han, ‘Sexual Equality,’ 167.

³⁵⁷ Weber-Han, ‘Sexual Equality,’ 167.

³⁵⁸ Weber-Han, ‘Sexual Equality,’ 169.

³⁵⁹ Weber-Han, ‘Sexual Equality,’ 169.

³⁶⁰ Weber-Han, ‘Sexual Equality,’ 169.

³⁶¹ Weber-Han, ‘Sexual Equality,’ 170.

Both Hull and Weber-Han regard Ephesians 5:21 ('be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ') as the guiding principle of the passage that follows. They both focus on two words in that passage – the verb ὑποτάσσω (to subject someone) and the noun κεφαλή (head), suggesting that each needs to be understood in a very particular way. When they are so construed, the passage is more easily reconciled with the gender equality they find expressed by 5:21. Other scholars pursue a similar interpretative strategy. Claire M. Powell introduces her commentary on the Ephesian household code by describing it as promoting 'mutual respect and submission in various relationships,' signalling the importance of verse 5:21.³⁶² In verse 5:22 ('wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord'), 'be subject' is better understood as 'be submissive,' where this suggests a voluntary 'giving in' or 'compromising our needs or wishes.'³⁶³ Powell adds that the overall idea of marriage thus expressed is of 'equals giving in at appropriate times to each other in love.'³⁶⁴ For Powell, applying the term 'head' to a husband indicates 'the caring, giving, sacrificial love that is like Christ,' rather than rule or authority.³⁶⁵ Again here, there is a concentration on the two words ὑποτάσσω and κεφαλή, and on defining these very specifically.

In addition to close definition of certain words, Powell's reading also contains a different interpretative feature: this might be described as an argument from silence. When asserting that husband as 'head' is not to be understood in any authoritarian way, Powell claims that 'the Bible never denies women the opportunity...to make decisions for themselves or on behalf of the family.'³⁶⁶ This suggests an approach to reading the Bible in which omission is as significant as inclusion. Others too take this line: in her 2005 article on Ephesians 5, Sarah Sumner counters any implication in the text of a husband as leader with the argument that 'nowhere in Scripture is a husband told to lead his wife.'³⁶⁷ She also rejects the idea that husbands should submit to their wives (which might be deduced from 5:21) on the grounds that 'the

³⁶² Claire M. Powell, 'Ephesians' in Kroeger, Catherine Clark and Evans, Mary J., *The Women's Study Bible* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 701.

³⁶³ Powell, 'Ephesians,' 703.

³⁶⁴ Powell, 'Ephesians,' 704.

³⁶⁵ Powell, 'Ephesians,' 704.

³⁶⁶ Powell, 'Ephesians,' 704.

³⁶⁷ Sumner, 'Bridging the Ephesians 5 divide,' 60.

Bible nowhere explicitly commands the husband to be subject to his own wife.’³⁶⁸ These readings imply that the Bible is regarded as offering a consistent and complete regulatory framework: for Powell this means that what is not prohibited is allowed, and for Sumner, what is not clearly prescribed is not mandatory.

Biblical inconsistency

The approach taken by Sumner, Powell, Hull and Weber-Han contrasts with that of other scholars who detect inconsistency in the biblical treatment of gender and gender relationships. Thus Joyce Tzabedze describes the ‘diversity of viewpoints’ found in the Bible on this issue,³⁶⁹ and Carol Westphal suggests that Jesus’ practice and Paul’s teaching in Galatians 3 differ from texts such as Ephesians 5:21-33 and 1 Corinthians 11 – the latter reflecting Paul ‘as he struggled through his own ambivalence’ on gender.³⁷⁰ Clarice J. Martin follows Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s argument that there is a ‘possible transition from an earlier and perhaps more liberatory vision of inclusive wholeness in the ministry of Jesus to the adoption of the Greco-Roman patriarchal household order in the *Haustafeln*.’³⁷¹ For all of these scholars, the Bible is not unilaterally committed to gender equality, but instead contains a variety of texts which point in different directions on this issue.

Several scholars therefore seek to make theological sense of the diversity they perceive,³⁷² and to assess the place of Ephesians 5 within this theological picture. Both Westphal and Martin point to the ministry of Jesus (inclusive of women and men) and Galatians 3:28 (‘there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’) as opposing gender hierarchy and patriarchy. Martin agrees with Schüssler Fiorenza that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry and texts such as Galatians 3:28 constitute ‘the earliest gospel stratum’ and promote ‘a nonpatriarchal structuring of social relationships that calls *all* to empowerment under God.’³⁷³ [Italics original]

³⁶⁸ Sumner, ‘Bridging the Ephesians 5 divide,’ 60.

³⁶⁹ Tzabedze, ‘Women in the Church,’ 78.

³⁷⁰ Carol J. Westphal, ‘Coming home’ in *Reformed Review* 42 no.3 (1989), 183.

³⁷¹ Martin, ‘The Haustafeln,’ 212.

³⁷² Joyce Tzabedze does not pursue this aim – her paper is brief and mainly concerned with the role of women in the church (see ‘Women in the Church,’ 78). To this end, she does not set out to develop a theology of gender.

³⁷³ Martin, ‘The Haustafeln,’ 212.

Westphal contrasts ‘the hierarchical thinking of the first century’ with ‘what Jesus practiced and with what Paul taught in Galatians 3:28.’³⁷⁴ This anti-patriarchal vision becomes the yardstick against which they measure Ephesians 5:21-33. Westphal finds signs of the vision within the text at 5:21 (‘be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’) and in the instruction to husbands to love their wives in 5:25.³⁷⁵ She however also perceives patriarchy: ‘Paul had believed in and taught some kind of hierarchical order that placed me as a woman in a position below a man.’³⁷⁶ She explains the discrepancy as an expression of Paul’s ‘inner tension in trying to understand the new male-female dimensions of the gospel and to relate these new dimensions to first-century ideas and to his pharisaic training.’³⁷⁷ Martin, approaching the Ephesians text by pointing to its implication in ‘the marginalization, subjugation, and exploitation of wives in Western culture,’³⁷⁸ does not identify signs of an anti-patriarchal vision within it. Instead, she argues that the passage should be rejected as out of step with ‘the gospel:’ she asks (rhetorically) ‘why should we continue to believe that the regulations regarding women’s subordination exemplify the gospel *in perpetuum*?’³⁷⁹

Despite their differing conclusions about Ephesians 5, both the readings of Westphal and Martin have more than one hermeneutical similarity. Not only do they both adopt an approach which evaluates the text against theological principles (anti-gender hierarchy) which they find expressed in other New Testament texts, they also both avoid detailed consideration of particular terms used within the passage. Martin makes explicit her non-participation in the debate about the meaning of certain words: ‘instead of rehearsing the literature on the linguistic peculiarities and significance of *kephalē* and *hypotassō*, I wish to move the discussion to another level...’³⁸⁰ Westphal simply takes the meaning of the passage’s terminology at face-value: ‘Paul does indeed call for wives to be subject to their husbands as to the Lord.’³⁸¹ Unlike the scholars above who argued that Ephesians 5:21-33 complies

³⁷⁴ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 183.

³⁷⁵ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 183.

³⁷⁶ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 182.

³⁷⁷ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 183.

³⁷⁸ Martin, ‘The Haustafeln,’ 218.

³⁷⁹ Martin, ‘The Haustafeln,’ 225.

³⁸⁰ Martin, ‘The Haustafeln,’ 220.

³⁸¹ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 182-3.

with consistent biblical advocacy of gender equality, neither Westphal nor Martin underpins her interpretation with detailed linguistic argument.

The context of Christian doctrine

The Trinity

Some of the scholars included in this survey drew on elements of Christian doctrine for their theological framing of Ephesians 5:21-33. Trinitarian doctrine was used by some to explain how men and women (husbands and wives) could retain their differences but still be ‘equal.’ In an article of 1983 against the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the US constitution, Angela E. Hunt criticised both ‘chauvinist attitudes’ and the feminist response they prompted, suggesting instead biblical/theological sources for ‘proper attitudes for men and women.’³⁸² In this context, she mentions her reading of Ephesians 5:24, that ‘women are scripturally commanded to submit to their husbands as the church is subject to Christ.’³⁸³ This is, however, immediately qualified by a reference to the Trinity: ‘as the members of the Trinity are equal and equally valuable, though with separate functions, so husbands and wives are equal in God’s sight.’³⁸⁴ Lisa Lickona, following the theology of John Paul II, develops this kind of reasoning more fully. Referring to Ephesians 5:21-33, she notes that ‘through the notion of submission, an inequality seems to be introduced to the relation of two equals.’³⁸⁵ This ‘inequality’ is however mitigated by likening the marriage relationship to that between members of the Trinity, in which ‘each is distinct, and yet each is wholly God.’³⁸⁶ Lickona thus detects in Ephesians 5:21-33 a ‘mutuality [which] does not flatten the distinctions between man and woman.’³⁸⁷ Men and women perform different roles – the former loving, and the latter receiving love.

For both of these interpreters, applying the Trinitarian pattern of relationship to Ephesians 5 helps to explain how the passage may treat men and women differently without any implication of inequality between them. This line of argument can,

³⁸² Angela E. Hunt, ‘All’s Not Wrong with Women’s Rights’ in *The Fundamentalist Journal* 2 no.10 (1983), 15.

³⁸³ Hunt, ‘All’s Not Wrong’, 15.

³⁸⁴ Hunt, ‘All’s Not Wrong’, 15.

³⁸⁵ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5’, 398.

³⁸⁶ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5’, 398.

³⁸⁷ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5’, 399.

however, be questioned by close reference to the text: Ephesians 5:21-33 does not explicitly refer to the relationship between members of the Trinity: its main point of comparison is a divine/human relationship (the relationship of Christ and the church) rather than intra-divine.

Christology

The frequent allusions to Christ within the text of Ephesians 5:21-33 suggest that Christology may offer a more textually justifiable doctrinal framing for Ephesians 5:21-33 than Trinitarian theology. Morna Hooker notes the repeated references to Christ throughout the household code, as part of her argument ‘that the instructions in 5:21-6:9 are intended to remind the readers of what it means to live in Christ.’³⁸⁸ This leads Hooker to assert that the author’s ‘main concern [in the household code] is to demonstrate how the various possible relationships between Christians should reflect the mutual love which ought to permeate the whole body of Christ.’³⁸⁹ Hooker’s reading of the passage places it firmly within the context of the Christology of Ephesians as a whole: she detects an ‘emphasis in the first part of Ephesians on God’s plan to gather up all things in Christ,’ and then that ‘the paraenesis of chapters 4-6 centres on the life of the Christian community and its dependence upon Christ.’³⁹⁰ Within this frame, Hooker argues that the author of Ephesians aims at transforming not the hierarchical pattern of marriage, which she regards as a given of the ancient world,³⁹¹ but the way in which all relationships were conducted, characterised by attitudes of respect and love.

Hooker’s careful reading draws out the complexity of Christological framing for Ephesians 5:21-33. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on ‘Christ’s self-giving love’ in 5:25 (‘husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’) which, as Hooker notes, picks up on 5:2 (‘...live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us’) and is suggestive of Christ’s ‘humility’ and ‘obedience.’ On the other hand, there is also a reference to husband as ‘head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church’ which, combined with the instruction for

³⁸⁸ Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 172.

³⁸⁹ Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 173.

³⁹⁰ Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 170.

³⁹¹ Hooker asserts that ‘relationships in the ancient world *were* asymmetrical,’ see ‘Submit to one another,’ 187.

subjection on the part of wives in 5:23, ‘implies rule, an idea that is stressed in relation to Christ’s rule over creation in Eph. 1:22.’³⁹² Christ is both humble and self-sacrificing, and yet also ruler. It seems that this dichotomy plays a part in the two aspects of Hooker’s conclusion: Christ as ruler underscores the authority of a husband over a wife and therefore the author’s advocacy of fixed gender roles in marriage; Christ as model of self-sacrifice suggests the transformation of a husband’s attitude towards his wife within the hierarchical structure.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’ socio-critical and theological reading of the passage also confronts the difficulty of reconciling its Christological references, although she does not arrive at the same conclusion as Hooker. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that ‘the instruction to wives...clearly reinforces the patriarchal marriage pattern and justifies it christologically.’³⁹³ However, this is followed by the ‘Christological modification of the husband’s patriarchal position’ in the instruction for a husband to emulate ‘Christ’s self-giving love for the church’³⁹⁴ in his love for his wife. For Schüssler Fiorenza, these Christological aspects are opposed to one another – with the first winning over the second, which does ‘not have the power, theologically, to transform the patriarchal pattern of the household code.’³⁹⁵

Unlike Schüssler Fiorenza, Elna Mouton (in an article which pre-dates her 2014 treatment of the Ephesian household code considered in section 2.2.5 above) does not regard the author of Ephesians 5:21-33 as pitting two aspects of Christology against each other but instead discerns a disparity between Christological vision and the limitations of the language used to express that vision. Mouton thus asserts that ‘the patriarchal language that expresses and constitutes the christologically reinterpreted notion of mutual submission in the domestic code (5:21) creates tension.’³⁹⁶ Despite this patriarchal language, Mouton discerns that through the household code there is ‘a radical reinterpretation of human relations in the light of the Christ event.’³⁹⁷ For Mouton, the letter to the Ephesians has ‘transformative potential,’ lying in ‘its ability to point beyond itself to a reality that it could only

³⁹² Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 177.

³⁹³ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 269.

³⁹⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 269.

³⁹⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 269.

³⁹⁶ Mouton, ‘Re-Describing Reality?’, 70.

³⁹⁷ Mouton, ‘Re-Describing Reality?’, 70.

describe in a limited and provisional manner.³⁹⁸ Mouton's reading is in some ways similar to Hooker's: for both, the text suggests the possibility of transformation of relationships and attitudes through a new perception of Christ and his significance. Mouton, however, emphasises in her theological account of Ephesians, 'the reinterpretation of power:³⁹⁹ the letter as a whole reflects an understanding of Christ's power as 'defined in terms of his sacrificial love, humility and care as a servant.'⁴⁰⁰ Mouton traces these characteristics of Christ's power through a number of Ephesians texts – including 1:7 and 4:32 (referring to Christ's forgiveness and grace), 2:13, 2:16 and 5:2 (referring to Christ's self-sacrifice). All these texts, she argues, clarify what is meant by the reference to Christ's rule in 1:22. For Mouton, Ephesians encapsulates a paradoxical understanding of the power of Christ so that when a husband is described as 'head' of his wife (in 5:23), the comparator is 'Christ's headship [which] is characterised by the power of his love – a power which is paradoxically revealed in the "weakness" of his suffering.'⁴⁰¹ This leads to her conclusion that the text promotes the opposite to 'abusive power.'⁴⁰²

Thematics other than gender relationships

As with readings within a socio-critical framework, the theological interpretations considered here reflect the diverse ways in which the passage can be read regarding gender relationships. For Mary Shivanandan and Lisa Lickona, Ephesians 5:21-33 assigns women and men different roles; they stress motherhood – both physical and/or spiritual – as a primary focus for women. Others, however, challenge this kind of conclusion: according to Cindy Weber-Han, Ephesians 5 does not assign different roles according to gender, and she uses this to contest 'sexism in the churches.'⁴⁰³ Several other scholars in this survey also consider the issue of women's role within the church, and arrive at conclusions similar to that of Weber-Han. Clarice Martin's rejection of the passage as out of line with 'the gospel' backs up her contention that it should not be cited to support gender discrimination in African-American churches.

³⁹⁸ Mouton, 'Re-Describing Reality?', 79.

³⁹⁹ Mouton, 'Re-Describing Reality?', 59.

⁴⁰⁰ Mouton traces this through a number of Ephesians texts, starting with the pivotal confession of 1:22-23 – see 'Re-Describing Reality?', 65.

⁴⁰¹ Mouton, 'Re-Describing Reality?', 66.

⁴⁰² Mouton, 'Re-Describing Reality?', 69.

⁴⁰³ Weber-Han, 'Sexual Equality', 170.

That Ephesians 5 can be used to support such widely differing ‘advice’ to contemporary women further exposes its fault-lines on the subject of gender relationships. It can, and has, been pressed into service as part of an argument against the Equal Rights Amendment in the USA (by Angela Hunt) and yet also in support of an argument in favour of ‘equality and mutuality in male-female relationships’⁴⁰⁴ (by Gretchen Hull). For some, following the passage could lead to a lower divorce rate (Sarah Sumner),⁴⁰⁵ while for others it would simply perpetuate injustice against women (Clarice Martin). This begins to suggest that there may be more promise in readings which point to something other than gender as the theological subject matter of the text. Readings such as those offered by Morna Hooker, in which the passage relates to all relationships between Christians, and by Elna Mouton, who stresses the way in which Ephesians Christologically redefines power, indicate some possible alternatives.

⁴⁰⁴ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 180.

⁴⁰⁵ Sumner notes ‘I can’t help but wonder if the divorce rate in the church might decrease if we would recognise the mystery of God fusing a husband and wife into “one flesh.”’ See ‘Bridging the Ephesians 5 divide,’ 61.

2.2.7 Lived experience frameworks

The ‘high stakes’ of interpreting Ephesians 5:21-33

Among the 39 scholars surveyed, there were several who explicitly set their reading of Ephesians 5:21-33 within the circumstances of their own lived context, negotiating the text in terms of their own experience. The variety of perspectives they offered included those of ‘a [formerly] fundamentalist wife in a dysfunctional marriage’,⁴⁰⁶ a reader with ‘experience...of marriage as a relationship between equal persons’,⁴⁰⁷ ‘a pastor counseling abused women’,⁴⁰⁸ ‘a wife, mother, and farmer’,⁴⁰⁹ and a church minister who had grown up in an ‘uncompromising conservative theological environment’.⁴¹⁰

From these diverse viewpoints, readers developed a range of ways of tackling the text: some offered interpretations in which the passage, or certain readings of it, stood in the way of what was life-giving for them. So, Susan Thistlethwaite (see socio-critical frameworks above) read the passage as ‘compatible with’ forms of abuse such as ‘verbal intimidation, economic deprivation and deliberate humiliation’.⁴¹¹ For her, the text represented a barrier to be overcome in her counselling of abused women: in this situation, liberation from this text became a prerequisite for life-giving possibilities. Virginia Mollencott’s reading (also discussed in socio-critical frameworks above) found ‘emancipative elements’ in the text, of the sort which might have given her grounds as ‘a fundamentalist wife’ to leave her ‘domineering and emotionally abusive husband’.⁴¹² For Mollencott, liberation was needed not from the text itself, but from those interpretations which fail to find signs of emancipation within it. For Carol Westphal, Ephesians 5 formed part of the biblical underpinning of ‘male headship and...female submissiveness’⁴¹³ with which she had grown up, and which prevented her from following her vocation to Christian ministry. Her interpretation (discussed above under the heading ‘theological frameworks: biblical inconsistency’) finds contradiction in the text,

⁴⁰⁶ Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 42.

⁴⁰⁷ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 192.

⁴⁰⁸ Thistlethwaite, ‘Every two minutes,’ 97.

⁴⁰⁹ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5,’ 395.

⁴¹⁰ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 177.

⁴¹¹ Thistlethwaite, ‘Every two minutes,’ 104-5.

⁴¹² Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 42.

⁴¹³ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 182.

which she takes to be symptomatic of ‘Paul’s own struggle and ambivalence’: this helped her to question assumptions of male headship and ultimately pursue her vocation.

For other scholars, Ephesians 5 was a more straightforward reflection of healthy life-giving relationships. Lisa Lickona’s traditional theological reading also draws upon her experience as a farmer of dairy goats, which causes her to posit essential differences between male and female, to emphasise procreation (for a woman, ‘the womb is the center’⁴¹⁴) and therefore put forward an understanding of a woman’s ‘submission’ as ‘permit[ting] her husband to enter *her* world – the intimate world of mother and child’ [*Italics original*].⁴¹⁵ From this, she infers that the sphere of a woman is the home and child-rearing. For Lickona, as a ‘wife, mother, and farmer,’⁴¹⁶ the passage mirrors the created order she observes around her in which women can realise their full potential in the domestic realm. Gretchen Hull, on the other hand eschews ‘rigid male-female roles’,⁴¹⁷ and begins her treatment of Ephesians 5 by detailing her experience of her own and her parents’ marriage, neither of which is characterised by ideas of ‘male headship’.⁴¹⁸ She argues that the Ephesians passage also does not support such headship ideas: instead it ‘emphasizes the couple’s oneness as they identify with each other’s interests’.⁴¹⁹

All of these interpretations from lived experience are pragmatic: they all negotiate the passage in terms of perceptions of what works, and what does not work. As a result, they highlight what can be at stake for women in reading Ephesians 5: as Westphal puts it, ‘as I returned to these passages [Ephesians 5:21-33 included], I read widely and prayed fervently, for much was at stake for me’.⁴²⁰ At issue here are important personal and professional decisions – how best to help the victims of abuse, how to follow a vocation unthinkable in earlier life, how to explain a decision to focus on domestic and familial responsibilities, how to retain a self-perception as an equal partner in marriage. The reading of Ephesians 5 can have an impact in all

⁴¹⁴ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5,’ 396.

⁴¹⁵ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5,’ 401.

⁴¹⁶ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5,’ 395.

⁴¹⁷ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 191.

⁴¹⁸ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 191.

⁴¹⁹ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 195.

⁴²⁰ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 182.

these areas – on women’s self-understanding, career choices and ability to escape and recover from abusive relationships; it is not simply an intellectual or a devotional exercise.

Issues of self-confidence among readers

Perhaps as a result of there being so much at stake in reading Ephesians 5, these interpretations from lived experience also suggest that it takes a certain measure of self-confidence for women to engage with Ephesians 5. Carol Westphal’s journey to ministry gives one illustration of this: she describes the part played by Ephesians 5 in supporting ‘Pauline ideas of women’s submissiveness and men’s headship’ which countered her perceived vocation.⁴²¹ At this point, she ‘felt considerable inner tension’ and ‘decided *not* to take a new and closer look at the “problematic” Pauline passages’ [*Italics original*] within which she included Ephesians 5.⁴²² It was only after a series of biblical ‘discoveries’ which, among other things, demonstrated Jesus’ encouragement of women,⁴²³ that Westphal approached the Ephesians text: ‘at last I knew I could put it off no longer’.⁴²⁴ At the end of her article she thanks her teachers and family: ‘I am grateful for the supportive teaching and help of my seminary professors...[and]...for the loving support and encouragement of my husband and children.’⁴²⁵ Westphal ‘put off’ her reading of Ephesians 5 at a time of inner tension, and only eventually approached it armed with some scholarly tools and perceptions of Jesus’ ministry drawn from the gospels; she acknowledges the level of support she needed to realise her vocation in the face of such texts.

Other scholars too, from their different contexts, hint that self-assurance is needed to tackle this passage. Virginia Mollencott’s argument against interpretations which fail to find liberating features in Ephesians 5 is concerned with the ‘low self-esteem’⁴²⁶ among women that such interpretations can promote. Although Mollencott’s target is certain kinds of interpretation rather than the passage itself, she at least infers that engagement with other scholarship on the passage requires some resilience: ‘had I still been bemired in my patriarchal marriage when I read those

⁴²¹ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 179.

⁴²² Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 179.

⁴²³ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 180.

⁴²⁴ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 182.

⁴²⁵ Westphal, ‘Coming home,’ 188.

⁴²⁶ See Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 39 and following.

words [part of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's reading], I would have felt all hope dissolving within me.'⁴²⁷ Susan Thistlethwaite does target the passage itself, and her experience of counselling abused women leads to an assessment that 'Ephesians 5:21-33 is a very difficult passage for abused women struggling to find some self-respect and some control over their lives.'⁴²⁸

These three scholars (Westphal, Mollencott and Thistlethwaite) all suggest the problematic aspects of reading Ephesians 5 (and/or its secondary literature) for women with a lack of self-confidence. Although the other two scholars considered in this section (Lisa Lickona and Gretchen Hull) do not interpret the text from the perspective of those with low self-esteem, it is possible to deduce that issues of self-assurance do have some effect on their readings. Hull compares the text with her experience of marriages that have worked – both her own, and that of her parents.⁴²⁹ Against this experience, 'an...emphasis on rigid male-female roles and a hierarchical "chain of command" [encountered in seminars she attended]...jarred me personally because the example of my parents and the practice in my own marriage and family life was that of mutual submission'.⁴³⁰ Hull's interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33 finds the 'overall teaching' of the passage to be what she has seen work in practice – mutual submission in marriage.⁴³¹ This suggests that her life-long experience of successful marriages has given her confidence to meet the text on her terms.

Lisa Lickona's treatment of 'submission' is especially interesting. As already noted, she understands 'submission' as the giving of permission by a woman for a husband to 'enter *her* world'.⁴³² This implies that a certain power lies with a wife – an implication made explicit in Lickona's conclusion:

'In every marriage the woman can see before her the temptation to grasp everything for herself. Like Eve in the Garden of Eden, she is

⁴²⁷ Mollencott, 'Emancipative Elements,' 44.

⁴²⁸ Thistlethwaite, 'Every two minutes,' 104.

⁴²⁹ Hull describes her parents' aim to please each other, and her own 'respect' for both of them – see *Equal to Serve*, 191. Of her own marriage, she writes that she and her husband 'love and respect each other' – see *Equal to Serve*, 192. These are clearly successful marriages.

⁴³⁰ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 191.

⁴³¹ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 195.

⁴³² Lickona, 'A Commentary on Ephesians 5,' 401.

the one first tempted to “become like gods,” not because she is weak, but because she is the powerful one’.⁴³³

Submission is thus a decision taken by the more ‘powerful’ partner: it is a choice not to exercise the power she possesses. In reading Lickona’s account, it is hard to escape the conclusion that her reading aims to take the ‘sting’ out of wifely submission by seeing it as the (gracious) act of the more capable partner in a marriage. If this is so, then she tacitly admits that there is such a ‘sting’ to submission: the implication is that when Ephesians 5 is read by women who do not share Lickona’s belief in their superiority over men, the text has real potential to harm their self-esteem.

All these readings from lived experience imply in various ways that reading Ephesians 5:21-33 can raise issues of lack of self-belief for women today. It is also a text with high interpretative stakes for women – potentially complicit in limiting career options, relationship options, even the option to be freed from abuse. This suggests that a reading which seeks to be ethically responsible towards women – in the sense of maximising their potential – will need somehow to neutralise the text as a gendered power-play in which women are disadvantaged, their options limited and their self-confidence undermined.

⁴³³ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5,’ 402. Lickona here draws on Gertrud Von Le Fort, *The Eternal Woman: The Woman in Time, Timeless Woman*, trans. Marie Cecilia Buehrle (Bruce Publishing Co.: 1962).

2.3 Hermeneutical methods

2.3.1 Introduction

‘We are confronted with a formidable text:’⁴³⁴ the review of readings thus far underlines Carolyn Osiek’s remark. Uncertainty about its historical origins, together with its literary complication, both prompt widely differing conclusions about the central thrust of Ephesians 5:21-33, and reveal the various ideological allegiances of its readers. As a result, there is no easy consensus about this passage – is it liberating or profoundly shackling for women? Is it an attempt to embrace visionary social practice, or a defence of a traditional status quo? In both of these debates, the text provides resources for those arguing on either side. Faced with the text’s ambivalence, interpreters have recourse to a variety of hermeneutical techniques – ways of dealing with its words and phrases – as they attempt to find some coherence or some value within it.⁴³⁵ This section examines three techniques in evidence among the scholars in this survey; I do not claim that they are the only hermeneutical techniques used, but that they represent interesting ways of tackling some of the problems of the text. Broadly the three techniques involve ‘stretching’ the meaning of words (maximal construal), choosing to deal with some elements of the passage and not with others (selectivity) and distinguishing between what is said and what is meant (*‘Sachkritik’*). The first two of these techniques can occur within any framework or framework combination, whereas the last depends on ideology to identify a *Sache*, and is therefore used by those offering theological or a combination of theological and socio-critical analyses.

(2) Maximal construal

As already mentioned in chapter 1, I am indebted to the work of Walter Brueggemann and Richard Briggs in identifying the idea of a range of construal, in which the meaning of words or phrases in a text are progressively ‘stretched’ according to the judgement of readers. At one end of this range is a position in which the meaning of words seems little influenced by reader judgement: Briggs refers to such readings as ‘weak construals’ in which language is taken as ‘flat

⁴³⁴ Osiek, ‘The Bride of Christ,’ 29.

⁴³⁵ Some readers – especially those who made use of maximal construal – seemed to aim for the passage to be a coherent whole, while others, finding the text to some extent contradictory, looked for value (social, theological etc.) within its various elements.

assertives’ or simple statements of fact. At the opposite end of the range are ‘constructivist’ readings in which reader choice has apparently played a significant part in determining meaning – in Briggs’ terminology, these are ‘strong construals.’⁴³⁶ Briggs cites Bultmann’s hermeneutics as an example of strong construal: ‘language about the second coming of Christ...is construed as the language of existential address:’⁴³⁷ such interpretation involves a significant degree of judgement by Bultmann.

In using these ideas, I have changed terminology. Instead of referring to strong and weak construal, I use instead maximal and minimal construal because I am concerned that the terms ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ could imply value-judgements which are not intended. Maximal construal then represents a reading of a word or phrase in which reader-choice plays a significant part, in contrast to minimal construal where little or no reader judgement is apparent. Classification of readings as demonstrating maximal or minimal construal is in itself a matter of judgement on my part: so I will explain my criteria for making these identifications. Indicators of maximal construal include close context-specific definition of particular words or phrases, and apparent re-definition of those words when compared with dictionary definition. An example is given in Gretchen Hull’s reading of Ephesians 5:21-33 (as mentioned above). Hull proposes what she herself describes as ‘possible alternate meanings’⁴³⁸ for the verb ὑποτάσσω (taken as ‘to subject someone’ by the NRSV) and the noun κεφαλή (‘head’ in the NRSV) – arguing that these should be understood in a very particular way. Hull’s definition of ὑποτασσόμενοι (in 5:21 and understood in 5:22) as “‘identify with’ or ‘become one with’” instead of ‘be subject to’⁴³⁹ finds no support in a detailed Greek dictionary, nor is it echoed by any other of the 38 readers in this survey.⁴⁴⁰ It represents a context-specific choice made by Hull.

Several scholars make interpretative moves similar to those of Hull, concentrating on the meanings of ὑποτάσσω and κεφαλή. Carrie Miles rejects the idea that

⁴³⁶ Descriptions taken from Briggs’ table of spectrum of construal in *Words in Action*, 124.

⁴³⁷ Briggs, *Words in Action*, 123.

⁴³⁸ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 195.

⁴³⁹ Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 195.

⁴⁴⁰ Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edn, (Oxford University Press, 1968) contains a detailed entry for ὑποτάσσω, including a survey of usage, on page 1897, but Hull’s proposed translation is not included among the possibilities.

ὕποτασσομένοι in verse 5:21 might mean ‘submit’ or ‘be subject to;’ she continues, ‘it does not even mean to “obey.” Nor does it mean to agree with someone or to give up one’s own preferences.’⁴⁴¹ Noting that the Greek verb is in the middle voice, she determines its meaning in 5:21 to be ‘all of you place yourselves under one another.’⁴⁴² This definition in itself is in line with a translation offered by Liddell and Scott’s Greek Lexicon, in which ὑποτάσσω is translated as ‘place or arrange under.’⁴⁴³ However, Miles then explains that by the use of this term, ‘Paul was not urging [the Christians] to exercise power over anyone or to yield to the exercise of power over them,’ instead ‘Paul asked them to opt out of the agonistic struggle for honor, prestige, control and wealth that characterized Roman culture.’⁴⁴⁴ Thus, asserts Miles, when the same verb is understood to apply to wives in 5:22, it does not mean that the husband is given authority over the wife, but ‘Paul’s instructions for wives are simply another example of the broader point he is making that the Christian community should emulate Christ by refusing to seek status and power over each other.’⁴⁴⁵ By this account, and in spite of the implications of ‘place under’ as a translation, the verb ὑποτάσσω as used in Ephesians 5 militates against social hierarchy.

Miles’ treatment of κεφαλή (‘head’) is similar. She argues that ‘while “head” can mean “authority” in English, it did not have that connotation in Greek when Paul wrote to the Ephesians.’⁴⁴⁶ By using the word, the author of Ephesians (assumed to be Paul by Miles) was simply introducing a head/body metaphor with implications not of authority on the part of the head, but of unification between head and body.⁴⁴⁷ So, Miles concludes, ‘as Paul uses the term, the husband who is head of his wife in the same sense as Christ is head of the church does not “rule over” his wife or even “lead” her, but instead serves her, facilitating their unity, growth, and “upbuilding in love.”’⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴¹ Miles, ‘Patriarchy or gender equality?’, 77.

⁴⁴² Miles, ‘Patriarchy or gender equality?’, 78.

⁴⁴³ Liddell and Scott’s intermediate Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 848.

⁴⁴⁴ Miles, ‘Patriarchy or gender equality?’, 78.

⁴⁴⁵ Miles, ‘Patriarchy or gender equality?’, 82.

⁴⁴⁶ Miles, ‘Patriarchy or gender equality?’, 82-3.

⁴⁴⁷ Miles, ‘Patriarchy or gender equality?’, 83.

⁴⁴⁸ Miles, ‘Patriarchy or gender equality?’, 84.

Miles' account contains several characteristics of maximal construal. First, there is a rejection of other, more commonly occurring, translations: Miles, for example, argues that the 'King James translators' were mistaken in their rendering of ὑποτάσσω.⁴⁴⁹ Second, there is the argument that the words at issue are very particularly determined by their context in Ephesians, rather than as they may be used elsewhere: thus when Miles denies (as above) that κεφαλή implies authority, she asserts that 'it did not have that connotation in Greek *when Paul wrote to the Ephesians*' [my italics]. Meaning is held to be context-specific. Third, meaning is narrowly defined – many interpretative possibilities are ruled out: thus Miles' discussion of the meaning of ὑποτάσσω rejects 'subject to,' 'submit' and 'obey', along with 'to agree with someone' and 'to give up one's own preferences' before offering her own definition of the term.

Miles may offer one of the clearest illustrations of maximal construal among this group of scholars, but she is far from alone in making use of this technique. Claire Powell takes a similar line to that of Miles: she too rules out several possible readings of ὑποτάσσω, arguing that it does not mean 'obey' or 'giving in' in the sense of 'compromising our needs or wishes' but when taken as part of Ephesians 5:21 and 22, suggests a marriage relationship characterised by 'equals giving in at appropriate times to each other in love.'⁴⁵⁰ Powell prefers the definition 'be submissive' to 'be subject', thus both closely defining meaning and effectively replacing the translation put forward by the NRSV, among others. When dealing with κεφαλή, Powell seems almost to regard the word as a synonym for 'love': 'what the husband stands for when described as head is the caring, giving, sacrificial love that is like Christ.'⁴⁵¹ That the word might imply some kind of leadership on the part of the husband is denied.⁴⁵²

Mary Shivanandan's 1996 reading of the passage also exhibits instances of maximal construal of the text. Following the reading offered by John Paul II, Shivanandan argues that the passage indicates that 'the husband is the one who loves and the wife

⁴⁴⁹ Miles, 'Patriarchy or gender equality?', 77.

⁴⁵⁰ Claire M. Powell, 'Ephesians' in Kroeger, Catherine Clark and Evans, Mary J., *The Women's Study Bible* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 704.

⁴⁵¹ Powell, 'Ephesians,' 704.

⁴⁵² Powell, 'Ephesians,' 704.

the one who is loved. It is in this sense that John Paul II interprets “submission”.⁴⁵³ She continues, quoting John Paul II, *The Theology of Marriage and Celibacy*, that submission “signifies above all the ‘experiencing of love,’” an interpretation that can be given especially from the analogy of the submission of the Church to Christ’.⁴⁵⁴ By this account, any suggestion that ὑποτάσσω might indicate a hierarchy of authority is lessened, and replaced with the idea that it represents an openness to be loved. ‘Submit’ is equated with ‘receive love’, a rendering which is heavily context-specific, as it depends upon an inference drawn from the analogy with Christ’s relationship to the church.

Despite their different definitions of the terms they examine, these examples of maximal construal all form part of readings which find Ephesians 5:21-33 to be consistently anti-hierarchical. This is not necessarily surprising: the textual features that most obviously suggest a gender hierarchy are the words ὑποτάσσω (as understood in 5:22, requiring wives to be subject to their husbands) and κεφαλή (in 5:23, describing the husband as head of the wife). These two terms therefore need to be tackled in some way if an argument is to be made that there is no hierarchy suggested in the passage. Conversely, the textual features that support an anti-hierarchical thrust to the passage – most notably the instruction for mutual submission in 5:21 and the requirement for a husband to love his wife in 5:25 and following – need to be explained by those who read the passage as consistently promoting a gender hierarchy. In general, such readers use other hermeneutical techniques in dealing with these aspects of the passage – techniques such as selectivity.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵³ Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage,’ 16.

⁴⁵⁴ Shivanandan, ‘Feminism and Marriage,’ 17.

⁴⁵⁵It could be argued that some readings demonstrate maximal construal of the imagery in Ephesians 5:21-33: for example, that of Jill Marshall (see the section on literary hermeneutical frameworks above) which seems to press the analogies in Ephesians 5 beyond their explicit statement in the text. However, I have not judged such interpretation to exemplify maximal construal because, unlike for individual words, it is far less clear where the text ends and reader-choice begins. There is no dictionary to consult to determine the legitimate reach of an image.

2.3.2 Selectivity

Selectivity involves giving prominence to certain parts of the text, with the consequence that other parts of the passage recede into the background or are effectively ignored. Sarah Tanzer's reading offers one example of this kind of strategy. As already noted in the section on socio-critical frameworks above, Tanzer regards verse 5:21 ('be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ') as more closely linked with the verses that precede it than those that follow. She asserts that this verse has 'at best [an] awkward fit'⁴⁵⁶ with the household code, and therefore does not deal with it as part of the instructions to husbands and wives which she regards as starting with verse 5:22 ('wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.') Tanzer's reading therefore first eliminates verse 5:21 – a verse to which many point as demonstrating even-handed treatment of women and men. Secondly, Tanzer stresses the importance of the quotation from Genesis 2:24 at Ephesians 5:31 – for her, 'it informs this entire first section of the Ephesian household code.'⁴⁵⁷ Tanzer argues that the Genesis context for 2:24 underlines a woman's position as secondary to a man: woman was created second, is accorded a function as helper and is named by man, in the same way as the animals were named by man.⁴⁵⁸ All these implications of secondary positioning for women are therefore introduced into Ephesians 5:22-33. The prominence Tanzer gives to this verse, and her ignoring of 5:21, together contribute to a reading of the passage as uniformly disadvantageous for women: for her, the passage 5:22-5:33 consistently points to 'the wife's inferiority'.⁴⁵⁹

Other scholars too regard the passage as starting at 5:22 and therefore pass over any implications of mutuality between husbands and wives in 5:21. Annette Merz takes the start of the passage to be 5:22, as does Pheme Perkins: the latter cites grammatical reasons for linking it with the passage before: 'the participle [in 5:21] belongs in the chain begun earlier'.⁴⁶⁰ Relegating it to the preceding passage, however, may make it easier for Perkins to conclude that 'most exegetical attempts to detect some radical modification of the ethical injunctions based on special

⁴⁵⁶ Tanzer, 'Ephesians,' 334.

⁴⁵⁷ Tanzer, 'Ephesians,' 339.

⁴⁵⁸ Tanzer, 'Ephesians,' 339.

⁴⁵⁹ Tanzer, 'Ephesians,' 335.

⁴⁶⁰ Perkins, *Ephesians*, 125.

Christian insight or compassion fail to prove their case.⁴⁶¹ An interesting example of treatment of verse 5:21 is given in Jennifer Bird's reading. Although Bird takes 5:21 with the verses after rather than before it, she seems to regard it as of a piece with what follows: 'the Haustafel section begins with a call to the entire community to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ (5:21)." Similarly, the wives are to submit to their husbands, in all things, as they do to the Lord...'.⁴⁶² The only other mention she makes of verse 5:21 concentrates on the end of the verse rather than its start: 'the theme of being subject to God or Christ out of fear (5:21) deserves some reconsideration.' She later continues 'fearing the power of the emperor is one thing; (re)importing such fear into the religious realm is simply ascribing the same dominant, and thus oppressive, relationship with the deity that the people have with the emperor'.⁴⁶³ Bird's focus is on 'out of reverence for [fear of] Christ,' rather than 'be subject to one another'. In effect, although she does not ignore 5:21, she glides over the first part of the verse. As for Perkins, this may enable her conclusion that 'the author of Ephesians [is] intentionally adopting the androcentric, patriarchal political ideals for men and women...'.⁴⁶⁴

A different example of selective approaches to the text of Ephesians 5:21-33 is given by contrasting treatments of the last verse in the passage – 'each of you, however, should love ('ἀγαπάω') his wife as himself and a wife should respect ('φοβῆται') her husband.' While 'ἀγαπάω' is usually translated as 'love,' 'φοβῆται' is more commonly, in other Greek usages, translated as 'fear.' The verse therefore appears to make different requirements of husbands (who are to love), and wives (who are to fear). Mitzi Smith makes much of this verse in her socio-critical reading of the text. She asserts that 'the dichotomy created between love and fear makes it possible for a husband to "love" his wife without respecting her body, her opinion or her emotions'.⁴⁶⁵ Smith appears to give very little weight to some of the textual elements which might set restrictions on a husband's interpretation of 'love': for example, the comparison in verse 5:25 between a husband's love for his wife and Christ's self-sacrificial love for the church, and the requirement in verse 5:28 that

⁴⁶¹ Perkins, *Ephesians*, 140.

⁴⁶² Jennifer G. Bird, 'Ephesians' in *Fortress Press Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 536.

⁴⁶³ Bird, 'Ephesians,' 538.

⁴⁶⁴ Bird, 'Ephesians,' 538.

⁴⁶⁵ Smith, 'Ephesians,' 359.

husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. This latter verse in particular would seem to prevent the kind of ‘love’ which did not respect a wife’s body. Arguably here, the last verse in the passage is given prominence over others.⁴⁶⁶

In contrast, Claire Powell’s reading appears almost to ignore 5:33. Powell asserts that the author of Ephesians (taken to be Paul) does not mean that ‘wives submit and husbands love’ because ‘obviously both do both.’⁴⁶⁷ Such a statement seems to pass over the different language used of husbands and wives in 5:33. Whereas Smith’s reading relies upon verse 5:33 to the possible exclusion of other verses, Powell’s concentrates on other verses and fails to address the implications of this last verse of the passage.

Both selectivity and maximal construal represent ways in which the complexities of Ephesians 5:21-33 can be handled: in effect, both techniques are used to produce readings in which the text maintains a consistent position on male/female relationships. The scholars whose work has been cited here typically do not take the passage to be contradictory or internally conflicted: it is either uniformly hierarchical or unfailingly opposed to hierarchy. These are reading strategies useful for aligning the thinking the text represents into one clear direction. The third hermeneutical technique, which I will now examine, does not necessarily claim that the text is internally consistent: instead it measures the elements of the text (what is said) against what is intended (what is meant) – this is ‘*Sachkritik*’.

⁴⁶⁶ Smith’s assertion forms part of an argument that those in power decided the content of the requirements of a passage like Ephesians 5:21-33: ‘husbands, fathers and masters not only determined the meaning of submission and obedience of those subordinate to them, but also defined and evaluated their own behaviour:’ see ‘Ephesians,’ 358. However true this may have been in practice, the issue I am examining here is whether the text permits this to happen: Smith’s argument that it does is based on the prominence she gives to the last verse of the passage.

⁴⁶⁷ Powell, ‘Ephesians,’ 704.

2.3.3 *Sachkritik*

Defining terms

I will now set out a relatively detailed account of *Sachkritik*, which is important because the term has arguably come to embrace a wider range of hermeneutical practice than its originator, Rudolf Bultmann, had in mind. It is also necessary to note that *Sachkritik* differs in some respects from the maximal construal and selectivity just discussed: it is less of a technique and more of an ideological approach to the biblical text, and so is distinct from interpretation that is purely historical or literary. That said, like the techniques discussed above, it does represent a way of handling the particular words and phrases of the text without necessarily stretching their meaning or dealing selectively with them. I will argue that among the scholars surveyed here, it is an approach adopted by many who read the text within explicitly ideological frameworks – theological or theological/socio-critical.

In defining *Sachkritik*, I will draw on an article in which Robert Morgan surveys this hermeneutical concept, not only as Bultmann understood and practised it, but also as it has subsequently evolved.⁴⁶⁸ Morgan offers a definition of *Sachkritik* as ‘criticism (of a text) in the light of the *Sache*, its intended subject matter:’⁴⁶⁹ it thus involves differentiating between the words used and the meaning (or *Sache*) they are intended to convey. Morgan sketches out the debate between Bultmann and Karl Barth in the 1920s which gave rise to the term *Sachkritik*, noting that both scholars agreed on the need to interpret biblical texts according to the *Sache*. Bultmann however, unlike Barth, held that biblical interpretation should involve not only determining the intended meaning, but also a critical process by which the adequacy of expression of the *Sache* would be assessed.

A crucial issue for this kind of interpretation is how to determine the *Sache*, or intended meaning of a biblical text.⁴⁷⁰ Morgan argues that Bultmann’s own work

⁴⁶⁸ Robert Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik* in Reception History’ in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 (2010), 175-190.

⁴⁶⁹ Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 177.

⁴⁷⁰ David W. Congdon notes some disagreement between Barth and Bultmann on this, quoting a statement from Barth which distinguishes between the ‘whole’ gospel and the ‘real’ gospel, and observing that ‘this still leaves ambiguity about how to discern the real gospel, and it was over this ambiguity that Barth and Bultmann would part ways.’ See *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann’s Dialectical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 724.

exhibits two forms of *Sachkritik* in each of which the *Sache* is decided in a different way, while scholarship subsequent to Bultmann has given rise to a third possibility. He says of these three kinds of *Sachkritik*,

‘these can perhaps better be seen as points on a spectrum stretching from Bultmann’s interpreting what a particular *says* in terms of its supposedly underlying Christian meaning, to forms of critical theological interpretation of biblical texts where the criterion is not drawn from the text being interpreted but is nevertheless arguably scriptural, and on to those where the criterion is less scriptural, or barely scriptural at all.’⁴⁷¹

In the first of these types of *Sachkritik* – typical of Bultmann’s earlier work – the *Sache* is found within the biblical book being examined. Morgan illustrates this by referring to Bultmann’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians, in which (for example) ‘having identified the *Sache* of chs. 1-4 in the paradoxical wisdom of God on the cross, [Bultmann] judges that in ch. 2 Paul rather loses his grip on this’.⁴⁷² In the second type – represented by Bultmann’s ‘later demythologizing proposal’⁴⁷³ – the *Sache* has become ‘[Bultmann’s] understanding of the New Testament message’ more generally.⁴⁷⁴ In the third position on the spectrum – which goes beyond Bultmann’s practice⁴⁷⁵ – the *Sache* is determined from extra-biblical sources, even if the biblical text continues to exercise some influence: as Morgan puts it, ‘contemporary experience is decisive, not the witness of scripture.’⁴⁷⁶

I have given a reasonably detailed account of Morgan’s article not in order to discuss whether his assessment of Bultmann’s work is justified, but because the interpretative approach he outlines seems to reflect the work of many of the women scholars surveyed here, both those I classified as reading theologically and those I judged to be reading socio-critically. Although *Sachkritik*, in all three of the forms

⁴⁷¹ Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 185.

⁴⁷² Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 181.

⁴⁷³ Morgan notes that although Bultmann does not describe his demythologising as *Sachkritik*, it merits that label because Bultmann is ‘criticizing what some New Testament texts say in the light of what he thinks they really *mean...*’ – see Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 184. This is a position supported by David Congdon, who describes ‘Bultmann extending *Sachkritik* into a program of radical demythologizing.’ See Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing*, 735.

⁴⁷⁴ Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 184.

⁴⁷⁵ It goes beyond Bultmann both because it draws on sources outside scripture to provide the *Sache*, and constitutes more of a judgement on the biblical text than interpretation of it – see Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 185.

⁴⁷⁶ Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 185.

Morgan defines, ‘presupposes a Christian account of the subject matter of the Bible,’⁴⁷⁷ many socio-critical readings seem to fit with Morgan’s description of the third type of *Sachkritik* – which can be ‘an honest rejection of [some biblical texts], free of the dubious claim that they are “really” intending something more Christian.’⁴⁷⁸ Socio-critical approaches and *Sachkritik* (as it has come to be understood) share broad characteristics. Both measure the elements of the text from a point of judgement beyond the words of the text itself. In practice it is not always clear how such a ‘point of judgement’ has been determined: ‘justice for women’ or ‘gender equality’ can be espoused as biblical principles, or as general moral precepts, or as both.

In surveying the readings of women scholars here, I have taken the following as indicators of *Sachkritik*: identification of a *Sache* (or point of judgement) from outside Ephesians 5:21-33 itself, and evidence of measuring the parts of the text against that *Sache*. Such ‘measuring’ was most clearly shown when the interpretation contained some element of negative judgement on, or proposed re-formulation of, the text. The following analysis distinguishes between three kinds of *Sachkritik*, roughly corresponding to those identified by Morgan: in the first a *Sache* is determined from elsewhere in the letter to the Ephesians, for the second the *Sache* is more broadly biblical, and in the case of the third, the *Sache* appears generally Christian but is not explicitly anchored in biblical texts.

***Sachkritik* type 1**

Among the scholars in this review who identified an intended meaning for Ephesians 5:21-33 from elsewhere in the letter, Morna Hooker perhaps gives the most thorough-going account. Hooker locates a *Sache* for the letter as a whole at chapter 1:9-10: ‘the theme of the letter...is “the mystery of [God’s] will,” made known to us by being set forth in Christ (1:9).’⁴⁷⁹ She later continues, ‘the μυστήριον of God’s will is said to be his purpose “to gather up all things in Christ, whether in heaven or on earth” (1:10).’⁴⁸⁰ This divine purpose – ‘a plan that is now embodied in the Church’ – is emphasised in the first part of the letter, leading naturally, in Hooker’s

⁴⁷⁷ Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 177.

⁴⁷⁸ Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 185.

⁴⁷⁹ Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 169.

⁴⁸⁰ Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 169.

view, to ‘the paraenesis of chapters 4-6 [which] centres on the life of the Christian community and its dependence upon Christ.’⁴⁸¹ It is in the light of this that Hooker deduces (as already noted in the section on theological frameworks) that the ‘main concern’ of the household code ‘is to demonstrate how the various possible relationships between Christians should reflect the mutual love which ought to permeate the whole body of Christ.’⁴⁸² For Hooker, Ephesians speaks of God’s aim to bring unity through Christ, and its household code of the need for this aim to be mirrored in the attitudes and practice of those within the church community.⁴⁸³

By Hooker’s account, the intended meaning of the Ephesian household code is concerned with the love and respect that ought to characterise relationships between Christians: this meaning is to be distinguished from the cultural assumptions that determined the particular form his words took. A hierarchical relationship between husband and wife reflects ancient presupposition, and now needs to be disregarded – as Hooker puts it, ‘we need to seek answers to the questions [the author of Ephesians] raised in terms that are appropriate for our own time, not...take over the answers he gave in his.’⁴⁸⁴ Hooker criticises those scholars who ‘regarded his words as “Law”,’⁴⁸⁵ and who do not separate underlying meaning from historically-conditioned expression. While Hooker does not overtly find fault with the text, she does in effect suggest that it needs some reformulation for present-day use; for the ‘answers’ the author gave are no longer appropriate. Her reading therefore demonstrates both identification of *Sache* and appraisal of the text against it.

Among the scholars criticised by Hooker for not differentiating between the mode of expression of Ephesians 5:21-33 and its intended meaning is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.⁴⁸⁶ It seems, however, that the readings of both scholars have significant common ground. Not only do they both frame their readings Christologically (as already discussed), they also both practise a similar kind of *Sachkritik*, despite the

⁴⁸¹ Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 170.

⁴⁸² Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 173.

⁴⁸³ Hooker says that through the instructions to husbands and wives, the author ‘remind[s] his readers of the link...between God’s plan to unite all things in Christ and the mutual respect which should be demonstrated by all members of Christ’s body.’ See ‘Submit to one another,’ 174.

⁴⁸⁴ Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 188.

⁴⁸⁵ Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 188.

⁴⁸⁶ See Hooker, ‘Submit to one another,’ 188, note 53.

different conclusions they draw from it. Both read the household code against an overall theme for the letter as a whole: for Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘*Ephesians* presents the “hope to which Christians are called” (1:18) as the gospel of peace (6:15).’⁴⁸⁷ She then traces this theme of peace in chapter 2: ‘the author applies this theological motif of peace and unification to the relationship of gentile and Jewish Christians in the community in order to insist on their unity, equality and mutuality.’⁴⁸⁸ At odds with this, however, are the instructions in the household code: ‘whereas wives and slaves are admonished to subordinate themselves and to obey with “fear and trembling,” the author does not admonish Jews to subordinate themselves in order to preserve the “peace” of the community...’⁴⁸⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza concludes her consideration of the Ephesian household code by asserting that ‘the “gospel of peace” has transformed the relationship of gentiles and Jews, but not the social roles of wives and slaves within the household of God.’⁴⁹⁰ For Schüssler Fiorenza, the early chapters of *Ephesians* aim at a kind of intra-communal peace based on a levelling of social hierarchy, whereas the underlining of hierarchies in *Ephesians* 5 runs counter to those earlier chapters.

The overall *Sache* of *Ephesians* identified by Hooker, and that of Schüssler Fiorenza, have some similarity: Hooker’s might be summarised as ‘unity to be achieved through mutual love and respect’ and Schüssler Fiorenza’s as ‘peace to be achieved through unity, equality and mutuality.’ The main difference lies in the conclusion of their *kritik*: whereas Hooker finds signs of her *Sache* in *Ephesians* 5:21-33 and therefore posits a distinction between *Sache* and mode of expression within the passage, Schüssler Fiorenza finds little or no sign of hers. For Schüssler Fiorenza, the passage simply does not reflect the *Sache* of the earlier parts of the letter.

A third example of this kind of *Sachkritik* is given by Elna Mouton’s 2014 article as discussed in section 2.2.5 above.⁴⁹¹ Mouton’s analysis here has points of similarity with Hooker’s, but Mouton’s different phrasing of the *Sache* of the early part of *Ephesians* results in a different emphasis to her conclusion on the passage itself.

⁴⁸⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 266.

⁴⁸⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 267.

⁴⁸⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 268.

⁴⁹⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 270.

⁴⁹¹ Mouton, ‘Reimagining ancient household ethos?’, 163-185.

Mouton's *Sache* concerns a radical break from the past ushered in by Christ: she refers to 'the essence of Eph 1-3' as 'a radically new humanity in relation to Christ and fellow-believers.'⁴⁹² In accordance with this, Ephesians '5:15-6:9...illustrates the principle of the new life under the influence of the Spirit.' On the other hand, the household code does not represent a straightforward illustration: 'the explicit hierarchical language of the Ephesians code comes as a surprise after references to a new humanity, to equally worthy members of God's household...'⁴⁹³ In the end, Mouton views the text as both example of, and invitation to, 'an ongoing faithful struggle to interpret God's radical presence in the world.'⁴⁹⁴

Mouton's reading stresses the change brought about by Christ: this is, for her, central to the letter to the Ephesians as a whole, and is reflected (though perhaps somewhat more dimly) in the household code. The code is problematic – Mouton's interpretation implies more negative critique than Hooker's. For Mouton, the text does not simply represent the work of an author understandably choosing an illustration from his own cultural setting (as for Hooker), but words which are to some extent ideologically compromised: a not-entirely-successful attempt to reflect the radical change in human relationships brought about by Christ. Despite the difference in their judgements of the passage itself, however, all three scholars – Hooker, Mouton and Schüssler Fiorenza – appraise its words according to an underlying meaning discerned from elsewhere in Ephesians.

***Sachkritik* type 2**

Other scholars, however, set the passage alongside a *Sache* determined from the biblical texts more broadly. Eileen Campbell-Reed's search for the liberating impulse of Ephesians 5:21-33,⁴⁹⁵ represents a form of *Sachkritik* based on her understanding of the biblical texts as a whole: 'the overwhelmingly clear message of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament is that God created humanity as free subjects...where humans are in bondage for any reason, God's purpose is to

⁴⁹² Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos?', 170.

⁴⁹³ Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos?', 171.

⁴⁹⁴ Mouton, 'Reimagining ancient household ethos?', 181.

⁴⁹⁵ Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, 'Should Wives "Submit Graciously"? A Feminist Approach to interpreting Ephesians 5:21-33' in *Review & Expositor*, 98 no.2 (2001), 264.

liberate them...'⁴⁹⁶ Along with this, she gives an explicit commitment to 'the equality of men and women as created in the image of God,' an apparent reference to Genesis 1:27 ('so God created humankind in his image...')⁴⁹⁷ She finds indications of this *Sache* in the earlier chapters of Ephesians, noting in chapter 2, 'the reconciliation of those who were formerly enemies and the equality of different groups (2 13-16)' and in chapter 4, 'no gender restrictions offered or even hinted (4 1-13).'⁴⁹⁸ The most obvious sign of the *Sache* in Ephesians 5:21-33 is 'the call to mutual submission' in 5:21, described as 'the pivotal point.'⁴⁹⁹ Somewhat similarly to Morna Hooker, Campbell-Reed explains hierarchical language as historical conditioning which is no longer appropriate: 'the hierarchical notions of the days in which Eph 5 21-33 was written are no longer understood as the formal authority structures...'⁵⁰⁰

While Campbell-Reed finds a 'liberating impulse' in Ephesians 5:21-33, others do not conclude as positively. Several scholars measure the words of Ephesians 5:21-33 according to principles established in undisputed Pauline texts, and find the former wanting. In Sheila McGinn's opinion, 'the use of the household code in the Deutero-Pauline Letters marks a significant shift from Paul's view of how Christians should relate to one another.'⁵⁰¹ McGinn assesses Ephesians 5:21-33 against texts such as 1 Corinthians and Romans and finds a gulf between their respective treatments of the marriage relationship. In the Ephesians text, 'the exhortations to husbands...in no way put the husband on an equal plane with the wife;' Paul, however, 'emphasizes the *reciprocity* of marital relations.'⁵⁰² [Italics original] For McGinn, the Pauline *Sache* of reciprocity between husband and wife is not to be found in Ephesians 5.

Elizabeth E. Johnson appraises Ephesians 5:21-33 against 'the apostle's [i.e. Paul's] conviction that the revelation of Jesus Christ...discloses God's new creation that is invading and displacing the old creation and its binary assignments of identity.'

⁴⁹⁶ Campbell-Reed, 'Should Wives "Submit Graciously"?' 266.

⁴⁹⁷ Campbell-Reed, 'Should Wives "Submit Graciously"?' 272.

⁴⁹⁸ Campbell-Reed, 'Should Wives "Submit Graciously"?' 273.

⁴⁹⁹ Campbell-Reed here draws on the work of Craig S. Keener, see 'Should Wives "Submit Graciously"?' 270.

⁵⁰⁰ Campbell-Reed, 'Should Wives "Submit Graciously"?' 274.

⁵⁰¹ Sheila E. McGinn, 'The Household Codes of the Later Pauline Traditions' in *Catechist* 37 (2004), 52.

⁵⁰² McGinn, 'The Household Codes,' 52.

Johnson refers to a number of texts to support this assessment of Paul's position, including Galatians 3:28 ('there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus').⁵⁰³ In her reading of the Ephesians passage itself, Johnson concludes that even those elements which others might find anti-hierarchical are negated by the rest of the text: thus any mutuality in 5:21 is countered by what follows: 'there does not seem to be much mutual submission in view when women are told they must be subject "in everything" to their husbands (5:24).'⁵⁰⁴ Her conclusion is that the Pauline *Sache* is not reflected in the Ephesians passage: 'the result for women is thus a retreat from the initial freedom promised them in Paul's preaching...'⁵⁰⁵

Despite the variation in their conclusions, these three scholars all assess Ephesians 5 in the light of a biblical theme of freedom for women from hierarchical social structures. Whether they trace this theme, or *Sache*, in Genesis creation narratives, in Jesus' ministry or in Pauline texts (or in all three), they use it as a yardstick against which to judge the elements of the household code. Campbell-Reed finds it partly reflected there, the others do not: their *kritik* yields different conclusions.

***Sachkritik* type 3**

While the first two kinds of *Sachkritik* could be identified by the explicit derivation of a *Sache* from biblical texts, the third kind offers no such overt referencing of a *Sache*. There is, however, judgement of the text in the light of a principle or standard, which can be identified as Christian. The interpretation of Rachel Muers offers an illustration. Muers describes her reading as 'gender-critical.'⁵⁰⁶ Her ideological perspective is therefore one that looks for justice for both genders, and I therefore classified her reading as primarily socio-critical. In accordance with her viewpoint, she asks of Ephesians 5:21-33, 'what do women-as-wives get that mitigates the terror of the text?'⁵⁰⁷ While Muers does not explicitly ground either her reading position or her textual question in terms of Christianity, the answer she gives to her question is couched in terms that are both theological and Christian: they

⁵⁰³ E. Elizabeth Johnson, 'Ephesians' in Newsom, Carol A., Ringe, Sharon H., Jacqueline E., Lapsley eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* 3rd edn. (Louisville/Westminster: John Knox Press, 2012), 579.

⁵⁰⁴ Johnson, 'Ephesians,' 580.

⁵⁰⁵ Johnson, 'Ephesians,' 580.

⁵⁰⁶ Muers, 'Women Reading Texts on Marriage,' 195.

⁵⁰⁷ Muers, 'Women Reading Texts on Marriage,' 196.

[women-as-wives] get ‘an avowal....that, in Christ, bodies are saved.’⁵⁰⁸ The principle of justice for each gender represents a *Sache* against which the text is questioned, and the response to the question connects this *Sache* with Christianity.

A further example occurs in the interpretation of Mitzi Smith. Smith concludes the introduction to her commentary on Ephesians with a call to read the book ‘critically,’ so that ‘African Americans can salvage what is liberating and lay aside that which threatens our freedom.’⁵⁰⁹ The texts will be judged against a *Sache* of liberation for African Americans – a Christian principle: ‘African Americans have never considered their status as Christians as mitigating the need for liberation from slavery’.⁵¹⁰ Smith finds the Ephesian household code does not conform to this principle: she states that ‘scholars have only been able to find a liberating Pauline ethic by distinguishing between the authentic Pauline writings and the deuteropauline writings, such as Ephesians,’⁵¹¹ and re-iterates her previous injunction: ‘African American preachers and other church leaders....must read the household codes critically’.⁵¹² Smith’s work illustrates the appraisal of the text against a *Sache* shaped by the experience of African Americans, and results in (to use Morgan’s words quoted earlier) ‘an honest rejection’⁵¹³ of the text.

Summary of *Sachkritik*

Sachkritik is a method which has promise for readers who wish to acknowledge that the text may be confused or inconsistent, and to find meaning without necessarily resolving this inconsistency, as several of the interpretations above demonstrate (perhaps especially those of Mouton and Muers). Perhaps most pertinent to this thesis, the use of *Sachkritik* results in suggestions for the use of this passage which go beyond acceptance or rejection: it might be used as a guide for all Christian relationships (Hooker), as an illustration (albeit somewhat indistinct) of the radical change brought about by Christ (Mouton), as a promise of ‘salvation of the body’ (Muers), to give just three examples. As noted in chapter 1, Robert Morgan argues that although *Sachkritik* allows for criticism of texts, it also, like allegory, ‘attempt[s]

⁵⁰⁸ Muers, ‘Women Reading Texts on Marriage,’ 196.

⁵⁰⁹ Smith, ‘Ephesians,’ 349.

⁵¹⁰ Smith, ‘Ephesians,’ 359.

⁵¹¹ Smith, ‘Ephesians,’ 359.

⁵¹² Smith, ‘Ephesians,’ 360.

⁵¹³ Morgan, ‘*Sachkritik*,’ 185.

to enable scripture to function as a source and norm'.⁵¹⁴ Pre-modern allegorical interpretation, says Morgan, 'retained all scripture as a potential source of faith and devotion even while resisting what some texts actually say'.⁵¹⁵ Although Ephesians 5:21-33 might not itself qualify as a 'source or norm', the *Sachkritik* of some scholars in this survey demonstrates how it might yet be 'retained as a potential source of faith and devotion' through its somewhat blurred expression of an intended meaning.

⁵¹⁴ Morgan, *Sachkritik*, 186.

⁵¹⁵ Morgan, 'Sachkritik,' 185.

2.3.4 The interaction of hermeneutical methods

As with the hermeneutical frameworks already discussed, the techniques of maximal construal, selectivity and *Sachkritik* are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to detect traces of more than one such technique in the interpretation of many scholars – for example, Claire Powell. Powell’s reading contains examples not only of selectivity (as already noted) but also of construal which appears something more than minimal. Powell states that ‘what the husband stands for when described as head is the caring, giving, sacrificial love that is like Christ.’⁵¹⁶ Thus being ‘head’ entails only love, with any connotations of authority or leadership removed: the word ‘head’ thus read does not suggest any hierarchical relationship. Similarly, Mitzi Smith’s reading demonstrates not only *Sachkritik*, but also some selectivity: as described above, she views the contrast between the ‘love’ expected of husbands and the ‘fear’ asked of wives (in 5:33) as governing the passage – which perhaps makes it easier for her to conclude that there is no sign of a *Sache* which is liberating for women in the text overall.

Although some readings show the use of more than one technique, certain patterns are also discernible among the group of readings as a whole. In particular, *Sachkritik* often appears to be used as an alternative to maximal construal among scholars who find some contemporary use in the text. This may be because there is no need for both: if words or expressions appear difficult to explain (either ethically or because they appear to conflict with other words) then they can either be redefined to ease the difficulty, or they can be judged to be in some way inadequate. The decision to go one way rather than the other may then depend on the interpreter’s degree of reluctance to find fault with the text.

⁵¹⁶ Powell, ‘Ephesians,’ 704.

2.4 Conclusion

Hermeneutical frameworks

This survey of women scholars has started to hint at some of the ways in which the various hermeneutical approaches might contribute towards answering the research question underlying this thesis. I am searching for theologically fruitful and ethically responsible ways of reading Ephesians 5:21-33 today – that is, readings that contribute towards our apprehension of God and maximise the potential of women. While readings within an historical frame helpfully draw attention to factors which might constrain these aims – such as the specifically-patterned inherited materials (the ancient household code form) from which the passage is crafted and which might blur theological meaning – their focus is on the text within its ancient setting and they can therefore downplay how it might be interpreted today. While they do, in theory, offer one way of addressing ethical responsibility towards women, this would involve neutralising the text's current potential to harm women by relegating it to the past: this would not help those who wish to find ways of continuing to use the text today.

Readings based primarily on socio-critical hermeneutics highlight the capacity of the text to be read in ways harmful for women and therefore underscore the importance of finding ethically responsible interpretative possibilities. However, although feminist approaches – especially second-wave – are helpful in providing a conceptual basis for challenging the text on the grounds of its impact on women, they also reveal the conflict within the text when it is taken to be primarily about gender. The result tends towards an accept/reject choice for the reader, instead of opening further creative options for interpretation.

Literary readings emphasise the complexities of the text simply as a piece of writing: its metaphors and intertextual references are opaque – leading to a wide range of possible inferences which can be drawn from them. Without some ideological framing, these textual features can lead in ethically problematic directions, as demonstrated in this survey by readings which concentrated on the text's metaphors. Some literary interpretation, however, shows the other side to textual indeterminacy: if the text points towards something which it does not fully express, then there can be

theologically and ethically promising ways of defining the content of this ‘something.’

Although I am searching for theological ways of reading Ephesians 5, not all the theological readings surveyed here were equally helpful for the particular aims of this project. As explained in chapter 1, my criteria for theological fruitfulness and ethical responsibility are linked: an understanding of God’s love as life-giving underpins a definition of ethical responsibility as maximising the potential of women. In this survey, some of the ‘traditional’ theological ways of reading Ephesians 5 conclude that the primary vocation of all women is to motherhood – whether physical or spiritual, and therefore assert that women are best suited to domestic or convent-based lives. Such generalisations severely constrain women whose talents and abilities might thus never be fulfilled. This in turn, if ethics and theology are linked, raises serious theological questions about the nature and extent of God’s love. There are different drawbacks with some of the other theological readings considered here: those that set the text in the context of other biblical passages about gender again (as with readings in socio-critical frameworks) demonstrate the opposing ways in which the passage, and the biblical witness more broadly, can be taken on the subject of gender relationships. For my purposes, there seems to be most promise in theological readings that suggest alternative thematics for the passage aside from gender – such as social relationships more generally, or the exercise of power.

Finally, interpretations which draw on lived experience illustrate how much can be at stake for women in treatments of Ephesians 5. The influence of the passage, or readings of it, can be detected in career choices, the conduct of marriages and the decision to leave an abusive husband. The readings considered here imply that the passage can tap into issues of self-confidence for women, standing in the way of self-belief for those whose contexts are marked by experience of being treated as subordinate to men. Emphasis on textual thematics other than gender might offer one way to undercut the passage as a thoroughgoing statement of gender hierarchy, and therefore defuse its potential to be used as a gendered power-play.

Hermeneutical methods

The literary complexities of the passage make it open to the variety of hermeneutical methods illustrated here. Both selectivity and maximal construal resolve these complexities by producing readings in which the text maintains a consistent position on gender relationships. Maximal construal is open to the critique that it reshapes the meanings of words compared with generally-accepted definitions; selectivity that it privileges certain parts of the text without necessarily giving grounds for so doing, and fails to pay attention to others. For my purposes, it seems that *Sachkritik* may be most useful. *Sachkritik* brings to bear on the passage some criteria by which its words can be evaluated: a way of judging it while respecting a Christian intent within it. The use of such a method would both acknowledge its problematic aspects, and yet also respect the reasons why communities of faith continue to use this text.

Although these observations about both frameworks and methods offer some preliminary indications of the sort of hermeneutic that might further my aims, they represent only half of the map I am seeking to compile. In the next two chapters I will consider the other half by looking at ways in which ‘ordinary’ readers interpret the text.

3. Compiling the map: views and voices of ‘ordinary’ women

3.1 Introduction

This chapter and the next describe and analyse interpretation offered by ‘ordinary’ women readers of Ephesians 5:21-33, based on fieldwork carried out in and near the South Eastern English town of Hertford. I chose Hertford for practical reasons: that is where I lived at the time, and therefore where I had connections – social and professional – that facilitated recruitment. Although I expanded the recruitment area to Welwyn Garden City (7 miles from Hertford) in order to include more diverse denominational/faith positions, the majority of participants (77%) were from Hertford itself. Hertford is a county-town within commuting distance of London. The population in general is relatively affluent (average weekly household income in the four areas of the town of Hertford ranges from £730 to £920, compared with an average for the East of England region of £700)⁵¹⁷ and well-educated (the 2011 census showed that 33.5% of people in East Hertfordshire are educated to level 4 – degree level – compared with 27.4% for England as a whole).⁵¹⁸ There is a comparative lack of ethnic diversity in Hertford and its surrounding area, with 90.3% of people living in East Hertfordshire describing themselves as white from the UK (in the 2011 census) compared with 79.8% for England.⁵¹⁹

This chapter details how the fieldwork was planned and carried out, reports on the demographics of the participant group and makes some observations about the research environment. It then gives two ‘thick’ descriptions: the first is of the broad context – ideological and experiential – within which participants read the passage;

⁵¹⁷ Data from Income: Model Based Estimates table for April 07 – March 08 for the East Hertfordshire Middle Layer Super Output Areas 014 - 017 on the Neighbourhood Statistics website (Office for National Statistics), accessed at 12.30pm on 10 July 2014, URL: <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?a=7&b=6280132&c=S G14+3AQ&d=140&e=14&f=25672&g=6433255&i=1001x1003x1004x1005&l=266&o=279&m=0&r=0&s=1404991247037&enc=1>

⁵¹⁸ Census data table on Qualifications and Students from Neighbourhood Statistics website (Office for National Statistics), accessed at 3.30pm on 9 July 2014: URL <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?a=7&b=6275087&c=East+Hertfordshire&d=13&e=62&f=32766&g=6433211&i=1001x1003x1032x1004x1005&l=2536&o=362&m=0&r=1&s=1404987541818&enc=1>

⁵¹⁹ Census data table on ethnic group from Neighbourhood Statistics section of the Office for National Statistics website, accessed at 3.30pm on 9 July 2014: URL <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?a=7&b=6275087&c=East+Hertfordshire&d=13&e=62&f=32826&g=6433211&i=1001x1003x1032x1004x1005&l=2477&o=362&m=0&r=1&s=1404987348537&enc=1>

the second is of the range of responses they gave to the text itself. It is this range of views which is important: this is a qualitative rather than a quantitative survey, and so its purpose is not to be representative of all opinions but to suggest hermeneutical options for reading Ephesians 5 that might make sense today. These options, together with those suggested by scholars in the preceding chapter, form part of a 'map' of contemporary readings, which will then be used to help determine where a theologically fruitful and ethically responsible reading (as defined in chapter 1) might lie.

3.2 Planning and executing the fieldwork

3.2.1 Set up and recruitment

Group discussions

Having identified the CBS method as the basis for the group discussion element of this research, I first formulated a set of questions to guide group discussions on Ephesians 5:21-33 (see Appendix B). With the exception of the first two, these questions generally followed a pattern suggested by John Riches in *What is Contextual Bible Study?* The first two questions asked about views of marriage in general and were intended partly as an ice-breaker and partly to replace Riches' suggestion of an opening prayer with something more secular – so as not to assume any particular faith position. They provided a particular context for subsequent discussion of the text, encouraging participants to reflect on how this ancient text might fit with their contemporary experience. After question 2, Ephesians 5:21-33 was read (everyone was offered a copy of the NRSV version), and question 3 was then as open as possible, inviting participants to contribute anything which had jumped off the page at them. The subsequent four questions were designed to encourage close reading of debated aspects of the text.⁵²⁰ I then asked a question about the historical and social context of the passage (question 8) to assess whether an historical perspective was of interest to participants, and a question designed to encourage explicit comment on the text's relationship with contemporary experience (question 9).⁵²¹ Riches' final category of question – to 'affirm and challenge the group in its faith-in-action'⁵²² was replaced (because this particular use of CBS was not intended to result in praxis) with a question (10) intended to prompt reflection on the broader biblical picture of gender relationships.

Interviews

The individual interviews offered an opportunity both to explore views in more depth than might have been possible in the group discussions and also to ask about wider ideological commitments (such as attitudes to the Bible and to feminism) that might

⁵²⁰ During pilot testing of this group discussion method, question 4 proved to be redundant and was not actually asked at any of the group sessions.

⁵²¹ See Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 60-64 for these suggested categories of question, for the wording of the 'open' question (question 3 for this project) and for the recommendation that everyone is given a copy of the same version of the text.

⁵²² Riches (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?*, 64.

have a role in determining interpretation of the text. Accordingly, the questions asked (see Appendix C) fell into two broad groups: those dealing with the text itself, and those concerning ideological positions. The first group includes questions 4-7, 10 and 11 which invite participants in various ways to summarise and conclude on their views of the passage, and on its context in terms of biblical references to gender.⁵²³ The second group of questions enquires about attitudes to the Bible (questions 8-9), and views of gender equality and feminism (questions 12-14). I might also include questions 1 and 2 within this second group, because although initially designed to supplement a question asked in the demographic information sheet (see more detail below), in practice they sometimes led on to reflection about the Bible and Christian doctrine more generally.⁵²⁴

Collecting demographic information

Participants in the group discussions were asked if they would complete an optional demographic information sheet (see Appendix D).⁵²⁵ As this is a qualitative study, demographic information was used as one way of assessing how wide a range of perspectives might be included in the project rather than to demonstrate how representative the participant group might be of any broader population. In constructing the sheet, I drew on quantitative research by Andrew Village,⁵²⁶ which concluded that ‘factors such as education, personality type, experience and charismatic practice seemed to be more important predictors of biblical interpretation than factors such as sex or age.’⁵²⁷ Along with this he found that theological education also had some bearing on interpretation,⁵²⁸ as did membership of particular traditions within Anglicanism – what he called ‘the “community” effect.’⁵²⁹ These findings prompted my questions about education (and theological education in

⁵²³ Question 10 repeated the question asked in group discussions about the broader biblical picture of gender relationships because in initial group discussions participants had little to say and I therefore felt it might be worth exploring further.

⁵²⁴ Although I initially thought that the question about Myers Briggs profiles might be interesting in framing responses to the biblical text – based on the research conducted by Andrew Village, of which more detail below – it proved redundant because most participants were not aware of their profile.

⁵²⁵ This is the final version of the sheet – it was amended part way through the project to make the ethnic group categories clearer. The sheet was also altered specifically for the Muslim participants to make question 4 more relevant to them.

⁵²⁶ Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People* (Aldershot UK & Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2007), 2.

⁵²⁷ Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, 160.

⁵²⁸ Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, 88.

⁵²⁹ Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, 160.

particular) and church denomination, as well as interview questions about personality type and denominational history.

Pilot testing

Having designed the questions to be asked of participants, I then developed an information sheet to explain the project to potential volunteers (see Appendix E). Among other things, the sheet gives details of the written consent required for each participant in order to prevent misunderstandings about the project (see sample consent form in Appendix F). With the materials drafted, a small group of friends from a church in Hertford gave feedback on the design and format of the project information sheet and offered to pilot-test the group discussion process. This was helpful in many ways: from testing the digital recording equipment to confirming whether the questions worked well in practice – it was during this session that question 4 (see Appendix B) was shown to be redundant. As all the necessary protocols were followed, the data from the pilot discussion group was included with the data from the other groups for analysis.

Recruiting

As recruitment for this study concentrated on church attendees (for the reasons, ideological and practical, noted in chapter 1), I initially approached local church ministers at one of their regular meetings together to see if they might be willing for me to recruit at their churches. Nine of the twelve groups who participated in the discussions resulted either directly or indirectly from the contacts made at this meeting. Of the other three groups, two arose from approaching church ministers in Welwyn Garden City, and the other was suggested by a Muslim friend. The churches used different ways of asking for volunteers. In some churches, existing women's groups were approached to see if they might be interested. At others, I was invited along to talk about the project at a service or information about the project was included in the weekly notice sheet. Recruitment for individual interviews was carried out among those participating in group discussions. Participants in the group discussions were asked if they would indicate on the demographic information sheet whether they might be willing to participate in an interview.

In general, recruitment in the churches/faith groups which agreed to participate was not difficult, though in some cases groups were small (the smallest number in a group was 3, and this occurred in three cases). In total there were 57 volunteers for the group discussions, from 7 different Christian denominations in addition to the Muslim group. This indicates an interest in reading and discussing Ephesians 5:21-33 and the issues it raises. Of the 57 volunteers, 42 (nearly 75%) offered to be interviewed, demonstrating a continuing readiness to engage with the text at the centre of this study.

Data analysis

The recordings of group discussions and individual interviews were transcribed and then coded to identify themes and recurring patterns.⁵³⁰ As this project is focused on hermeneutical methods and techniques, I was interested in the views expressed rather than their mode of expression – I therefore did not use techniques associated with discourse or conversation analysis.⁵³¹ In order to code the transcribed discussions and interviews, I used both concept-driven and data-driven methods.⁵³² As concept-driven codes come from sources such as literature or research ideas which are outside the data,⁵³³ they were helpful for this project in maintaining its focus on biblical interpretation strategies amid a high volume of data, not all of which concerned Bible reading. The hermeneutical frameworks described in the next chapter represent concept-driven codes – classifications generally recognisable from analyses of biblical interpretation. Alongside concept-driven coding, coding arising from close analysis of the data itself (data-driven)⁵³⁴ helped to supplement my initial list of hermeneutical frameworks.

Referring to individual participants

In this study, I refer to participants by number when quoting their words. The aim of the numbering system is to preserve the anonymity of those involved, but also to

⁵³⁰ Graham Gibbs describes coding as ‘a way of indexing or categorizing the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it’ in *Analyzing Qualitative Data* (London, SAGE Publications Ltd., 2007), 38.

⁵³¹ Techniques described in Gibbs, *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, 15.

⁵³² Data analysis software (NVivo 10) was helpful in coding the data, comparing answers and topics across different groups and individuals, and in generating reports on word frequency.

⁵³³ As described by Gibbs in *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, 44.

⁵³⁴ Gibbs, *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, 45.

allow me to distinguish between participants and so to demonstrate that I am not simply relying on the words of only a few. I have used two different numbering schemes – participants in the group discussions are referred to using numbers 1 to 57. For those who offered to be interviewed, I have used another number series – from 501 to 542. The use of two series is in order to lower the risk that participants in group discussions might identify the source of comments made in individual interviews. Interviews offered the opportunity to speak about personal experiences or put forward opinions which participants might have been hesitant to reveal in a group context – had the same numbering system been used, it is possible that interview responses could have been attributed to particular people.

3.2.2 The participants

The volunteer group in this study reflected some of the features of the Hertford population in general: the group was predominantly white (88%) and generally very well-educated (68% to degree level or higher). In addition, most of the volunteers (61%) described themselves as middle class and most were married (75%). This indicates that participants came largely from the same socio-economic group. Although a lack of demographic diversity such as this would not invalidate conclusions, as it could have done in a quantitative project, it did indicate that the project as a whole missed the observations and suggestions that others from different socio-economic groups might have contributed. However, the range of views expressed here, albeit predominantly from just one socio-economic background, is already potentially very helpful for the aims of this project. This is demonstrated by the variety of opinions expressed in group discussions and individual interviews. Views of the Bible differed considerably – described by one woman as ‘the infallible word of God’ [538] and yet by another as ‘stories to live by’ [502]. Similarly disparate were attitudes to faith – one participant said ‘I am very suspicious of religion in general,’ [531] but another summed up her view of Ephesians 5:21-33 as ‘it’s what God says, so I totally obviously agree.’ [526]

The wide range of opinions may have resulted from some of the ways in which the participant group did demonstrate diversity. First, there was a breadth of ages involved – the youngest volunteer was 24 and the oldest 87 – meaning that three generations were represented. Secondly, there was a wide variation in denominational allegiance, including members of institutional churches, non-conformist churches and those who would not necessarily subscribe to any particular faith position – as one Quaker interviewee put it, ‘you could be Jewish and a Quaker, it doesn’t matter what you believe, it’s about how you live your life.’[528] Finally, there was considerable diversity of occupation: volunteers for discussion groups included housewives/homemakers (21%), teachers (21%), nurses/carers (9%), as well as two psychologists, a biomedical scientist, a physicist, a lawyer, an aid worker, two musicians, a university professor and an accountant. In terms of factors identified by Andrew Village as affecting biblical interpretation, participants in this study thus belonged to a wide range of church traditions (equivalent to Village’s “community” effect’) and they included some with formal theological qualifications

and many who had none. In these ways, therefore, it was probable that their views of the biblical text would differ. As a result, while demographic similarities among members of the participant group might suggest further research possibilities, they need not detract from the value of this project.

Within this participant group as a whole, the Muslim group acted as a kind of control on the views expressed by other participants. They did this not only because of their particular faith position, but also because their ethnicity was Arab, from families originally from Iraq.

3.2.3 The research environment

Group subtexts

At the start of one of the group discussions I asked ‘do you all know each other?’ The response came amid some laughter: ‘we do *now*....’ [55]. The dynamics of group discussions varied according to how well participants knew one another: in some groups there were women who had not met each other before; in others, participants were members of an established small group. Although it is textual interpretation which is central to this research rather than the ethnography of reading, several ethnographic observations provide helpful background to analysing the data from these groups with their different dynamics. In his ethnography of evangelical group Bible study, *Words Upon the Word*, James Bielo commends an observation made by Elizabeth Long, who noted that behind the formation and continuation of many reading groups there is a ‘subtext:’ in Bielo’s words, ‘some intersection of shared values, interests or passions that bind them into a cohesive social unit.’⁵³⁵ Among the groups in this study which were accustomed to meeting together, there was evidence of such subtexts: for example one participant identified her group as sharing a more conservative approach than others in her church: ‘we have quite a big church...and a lot of people I don’t think...have been taught as conservatively as maybe we have...’ [50]

There was evidence of another kind of subtext in some groups – one which reflected the denomination of which the group was a part. So, for example, early on in a discussion with a group of Quakers, a participant distanced herself from ‘church’ by saying ‘Christ didn’t give himself up for the church – this is the Quakers, Quaker talking [laughter]...he perhaps gave himself up for humankind... for ordinary people, but not for the church...’ [37]. This comment, and the laughter of other participants while it was said, seemed to reflect a shared desire to distinguish these participants, and Quakers more broadly, from institutional churches. An example of a different ‘denominational’ subtext occurred in a group of Roman Catholic participants, where almost everyone emphasised the role of the church in interpreting the Bible: one woman said, ‘it’s one of the reasons why I love our church, as with any passage in the Bible, you need help understanding it...’ [56] while another

⁵³⁵ James S Bielo, *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 96.

praised a particular edition of the Bible by saying ‘I like it because they give you a commentary on it and give you what the church’s teachings are and what the fathers of the church say and what the documents of the church say’ [55]. There were very few references in other groups to the role of the church in biblical interpretation.

Identifying such subtexts was useful in analysing what was said about Ephesians 5:21-33. When the Quaker group just described was asked about the meaning of Ephesians 5:23 (‘For the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church...’), the discussion that followed concentrated on the meaning of ‘church,’ with one participant expressing the view that verse 23 was ‘propaganda’ because, as she continued, ‘they wanted to build this church and were doing a bit of publicity for it’ [40]. In other groups, the discussion about verse 23 did not generally focus on the implications of ‘church’ but instead on the term ‘head’ or on the meaning of the analogy more generally. Identifying an anti-institutional church subtext in the Quaker group therefore provided useful background to their particular comments about the text itself.

In the case of the Roman Catholic group, identifying a general subtext helped to highlight the differences in the views of particular participants. Although the church in general was held to have an important role in biblical interpretation, the main reference point for some participants was interpretation offered by parish priests, whereas others referred to published official documents. Especially interesting was the difference this seemed to make when interpreting the Ephesians passage, in particular verse 22 (‘Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.’). The participants who had referred earlier to the interpretation of parish priests were less inclined to read verse 22 as a statement of gender hierarchy than the women who referred to the published teachings of the church. So, for instance, one woman made the comment that ‘years of hearing sermons on this passage, I only ever had memories of priests growing up talking about partnerships and roles of men and women in a marriage that weren’t to do with women doing as they were told by their husbands’ [56]. Later in the discussion, however, another participant referred to a papal encyclical to support the idea of gender hierarchy in marriage (albeit with certain limitations on what that hierarchy might mean): ‘Pope Pius 11th taught in

1930 in *Casti Connubii*, “the submission of the wife neither ignores nor suppresses the liberty to which her dignity as a human person or as her normal functions as wife, mother and companion give her the full right” [55]. It would be wrong to infer too much from this observation – there is no implication that Catholic teaching is inconsistent. However, there is an indication here of the difficulties of determining the meaning of this passage even within a group in which there is general agreement about a source of definitive interpretation – ‘the church.’

Interviews

In general, the individual interviews met their objectives of allowing voices which had been relatively quiet in the group discussions to be heard, and personal experiences to be described. As an example of the latter, four women talked about difficult relationships with their own parents in the interview setting, but not in the group discussion. The interviews also offered an opportunity for women to articulate opinions which ran counter to subtexts they thought might exist among other members of the group. One participant spoke in the interview about non-heterosexual marriage and acknowledged that she had been reluctant to raise the subject in the group discussion: ‘I kept thinking well, I know I’ve thought it, is it that no-one else is thinking it, or is it the elephant in the room that no-one wants to bring up because...it feels like that’s the next big taboo – would people be ok with saying it?’ [513]

The effect of my role

In *Words Upon the Word*, James Bielo stresses the importance of ‘reflexive ethnography.’⁵³⁶ This expression refers to an ethnographer’s awareness of how their chosen methods and ‘the autobiographical and relational element of fieldwork’⁵³⁷ might affect their results. Bielo goes on to describe what he sees as ‘the central issue of being an ethnographer of Christianity: my spiritual identity and the community’s reaction to this.’⁵³⁸ Although this is not ethnographic research, it still aims at critical detachment as a basis for conclusions. Therefore, as I am an ordained woman in the Church of England, it would be a serious oversight not to attempt an analysis of the

⁵³⁶ Bielo, *Words upon the Word*, 22.

⁵³⁷ Bielo, *Words upon the Word*, 29.

⁵³⁸ Bielo, *Words upon the Word*, 30.

part my role in the church might have played in this research. In terms of recruitment, my position in the church gave me access to ministers that proved advantageous. It meant that I could go to the meeting of local church ministers as an ‘insider’ (in one way at least) and ask for their help to recruit.⁵³⁹ In terms of the participant groups, I was in some cases an insider (a fellow-member of the Church of England, a fellow Christian, a fellow-member of their particular church) and yet in others an outsider (ordained rather than lay, from another denomination, from an institutional church). It is impossible to be certain about all the effects these considerations might have had on results; some aspects were clear – such as one participant’s reticence in explaining to an ordained woman why she preferred male leadership in her church:

‘I don’t know if...I mean I kind of come from a background that feels more comfortable with a male pastor.....I’m not saying our church wouldn’t consider our lead pastor being a woman but I think I would feel more comfortable if it was a man – I don’t know why, though – I don’t think it’s from this passage...but maybe it is, I don’t know. But part of that I think is maybe just my preference than I think it’s wrong....I mean obviously you’re a woman who’s a pastor, so I don’t want to....’ [538]

Other ways in which my position may have affected results must remain speculative. Did my role within the Church of England prompt the anti-institutional church subtext noted in the Quaker group? Were official documents of the Roman Catholic Church cited particularly for my benefit, as a member of a different (and possibly theologically suspect) denomination? While it is impossible to answer these questions definitively, it is possible to follow Bielo’s strategy of outlining the steps I took to minimize the impact of my particular background and role.⁵⁴⁰ At the start of all the group discussions, I emphasized my role as facilitator and listener rather than teacher: I also described the differences between the research discussion group and the kind of ‘Bible study’ intended to be a teaching event. I stressed that this research was not in any sense on behalf of the Church of England. Throughout both the

⁵³⁹ As James Bielo describes, there is considerable debate among anthropologists about the relative merits of being an insider or an outsider when conducting research among Christian groups (*Words Upon the Word*, 30-33). Esa Lehtinen argued that her position as ‘insider’ helped her research among Seventh Day Adventists because she was able ‘to make sense of the interaction:’ see ‘Conversation Analysis and Religion: Practices of Talking about Bible Texts in Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Study’ in *Religion* 39 (2009), 234.

⁵⁴⁰ See especially Bielo, *Words upon the Word*, 40-43.

discussions and interviews I was careful not to offer my own opinions, even when asked.

Perhaps the most effective curb to my influence on the discussions and interviews came from the participants themselves. As already noted, the participants were very well-educated. As a group, they were confident and articulate: indeed it would be doing them something of a disservice to imply that the views they expressed were somehow determined in response to me. Their independence of thinking was shown in some implied challenges to aspects of the project: for example, a participant in one group disputed the question about the meaning of 'be subject to' when she said 'you're sort of taking this to pieces and then...we're not necessarily looking at what follows...' [52]. For this participant, questions that concentrated on particular words and phrases in the first half of the text missed the point of the passage as a whole. A further illustration of participant confidence was given by the woman who initially seemed reluctant to speak about her view that a church leader should be a man: she went on to give a specific biblical justification for her opinion:

'I'm not saying a church who has a woman teaching pastor is wrong, or sinful in any way....I just think that's my own...probably my own comfortableness because of what I grew up with. The tradition I grew up with...but I don't think it's because of this passage....I think it's from the other passage about women speaking to women...' [538]

Although she started by attributing her opinion to her upbringing (which lacked the implication that it might apply to me), in the end this participant did not shy away from giving biblical justification for her view (which could carry an implication for me). Overall, although it is impossible to gauge all the effects of my presence, role and actions on the group discussions or interviews, these illustrations of the assertiveness and capability of the participants give some indication that the research was not compromised.

3.3 The contexts for reading

In this section I will offer a ‘thick’ description of aspects of the ideological and experiential contexts in which participants read Ephesians 5:21-33. I will deal with the views participants expressed of marriage, gender equality, feminism and the Bible. This description is based mostly on responses to the first two questions in group discussions (about marriage) and on answers given in individual interviews (about gender equality, feminism and the Bible). Such a description will then form the basis for exploring participants’ comments about the text itself.

3.3.1 Views of marriage

The first two questions asked in group discussions concerned ideals of marriage (‘how should the relationship between a wife and her husband work?’) and its practicalities (‘how does the relationship between wife and husband work in practice?’). Early on in nearly all discussions, however, participants considered how they perceived marriage to have changed in their lifetimes, or those of their parents and grandparents. I will therefore address these issues of change first, before moving on to consider the ideals women suggested.

Changing cultural norms: roles within marriage

Most discussion about changing cultural norms around marriage centred on how the roles of husband and wife had changed during the three-generation span represented. One participant commented ‘my father...wouldn’t be seen pushing a pram – very undignified’[14] and another then replied, ‘my Dad certainly never did any looking after us in that sense, and my Mum was at home, whereas now, in our generation, I’m the one who’s at work and my husband’s at home with the children’[16]. This kind of observation was echoed in many other groups, as one woman commented, ‘the traditional...ideas of who should do what are altering’[29]. Many perceived that men used to be cast in the role of ‘breadwinner’ but that had changed:

‘I’m old enough to have been married over 50 years and when I got married it was assumed that the husband took primary responsibility for the financial side of things – it was his business to have a job where he could support his wife and family...it has changed’[57].

Although some thought their husbands still saw their role as earning the main family income, they did not assert that this was a current cultural norm: one woman referred to ‘things that [her husband] would see as his role to do’ and then immediately added, ‘because of my generation, you know’[12], implying that this was not the case for later generations.

Other participants considered that the increased prevalence of women doing paid work outside the home had changed the roles of husband and wife: ‘a lot of women work now don’t they? And that’s changed the nature of marriage. It used to be that when a couple got married the woman stopped working’[20]. While this perspective was challenged: ‘Does it not depend on your background? Cause...my grandmothers both worked. And I think it was financial...’[46], many participants felt that changes in working arrangements had had an impact on family life:

‘...it seems to be a lot to do with working patterns actually, and men are more hands on with the children in terms of a nurturing role...both parents...now have to be nurturing and have to...handle discipline issues...’[28]

Opinions varied about whether these changes were for the better. One participant thought that freeing men from the role of provider had resulted in a lack of responsibility: ‘modern men have gone [to] the extreme...modern men nowadays have said...I’m going to keep my wages and look after me, I’m gonna buy a flat and I’m not gonna share my money with anyone’[31]. Another wondered whether ‘men are a bit lost in their role sometimes...’[51] because formerly distinct roles were now being shared. A third participant, however, used the premise that ‘talents and qualities are not necessarily gender-related’, to imply that releasing husbands and wives from fixed roles was advantageous [8]. While many agreed with the thinking that roles in marriage should reflect individual abilities (see further comment below), some highlighted that in practice, working women sometimes still took responsibility for more domestic tasks than their husbands: ‘I still do a lot of stuff...I work part-time...but given that he’s at home full time I’d still say that I do a lot...I do a lot of the childcare stuff...All the play-dates...’[16]. Changing attitudes to marital roles may therefore have resulted in an increased workload for some women.

The Muslim group in this study made many similar observations to participants in the other groups, noting changing roles for husband and wife across generations, and the impact on married roles of wives working outside the home. One participant commented,

‘me being a second generation coming from Iraq and...looking at my parents’ marriage I was like...I want...more of an equal role...my Dad was the breadwinner, my mother was at home – she had served my Dad in that sense. But...I didn’t want that. I wanted it to be more equal’. [27]

In some ways this comment echoes those of participants in other groups: they show a generational change in perception of a wife’s role. The same participant went on to note that, like some other women in this study, she still carried out more domestic tasks than her husband despite having full-time work outside the home, though she speculated that this might be due to her cultural background:

‘I think although I was born here and I am English but I think the culture’s still inside me where I want to...I don’t know if the word is serve. But I still want to be the kind of wife in the house and I work as well full time but I still feel that’s still inside me where I still do the cooking and the washing and the cleaning for him...I don’t know if culture comes into it, I think probably, and I think he expects it as well’. [27]

Notable here is the participant’s rejection of the notion of wifely ‘service’ as her mother understood it. Even when she describes a kind of pull towards doing domestic tasks, she questions whether this is to be understood as ‘service’: ‘I don’t know if the word is serve’. Overall, the Muslim group, as with the others, highlighted the changing expectations and practices of married women in their life-times.

Changing cultural norms: attitudes to marriage

Although this was not addressed in all groups, participants in some discussions outlined their views of how attitudes to marriage as an institution had changed. For some, the increasing ease of divorce resulted in a lack of persistence with marriage when difficulties arose: ‘some people today don’t give marriage a chance to work – they think, oh, this isn’t working, we’ll get a divorce’[17]; another participant

contrasted this with attitudes in previous generations:

‘...my father-in-law...was a jack-the-lad, he really was...but...my mother-in-law she stuck by him through thick and thin, through the war years and everything and...he was out with other women...but they grew older together and...they stuck together, they got through it, they carried on and they were devoted...but she always used to tell me stories about him, where she’d even taken his dinner to the pub, as he’s not come home for his meal...’ [22]

Other participants, however, saw changing attitudes to marriage as in some way liberating for women: one remarked, referring to previous impediments to divorce, ‘marriage could become a prison...my mother didn’t want to get divorced even though she was in a very unsatisfactory marriage because of the moral stigma’ [21]. Another implied that previous ideas of marriage had to some extent prevented her own self-discovery:

‘I was married a very long time ago and the idea of what marriage was in 1958...is very different to what it is now and when I married it was two people who were trying to become one person and I don’t think it’s quite like that now...when my husband died I remember saying to somebody “now I find out who I am” and I meant it – I had no idea’[35].

These contrasting views illustrate different aspects of the same social phenomenon: that for these women, marriage need no longer be seen as permanent – a move liberating for some, but risking trivialisation for others.

Ideals for marriage

Participants were divided on whether it is possible to be generally prescriptive of how marriage should work. Some rejected the notions of ‘should’ and ‘ideals’ in connection with marriage: ‘I don’t like the word “should” really because I think it’s a very individual thing and I’m not sure there is an ideal...perfection is a sort of mirage and we all create relationships in different ways’[37]. There are two ideas expressed here: that marriages are limitlessly diverse in their functioning so there can be no blue-print, and that ‘ideal’ implies a kind of perfection that is unattainable. This participant preferred to speak of qualities which might contribute towards relationships: ‘there are principles and equality would certainly be one of the

principles, and respect and love...’ This approach was echoed by other participants: ‘I think “should” doesn’t come into it – it sort of depends on the personality, it depends on so many factors...’ [28]. Along similar lines, one participant felt that agreement between partners was important, not prescription of roles: ‘I think as long as you’ve agreed to what you’re doing, it doesn’t matter who does what as long as you’ve communicated that this is your job and that’s my job...it doesn’t have to be gender-related’ [44].

The contrasting view held that different male and female traits make a blue-print for marriage possible: ‘I think maybe there is something inside of maybe husbands, men, that makes them feel they are the provider – comes naturally?’ [33]; ‘women are more nurturing, aren’t they, generally’ [32]; ‘men and women are different to each other...women are probably, perhaps better at nurturing and home things anyway and obviously they actually have the children...so, the whole thing lends itself to that’ [55].

Sometimes the difference in these views was masked by the use of the same terminology. For example, when expressing their ideals for the relationship between wife and husband, many participants used the terms ‘equality’ and ‘partnership’. It became clear, however, that there were different meanings attributed to these terms. For some, equality and/or partnership were compatible with different gender roles: ‘I think it should be...equal...in as much as I believe that man has his role and a woman has her role’[34]; for others they were not: when asked to explain what she meant by ‘equal responsibilities’, one participant replied, ‘some people think that a man should do certain things and a woman should do certain things – I think it’s up to a couple to decide...between themselves what responsibilities sit with which person’[42].

An interesting possible middle way between a general blue-print for marriage based on gender characteristics and the idea that all marriages are different was suggested by a participant in the Muslim group. She said,

‘my contribution is caring; my husband’s contribution is breadwinning...and that’s where the equality is. We’re both putting an equal amount of effort into making the family work. If it was the

other way round, I don't know how that would work because naturally I would like to care...however...even though I'm practically doing the traditional role of being at home, I feel inside that I have gone against that because I am choosing to do this because when I choose not to cook, he can cook, he is able' [26].

This participant and her husband demonstrate equality by their commensurate, though different, commitments to the family. 'Naturally' she prefers a caring role (this may hint at a broader female characteristic), but it is still her choice to do that – her husband is equally able to carry out domestic tasks like cooking. The resulting roles may *look* to be based on traditional notions of male/female areas of responsibility, but in fact subvert these because they are the result of individual preference rather than desire to conform to tradition.

These diverse perspectives demonstrate the range of ideological positions on marriage within the participant group. This variety, combined with a widely-held perception that marriage is an institution in flux, constituted part of the context within which these 'ordinary' readers addressed the text of Ephesians 5.

3.3.2 Views of gender equality

The data for views of gender equality is drawn from a question (12) asked in individual interviews: it therefore represents a question asked of 42 out of the 57 women who participated in this fieldwork overall: a proportion (74%) sufficient to give a flavour of the ideological positioning of the group as a whole on this issue. This question was comprised of two parts: ‘In what ways do you think women are equal with men?’ and ‘How do you see these ways working out in your own life?’ It was possible to understand the question in a number of ways – as referring to inherent qualities, social opportunities and/or theological treatment. This section combines responses in these areas, together with the personal experiences offered in response to the second half of the question, to give a sketch of the participant group as a whole.

Equality and difference

In terms of inherent qualities, the group of interviewees was almost equally split between those who emphasised gender equality and those who stressed both equality and difference. Those in the former category sometimes made reference to differences between men and women, but they tended to be limited to observations about physical strength and to be secondary to comments about equality. An example came from a participant who responded to the question as follows: ‘I think they’re equal in every way, in fact sometimes superior...I can’t say that I think men are stronger in any way except physically...’[518]. Opinions varied within this group as to whether physical strength was necessarily a difference between genders: one participant felt it was:

‘I think men and women are equal in most things – in intelligence and abilities to do things and everything. I think where man might dominate a woman would be in physical strength, but purely because physically, a man is obviously a lot stronger than a woman, but otherwise I think they’re equal in everything else’ [539].

Another, however, suggested it may not be: ‘I think their mental capacity is absolutely equal, I think sometimes physically women and men are as strong as each other depending on who you are...’[515].

The other group of women, however, spoke about both equality and gender difference. The differences they highlighted were other than simply physical strength:

‘Well, they’re equal but different...women have the same...cognitive or intellectual capacity... Women maybe...because of their child-rearing skills and capacity, are more intuitively...inclined...might perceive emotion more, they might perceive different things to men...’ [522].

Another participant, when asked to comment further on the gender differences she had mentioned, said: ‘...I think they’re geared up different, aren’t they, men? They’re more of a...hunter and I think that’s the difference that God had made us, although we’re equal...’[526]. A third participant pointed to her experience as a mother as changing her previous perceptions about gender difference: ‘we’re equal but different...especially since I’ve had my son, and I can just see how male he is and how he’s interested in all the things I’m not interested in...’ The same participant concluded her comments by saying ‘there just seems to be this innate aggression in males...’ [531].

A society on a journey

Some participants drew attention to social opportunities and rights in answering the question. As a whole, those who spoke about this aspect of gender equality presented a picture of a journey towards equal social treatment of women which had not yet been completed. Some pointed to past advances made:

‘it’s taken a long time but when you think back, in the 19th century it was a great fight for women to become doctors because only men could do this...it wasn’t until the last war that once a woman got married she was allowed to go on teaching...And of course it’s the First World War when women suddenly had to go and drive buses and things and got a bit of feeling of some independence... I think things have evolved a great deal during the last hundred and odd years’ [507].

Despite perceived progress like this, however, many participants expressed the view that women are not yet treated equally with men. Several singled out the issue of equal pay: ‘I think there’s a big gap in aspirations, in expectations from society from

women and men, obviously we don't have equal pay yet, despite legislation since the 70s...' [528], and

'there's still a discrepancy in pay for the same job for a man and a woman. I think obviously there's a lot more equality now – we don't have to stay at home, we can go to work and can do the same job as a man, can earn as much money as a man I suppose in some cases...but there's still a lot of inequalities and...it kind of makes me a bit angry...' [530].

Others highlighted other work place issues – such as the difficulty of combining having children with a career, and an unequal domestic workload when women do work outside the home:

'...certain careers it's very, very hard to take breaks and so I don't think in the workplace you're equal. If you don't have children then it's easier but even so, women still don't always get the same pay – that's addressed better now but for years it wasn't...' [515].

'I think it's much better than it used to be, but I think there's still a big difference...just for instance, I think still the majority of the housework is done by a woman, even though a lot of women work, so, that's not equal...' [536].

There were comments about an absence of women in positions with significant leadership responsibilities:

'I think there's a move towards it, but...if you look statistically, at men and women that are in leadership roles, and in the really top jobs, there are far less women than men. So maybe down on paper it says, yes, this is what we believe in, I don't think we're quite there yet' [537].

One participant called attention to many areas of gender discrimination, noting the disparaging connotations of some language about women:

'society-wise...I think we're discriminated and disadvantaged in many, many ways, still. Every way – pay, jobs, culturally, symbolically...it can still be an insult for boys to call one another "you're a girl" even at that sort of symbolic level...' [513].

One participant challenged the idea that increased opportunities for women to work outside the home were advantageous,

‘And I think a lot of feminists might say...our poor grandmas and our poor mothers had no choice, but actually I think that you’re very wrong, I think that they might have been very happy where they were and in fact might have been grateful...’ [540].

Such a view, however, did not seem representative of interviewees as a whole. Overall, responses to the question gave an impression of progress, but not completion; of a society on a trajectory towards gender equality, but with some distance still to cover before this would be achieved.

Personal experiences

When participants were asked how gender equality had worked in their own lives, many referred to positive experiences. Some pointed to a lack of discrimination in their workplaces:

‘I’ve always worked in a man’s environment...and...you come up against some harsh men...but...I feel that God has sort of blessed me in a way because I’ve never come up against any, what do you call it? Any conflict...because I’m a woman’ [526].

‘Well...in my professional life the fact that I’m a woman has never been a disadvantage – I mean I’ve been a head teacher of two schools and I’ve had plenty of men...that I’ve managed and I’ve never ever felt that there was an issue because I was a woman...never ever...’[529].

Others cited equal educational opportunities:

‘I think the equality was there in the fact that I...had an education to start with, and I was able to get to university and make choices based on that since...’[528].

Other women, however, referred to negative experiences either in the workplace, or at least a mixed picture:

‘allegedly I’m equal at work because I’ve got a good position but you can still see...I know men are paid more than me...I’m sent all the pastoral stuff, so...we are equal and I think we should celebrate and not complain massively, but there are still inequalities’ [513].

Replying to the question of how gender equality had worked in her life, another said, ‘Yeah, not great, actually. Because one of us had to be the breadwinner and...we tried like one person doing both and it didn’t quite work...’ [501]. A third woman referred to her experience of discrimination in recruitment practices: ‘I do feel that sometimes they [women] can be discriminated against – for example, when they have children, I mean I had this happen to me...if you’ve got small children people...don’t always want to employ you’ [511]. These experiences mostly suggest that many of this group felt largely equal with men in terms of educational opportunity. Experiences in the workplace varied, with a significant issue being how to combine the raising of children with employment outside the home.

3.3.3 Views of feminism

Understandings of feminism in general

Asking participants about feminism revealed a spectrum of views of its aims and methods. When asked what they understood the term ‘feminist’ to mean, many participants spoke in positive terms about feminist aims, especially equality for women, as these two examples show:

‘a feminist believes that men and women are equal’ [510]

‘I understand it to mean someone who actively supports women’s rights for instance, equal pay’ [525]

While others spoke of feminism as protecting women’s interests, or as having a high estimation of women’s worth – ‘I think every woman should be a feminist because it’s just looking after women’s interests’ [518] and ‘a feminist is somebody who believes that women are valuable’ [521] – most positive views of feminism were expressed in terms of its concern with gender equality.

For other women, however, feminist aims were seen as belittling of, or aggressive towards, men:

‘A feminist is a female who thinks that she is, can be independent of males...They don’t need men’ [516]

‘It makes my hackles rise a bit. I think the term feminist to me means aggressively feminine, seeing no good in masculinity at all, men are a useless waste of space...’[527]

Some contrasted past achievements with current aims – again many were concerned about the impact of feminism on men:

‘I know some feminists go over the top, and want ridiculous things, you know, like virtually to abolish men altogether if they can! But I think originally the feminist cause was good and it began to move things in the right direction for women, I do feel that...’ [515]

Some women seemed to distinguish feminist aims and methods – speaking about the latter as excessive or confrontational:

‘I guess [a feminist is] someone who is concerned with women’s issues, rights, place. Who perhaps...promote it more forcefully and perhaps in not such a balanced way...’[540].

‘I’ve always thought that feminists tended to be very aggressive...’ [523].

Many concerns that appeared at first to be about methods, turned out to be more about perceived aims – especially, again, their effect on men:

‘...most people think feminists are – it’s almost...aggressive...and on occasions I think feminists are seen as doing the opposite...as in they push men down and do exactly to men what they think men shouldn’t be doing to women...’ [534].

‘...it still conjures up the image of rampant, militant, bra-burning women...I think there’s a danger that feminist can be used for somebody who almost wants superior rights for women...’ [535].

Overall these responses indicate an overriding concern with gender equality in terms of maintaining a balance between the interests of women and those of men. Some of the group saw feminism as redressing an imbalance which had disadvantaged women, and spoke of it in positive terms. Others perceived feminism as denigrating men, or as promoting a gender inequality in which men come off worse, which they largely viewed in negative terms.

Personal allegiance to feminism

When asked if they would describe themselves as a feminist, 12 out of 42 (29%) interviewees said they would, 25 (60%) would not, and 5 (11%) were unsure. Of those would say they are a feminist, some repeated or expanded what they took the term to mean to explain their choice:

‘I would describe myself as a non-aggressive feminist...’ [511].

‘I’m pretty far along, yes, I mean I do believe in equality...but I’m not an extremist’ [517].

Those who rejected the term ‘feminist’ for themselves did so for a number of reasons: for some it was the straightforward result of their view of feminism as disparaging of men – as in the case of participants 516 and 527 quoted above. There

were others, however, who expressed largely positive views of feminism, yet would hesitate to use it of themselves. Of these participants, some were concerned that their own definition of feminism might not be shared by others, who would therefore view them in ways they would not want – so, for example, the participant who said ‘a feminist is somebody who believes that women are valuable’ [521], went on to say ‘I...know that men understand feminist in a very different way...some of them understand the word feminist as meaning man-hating and so it depends who I was talking to as to whether I would describe myself as a feminist’. Similarly, the participant above who defined a feminist as ‘somebody that...campaigns for gender equality’ [501] went on to say, ‘that word doesn’t give good connotations...I wouldn’t call myself a feminist’. Some women considered that feminism implied not only a set of beliefs but also taking action – and that as they had not taken this kind of action, they did not think of themselves as feminist: as one put it, ‘...I don’t do anything about it – you see I agree with it, but I don’t do anything about it’[525]. Some participants felt that there is now little need for feminism, as most of the battles for gender equality have been won: ‘I mean now, I feel like our world is more open and more women have equal opportunity than in the past...’ [538].

In summary, there was widespread support for feminism understood as equality of opportunity, pay, and rights for women, and praise for what it was seen as having achieved in these areas. There was also, however, concern about the image of feminists as aggressive, and significant worry that feminism might be directed beyond the aim of gender equality and into the territory of female superiority and discrimination against men. This discomfort lay behind many of the negative views of feminism, and much of the reluctance to sign up to it on a personal level. It also explained how participants could simultaneously hold that women do not yet enjoy equality of opportunity with men, and yet also not wish to espouse feminism: a feminism which disadvantaged men was not seen as providing the answers.

3.3.4 Views of the Bible

In interviews, participants were asked ‘what is your view of the Bible?’ and ‘could you say why you have this view of the Bible?’ During the first few interviews, it became apparent that a contested term was ‘the word of God’ – used by some to describe their view of the Bible, but rejected by others. Accordingly, in the interviews that followed, I asked participants about this term if they did not first mention it themselves. As a result, the question of whether participants would see the Bible as word of God arose in 40 out of 42 interviews, and it proved a useful way in to discussion.

The Bible as ‘word of God’

Out of 40 participants, 25 (63%) said they would either wholly or partly describe the Bible as word of God, with the remaining 15 (37%) saying they would not. The interviewee group as a whole was therefore heavily weighted towards those with a higher view of scripture. Views of the Bible and denominational allegiance/experience seemed to be linked: out of 12 interviewees who had attended Baptist churches (either currently or in the past), 11 described the Bible as word of God, and only one did not; out of 8 Quaker interviewees, 7 would not describe the Bible as word of God, and only one would. Although different understandings of the term ‘word of God’ played a part in whether people assented to it or not, it did not seem to be the most important determining factor: only a few who agreed with the term defined it as implying some kind of divine dictation, and many of those who rejected it cited other perceived problems with the Bible, not (or not only) difficulties with the idea that it might derive word-for-word from God. Different views were therefore not simply attributable to different definition of terms, but fell into a range – albeit not an evenly distributed one.

At one end of this range were those who described the Bible as almost entirely human construct: ‘it is a written collection of how other people engaged...with their God and...they wrote down about it to express themselves and to help others in as much as they could...’ [508] or ‘a great expression of what it means to be human...in relation to some other great mystery’ [528]. The first of these quotations illustrates an expression popular among those who chose not to describe the Bible as word of God: ‘collection’ was used by 6 of these participants. This possibly infers a lack of

cohesion to the Bible, seen as a compendium of disparate writings. The second quotation demonstrates that some participants were uncomfortable with notions of God: as another put it,

‘I’m helped by...using the word ‘good’ in my mind, rather than the word ‘God’ - I find it helps me to live with the concept – I understand the concept of good, I haven’t got the bottom of the concept of God...’ [502].

One notable feature of participants at this end of the spectrum is that even though they did not describe the Bible as word of God, they still indicated that they held it in high esteem: the three participants just quoted suggested that they had a strong emotional attachment to the Bible and/or found it useful. One said ‘I think it’s an amazing and an incredible document, or collection of documents, I love its language, I love its ability to be useful to us down the ages in its language... [528], a second, ‘I think it’s a tool through which we can live with our faith’ [502]. The third implied that she turned to the Bible regularly:

‘the truth is...there has never been a time when it hasn’t been there, actually physically to put my hand on...several different varieties because of different languages – different language styles...and useful notes that come with different versions’ [508].

It might not be word of God, but these comments indicate that the Bible played a significant (and welcome) part in the lives of these participants.

Further along the range (but still within the category of Bible not as word of God), were those who were comfortable with notions of God, and who used words like ‘inspired’ or ‘inspirational’ of the text: ‘I think it’s like inspired writing’[525] and ‘I wouldn’t call it the word of God, I would say God’s doings with man...his interaction...and this is an account of it, and some of it is marvellous, very inspirational, but others of it is very unconvincing’[542]. The second of these quotations illustrates another aspect of many of those who did not see the Bible as word of God – the difficulties they felt were presented by some parts of the Bible, especially the Old Testament.

For some participants, problematic passages in the Bible (especially in the Old Testament) prevented them from seeing the Bible as word of God: ‘I certainly don’t view it as the word of God. I think it’s interesting, extremely...the Old Testament I’m, I mean half of it’s not even accurate...’[527]. For others, difficulties with the Old Testament indicated that the New Testament alone could be seen as word of God (I have included these views in the group affirming the Bible as word of God because of their relevance for the Ephesians passage at issue in this study): the following gives an example:

‘I suppose I see it more of a historical document...especially the Old Testament...I find that really hard to get to grips with – but the New Testament is the word of God because it’s actually Jesus living his life...and he is the Son of God, so it is the word of God. But I’d see it in two separate identities...’ [516].

Slightly further along the range of views of the Bible were those who felt that the Bible as a whole is word of God, but did not take this to mean the text itself originated with God. Such participants often spoke of divine influence and human interpretation, as the following examples show: ‘I believe it’s divine inspiration but I do not believe that God dictated it word for word’ [507], ‘I do believe it’s the word of God come through human beings...I’m sure God speaks to humans and inspires them’ [515]. Much further along the range – at the far end from those who found the text to be wholly a human work – were those participants who acknowledged a human element in the Bible’s composition, but held that divine inspiration would make the effect of this element either almost negligible: ‘I believe that it is God-inspired, so it can’t be that far off from a dictation otherwise it wouldn’t be God saying it’ [533], or irrelevant, ‘it’s the infallible word of God that was written by however many authors but the Holy Spirit spoke through them, and so I believe that God was penning it through man...’[538].

This spectrum of views about the Bible is put into context by the view of the Koran given by one of the Muslim participants in this project:

‘the Koran came down via the angel Gabriel to the Prophet. He learnt it all off by heart because at the time they did that. But he told everybody and they all learnt it off by heart and it was all written as it was and...nobody could change a word of it...’ [521].

The same participant later added:

‘it is...very strongly-felt that these are the words of God because it was never interpreted, well...there are interpretations but they’ve not been called the Koran...’

Although some participants’ views of the Bible were similar to this understanding of the Koran, others sat at varying distances away from this position demonstrating that the participant group as a whole was significantly diverse in its views of the Bible – a diversity advantageous for the aim of exposing a variety of possibilities for reading Ephesians 5. This analysis also shows that the majority of interviewees’ views were towards the ‘Bible as word of God’ end of the range, suggesting that many participants might wish to find ways to continue to use Ephesians 5 rather than dismiss it.

Guide for living

Among those who viewed the Bible as in some way word of God, there was sometimes a particular feature of what they said which might be held to have implications for their reading of Ephesians 5. Several specifically described the Bible as guide for how life should be lived. Thus, ‘I think the New Testament is the teachings the way we should live’ [511], and ‘there’s so much to help people with the way that they live their lives, regardless of whether they are Christians and believe in it or not’ [506] and ‘the New Testament is an amazing account of the life of Jesus and interpretations of it...and helpful stuff to help...Christians live a Christian life’ [520]. These general observations suggest a desire to find within the Bible (especially the New Testament) advice on ways of living, which might be especially important when addressing passages of specific instruction on relationships, such as Ephesians 5:21-33.

3.3.5 A summary of the context for reading

In some ways, this analysis has identified a significant diversity of views among women in this study on the subjects of marriage (whether or not it is possible to talk about ideals for marriage in general; whether marital roles should be determined by gender), gender equality (whether equality is emphasised, or equality and difference), feminism (both positive and negative perceptions of it) and the Bible (whether or not it is to be seen as word of God). However, despite such wide divergence in opinion, participants' responses to questions in these areas highlighted some features of a shared cultural and ideological context in which they would read Ephesians 5:

1. Culturally, these participants have (in general) experienced significant change in expectations of marital roles over the last three generations, with one of the major factors being increasing options for married women to work outside the home. While this has sometimes resulted in women taking on paid work in addition to domestic responsibilities (and men expecting wives to be self-supporting), former assumptions about household patterns – such as a sole male breadwinner – are perceived to have largely changed.⁵⁴¹
2. Participants painted a picture of a society in which there has been significant progress towards gender equality in terms of equal opportunities and equal workplace treatment, but with some way still to go. The impression is one of a journey – with general approval for the direction of travel, but with the destination not yet reached. The group was split on the nature and extent of inherent differences between men and women – with some considering these to be minimal, and others more extensive and significant.
3. Whether participants signed up to feminism or not, they displayed a widespread concern that gender equality should not be understood as privileging or disadvantaging either men or women.
4. Participants generally held the Bible in high esteem – they found it at the very least useful, whether in part or as a whole. Approximately two-thirds of interviewees saw the Bible as either wholly or partly word of God. The participant group as a whole might therefore be described as having a marked ideological commitment to the Bible.

⁵⁴¹ It is important to note that this is a perception of this group who self-identified as predominantly middle-class.

Broadly speaking, the views expressed by the Muslim group tied in with the general observations I have made in points 1-3 above: they too (as noted in the detailed analysis) spoke about generational changes in marital roles and the opportunities for women to work outside the home; their comments echoed the perception that women now have choices (such as whether to work outside the home) which imply equality of opportunity, and also supported an idea of gender equality as not disadvantaging either men or women. In terms of these cultural and ideological features, they were not especially distinct from other participants. This suggests that they are an interesting 'control' group for this study – having some cultural and ideological common ground with other participants, and yet without any particular commitment to the text at the centre of this project.

3.4 Responses to the text

3.4.1 First observations

Negative emotional responses

In the light of a context characterised by a perception of progression away from gender-based marital roles towards the ‘good’ of equal opportunities for women, it is perhaps unsurprising that the first response of many women to Ephesians 5:21-33 was one of negative emotion. After the passage was read in group discussions, the first question asked was ‘what leaps off the page at you?’ Women in 5 group discussions replied by describing a negative emotional reaction – as illustrated below:

‘I find it quite uncomfortable to read...things have changed now, it can’t possibly be this way, meant to be for us now. I found it quite uncomfortable, and...if I thought my husband read it like that and thought that he was then in charge of me, that would make me feel very unhappy’ [2].

‘my emotional reaction is... there’s a sort of indignation about it’ [28].

‘the first thing that jumped out at me was that I felt a bit bad and guilty thinking well, I don’t do that....’ [16].

Taking a view of emotion as cognitive,⁵⁴² Martha Nussbaum offers a definition: ‘emotions are appraisals or value judgements, which ascribe to things and persons outside the person’s own control great importance for that person’s own flourishing.’⁵⁴³ Using this definition of emotion helps to uncover what might be at stake in some of the emotions just described. Participant 2 first describes her discomfort with the passage, which threatens to reverse a positive progression: ‘things have changed now, it can’t possibly be this way’. This threat matters because she imagines a situation in which her husband might think he is ‘in charge of’ her, which would have a profound effect on her ‘own flourishing’: ‘that would make me

⁵⁴² This reflects an almost common consensus among contemporary philosophers – as noted by Sarah Coakley in *Faith, Rationality and the Passions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 3.

⁵⁴³ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4. Nussbaum’s definition shares some common ground with recent theological work by Edward Collins Vacek, who also argues that emotional cognition enables us to grasp ‘the dimension of value’ where, following the Roman Catholic Catechism, value is essentially an assessment of good or evil – see ‘Orthodoxy Requires Orthopathy: Emotions in Theology’ in *Horizons* 40 (2), 225.

feel very unhappy'. There are similarities between the emotions expressed by participant 2 and participant 28. The latter went on to explain her 'indignation' at the passage in this way: 'even back in the seventies, eighties...it was... "well, hold on there I don't think we really agree with that any more" feeling. So, it's definitely something I would still regard just belonging to the biblical times'. She later added:

'...my husbands' parents...his Mum was terribly deferential and I thought gosh, I hope my husband doesn't think I'm going to be like that! Cause I wasn't. So...I think I'm probably still fighting a little bit...I could never be subject to my husband'.

Again here, the initial emotion is expressed in relation to the passage as a perceived reversal in progress made. This matters for the participant's 'own flourishing' because she sees herself as still (to some extent) 'fighting' against the idea (demonstrated by her husband's parents) that a wife will be 'deferential' towards her husband: the passage undermines her battle. The comments of these two participants suggest not only that the passage is seen as arresting a journey towards equality in marriage (away from a husband being 'in charge' of a wife and away from a need for wifely 'deference'), but also that this journey might be slightly precarious or otherwise difficult: the impact of a reversal is easily imagined because it is only a generation distant.

Emotions like indignation might be thought of as linked with anger. One of the participants above mentions something different from anger – guilt. Her guilt, she says, stems from a recognition that she does not follow the way of living set out in the passage – 'I don't do that'. Ideologically, this participant did not agree with fixed marital roles based on gender – as she put it just a little later in the discussion, 'I think that different roles are fine, but I suppose I have a problem with the idea that the different roles would be based on something like gender' [16]. And yet, she still felt a sense of guilt that her way of life did not reflect the passage. This perhaps indicates the significance of the Bible for this participant – it matters to her that she does not follow it in this instance, even though she does not agree with what she perceives it to be saying. Something similar could be a factor in other negative emotions expressed about the passage: if the Bible itself is judged to be of value – as word of God, guide for living, or in some other way useful (and the observations on

reading context showed that participants as a group held it to be so) – then finding within it something which does not fit with other ideological positions might prompt guilt, confusion, or heighten a sense of anger.

The question of gender balance

In one group discussion, replies to the first passage-based question took as their starting point appreciation of the negative emotions that reading the text could provoke. In this instance, however, participants then explained why they did not share those emotions – they viewed the passage as exhibiting gender balance:

‘Well for me...“wives be subject to your husband as you are to the Lord, the husband is the head of the wife” you think [sound of horror], however then the rest of the passage is mostly about how the husbands are to behave which...has a significant bearing on that initial sentence’ [52].

Another participant then added (and participant 52 subsequently agreed), ‘it always strikes me...what a responsibility that is to the man...’[51]. These comments indicate that what is asked of husbands is in some way equal to, or compensates for, what is asked of wives. This might be expressed as kind of balancing out of the first few verses of the passage by those that follow. This idea was echoed in a different group discussion:

‘I think people usually respond to the “wives be subject” and “the husband is the head of the wife”. I think that’s the thing people notice first and they go “oo, oo, not sure about that”...it is quite often that people don’t look much further down the passage and see that...there is a balance’ [45].

This issue of gender balance (or imbalance) in the passage arose early on in many group discussions, illustrating another feature of the reading context: the widespread concern with gender equality understood as maintaining some kind of equilibrium in which neither women nor men are privileged or disadvantaged compared with the other. Some found ways in which the passage maintained such an equilibrium, whereas for others it did not.

Participants in some groups detected a balance in difficulty of the requirements of husbands and wives. They considered that the demands made of men were at least as onerous, and possibly more so, than those made of women. These participants tended to single out either verse 25 ('husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her') or verse 28 ('in the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies') as verses that 'jumped off the page.' So, for example, one woman said of verse 25, 'that...puts the whole passage into some perspective really because that's a big ask of the men, I think' [1]. Another participant spoke about verses 28 and 25:

'...the thing that struck me was the bit about husbands...should love their wives as they do their own bodies...all of this is quite a tall order for the husband...and it's...the same as Christ loved the church which obviously is huge...' [33].

Often, the notion of balance not only related to equally challenging requests made of wives and husbands, but also a connection between those requests – so that the assurance of a husband's love (modelled on that of Christ) enabled a wife to accede to the request to be subject to him: as one participant expressed it, 'if they're doing that and they're so loving you, then it's not difficult to...submit to their authority' [33]. Several pointed out a possible problem with this in cases where a husband did not love his wife in this way: the passage might work as an ideal, but be questionable in practice:

'if your husband or partner...doesn't have that way of...treating your wife then that's hard...to submit...maybe he's doing things wrong...that's ungodly and so you can't really submit to things like that...' [34].

An interesting alternative view, but one which still saw the passage as in some sense exhibiting gender balance, was expressed by one participant:

'...God has made men and women such that each in their marriage has to suppress their weakness – the woman's weakness is the desire to dominate everything, the man's weakness is a desire to go off and be by himself and take no responsibility...' [53].

The passage, by this reckoning, represents a corrective to both wives and husbands.

On the other hand, there were other participants who felt that the passage demonstrated significant imbalance between the genders. Some simply observed that most of the passage seemed to be directed towards husbands: ‘there’s a lot of husbands love your wife...there’s a lot of talking to the males, guiding the males...’[3]; other participants, however, detected more of a fundamental imbalance than this: ‘a wife has got to be subject to her husband; a husband is asked to love his wife....not quite the same thing is it?...it’s...not an equal relationship...’[14]. A lack of reciprocity was noted in a group discussion too: ‘it keeps on saying a husband should love his wife, it never says a wife should love her husband, she should respect her husband...’[35]. For these last participants, the different instructions to husbands and wives are not equally challenging, nor does a husband’s love somehow enable a wife’s submission; the different requests made of each gender are taken as disadvantaging wives.

A product of another time

In addition to a negative emotional response and comments about gender balance (or otherwise) in the passage, there was a third theme to answers given to the first question about Ephesians 5:21-33: a perceived dissonance between the passage and life today – a sense that the text was the product of a very different time. Some comments on this topic were about the passage as a whole: ‘the context when Paul was writing this...is so utterly different to now...’[29] and ‘I suppose we have to look at the time at which this was written...it was different. Very different’ [10]. Other participants identified particular aspects of the text which assumed a context very different from their experience – especially the first part of verse 29: ‘for no-one ever hates his own body’:

‘One other little thing...does rather strike me, ‘for no-one ever hates his own body.’ Well in the 21st century that’s just not so – all the self-harming you get...’ [23].

‘I picked that one out [verse 29], not that I particularly hate my own body but plenty of people do, plenty, anorexics, bulimics, self-harmers, body dismorphics...’ [49].

Points such as these suggest that gaps between the cultural setting of the text and the cultural context of these readers were immediately identifiable, putting distance between readers and text.

The Muslim group

Readers in the Muslim group also pointed out a gap between the cultural setting of the text and life today. One of the first comments on the text in this group was ‘I would read this in the context that it was written, at the time’ [26]. This followed initial remarks on the text which pointed out its resemblance to passages from the Koran: ‘that’s similar to what we have’ [27], a comment immediately supported by another: ‘it’s very similar to what we have’ [26]. For these participants, the most noticeable gap was not between their sacred texts and this one, but instead between the historical circumstances in which the text was written and their contemporary experience. This is perhaps a further indication of the cultural and ideological common ground this group had with other participants, which was also illustrated by another early observation from a member of the Muslim group: ‘it’s funny how it says the husband should love his wife, the wife should serve the husband. It doesn’t say the wife should love him – isn’t it enough for the wife just to love the husband?’ [27]. The implication of this comment is that there is an imbalance in the passage between what is asked of husbands and wives: like others in different discussion groups, this participant appraises the passage according to ideas of maintaining a gender equilibrium.

The most distinctive feature of the response of the Muslim group to the first passage-based question was their discussion of verse 31 (“For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”). The verse had been discussed in other groups too, but generally in connection with unity of husband and wife, as this example shows: ‘the two shall become one flesh...so in your marriage you’ll be one person’ [53]. For Muslim participants, however, the most significant feature of the verse was the ‘leaving’ asked of a husband, which resonated with their experience:

‘What stood out for me is...number 31...I think my husband sees it a lot in that way...I’m his new family – like his family come second now and I’m his number 1...and I find that...most men do become

like that - their wives become their new family but for me, as a female...that's not the case at all. My family are equal to my husband...'[24].

Two other participants agreed with this, and while a fourth modified it from her experience '[her husband] did leave his family but he still loves them and is still very much attached to them, so he hasn't left them for [the participant]' [25], the discussion still focussed on the leaving asked of a husband rather than the joining with a wife. This is an interesting emphasis, and one which was not noted in other groups.

3.4.2 The meaning of ‘subject to’

In the NRSV version that participants were invited to consider in this study, the phrase ‘subject to’ is used to describe four relationships: a general relationship ‘to one another’ (verse 21), the relationship of a wife to her husband (verse 22), the relationship of wives to the Lord (also verse 22) and the relationship of the church to Christ (verse 24). Much therefore hinges on what the words ‘subject to’ are taken to mean. Participants in group discussions were therefore asked ‘what do you understand by “be subject to”?’ Data for this section is taken largely from their responses to this question.

A spectrum of meaning

A broad spectrum of meaning was identified for the term ‘be subject to’ among non-Muslim participants in this study. This seemed to represent a range of construal (of the kind already discussed in chapter 2) in which readers’ experience was brought to bear on the expression in varying ways. At one end of the spectrum were those who viewed ‘be subject to’ as denoting obedience: ‘to me it means you have to do what he says’ [18], and another, ‘I see that as obedience...be obedient to your husband really’ [31]. Further along the spectrum were those who equated ‘be subject to’ with ‘submission’, and regarded both terms as distinct from obedience: ‘I chose not to say ‘obey’ just because...I didn’t really like that word actually, I think it’s slightly different to submit’ [33]; another participant expressed something very similar:

I said submit in my wedding service and not obey, when I got married...if there was a...problem that needed to be sorted...sometimes there does need to be somebody who’s going to make that final decision. And I suppose I would see myself in that situation as submitting. But I don’t see it as being...an “underdog”...’[12].

At the other end of the range were those who saw ‘be subject to’ as implying far less hierarchy than either ‘obey’ or ‘submit’, so, for example, one participant suggested:

‘there’s a different meaning to being subject to being submissive to one another...I think ‘subject to’...gives you room for intellectual engagement and then for reaching an accommodation, compromise...whereas submissive is just one step up almost from a kind of.....slavery...’ [11].

At this end of the spectrum, some of the synonyms suggested for ‘subject to’ further reduced, or even eliminated, any notion of hierarchy from the expression: they included ‘accountable to’ [1] and ‘available for’ [3]. The first of these two definitions was explained as follows,

accountable is also when you can go to one another and say...I spent too much money...that honesty...because we’re talking about here, obviously, trying to live a Christian life...so helping one another to live a good life or a Christian life or to be the best that you can be’ [1].

There is reciprocity implied in this explanation, but no sense of hierarchy.

In terms of the participant group as a whole, ‘be subject to’ appears to be a malleable term – capable of being stretched from definitions denoting hierarchies of command and control, through to definitions which liken it instead to a partnership of equals.

Marriage vows

In the quotations just cited, some participants interpreted ‘be subject to’ in the light of the vows they had taken in wedding services. These vows formed a significant reference point for many, discussed in 6 out of 12 groups. One participant asked if marriage vows were based on Ephesians 5: ‘And...this is the passage that historically has had ‘obey’ in...is that right?...Which is the passage you get the ‘obey’ from that’s in the marriage service?’ [45]. Another described how the Ephesians text – particularly her perception of balance within it – had convinced her to agree to obey her husband: ‘we had this passage at our wedding...and we had a big long discussion about would I say I obey and so on...and for me verse 25 puts the whole passage into some kind of perspective...’ [1]. Here verse 25 (‘husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’) seems to set not only the rest of the passage, but also by implication the marriage vow of obedience, into ‘perspective’: it appears to make both acceptable. Thus the marriage vow is clarified and made tolerable by the Ephesians passage. For another participant, the reverse seemed to be true: she said ‘it’s interesting that you’ve drawn attention to the word “subject” because...I was thinking of it as...a bit like ‘obey’ and...I was thinking

about marriage vows, thinking well I don't think I totally agree with that as an idea' [16]. In this case, a perceived link between the marriage vow and 'subject to' makes both unacceptable.

I will analyse participants' comments about marriage vows further in the section on frameworks of lived experience in chapter 4. In connection with Ephesians 5:22, it was clear that this verse reminded many women in this study of choices they had made to obey, or not, their husbands at their weddings. To some extent, this may have acted as a kind of bridge across the cultural gap between the text's setting and the context of these readers, giving an ancient text more recent resonances. Evidence for this hypothesis was given in one group discussion, in which the topic of marriage vows was raised immediately after this comment relegating the text to its ancient setting: 'well wives then were chattels, weren't they?...it just doesn't apply now' [23].

The Muslim group

When the Muslim group was asked about the meaning of 'be subject to', participants used terms including 'bow down to,' [27] obedience [27] and service [26]. When the question was first asked, one participant made a connection between Ephesians 5:22 and Islamic texts, or 'sayings':

'There's actually a saying in Islam...something similar to God saying that 'I'll never ask any human to bow down to another human ever because you only bow down to me myself, which is God. But if there was, I would ask the wife to bow down to the husband"...and I remember thinking that's just so unfair...Why? Why can't they bow down to us?...So it's similar to "wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord." And...the extreme as they say the first people of hellfire are the women that disobey their husbands' [2].

This prompted a discussion about whether participants were obeying their husbands, and the difficulties presented when they were not: 'the problem with believing is you are not good unless you do this. And there's a real struggle with practically, we're not doing this. So does that mean that we're bad?' [26]. This comment seems to indicate a dilemma between 'believing' and living without obeying husbands – 'we're not doing this'. The group did not try to redefine what obedience (or 'subject

to') might mean, but took it at face-value. This might illustrate the Islamic belief (as articulated by the participant quoted earlier) in connection with the Koran, that 'it is...very strongly-felt that these are the words of God'. This implies that the words cannot be redefined.

3.4.3 The impact of verse 21

There has been much debate among New Testament scholars about the connection of verse 21 ('be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ') with the verses that follow it. At the heart of the discussion is whether there is an inconsistency between 'be subject *to one another*' [my italics] and the rather one-sided imperative addressed only to wives that follows in verse 22: 'wives, be subject to your husbands...' ⁵⁴⁴ The high profile this issue has among scholars prompted the question asked about it in group discussions: 'How does the first sentence fit with the rest of the passage?' For some participants, this question raised an issue they had not considered before because their own versions of the text separated verse 21 from the verses that follow: 'in mine [Bible] that's part of the previous part...and then it's part of the passage before which is all about be wise, do not get drunk' [50]. This may be one of the reasons that very few participants raised a possible discrepancy between verses 21 and 22 in discussions about what jumped off the page at them. When asked about the fit between verses 21 and 22, although many acknowledged some kind of different thrust to the two verses, they then divided into those who resolved this difference, and those for whom it remained an inconsistency.

Ways of reconciling verses 21 and 22

Several participants across different groups found that verse 21 reflected the balance between genders they identified in the rest of the passage. They therefore tended not to speak of verse 21 as a statement of equality, but instead of mutuality or balance. Some examples of this are set out below:

'that first line sets the scene, doesn't it, and then it goes on to explain wives this is how you subject to your husbands and husbands this is how you...so it's mutual, isn't it?' [52].

'It [verse 21] backs up the rest, cause although the word used is subject for wives and love for husbands, I can't untangle them...[46].

[To which another participant then responded] 'It's balanced' [45].

⁵⁴⁴ For example, Francis Watson says of these two verses: 'an exhortation to mutual subjection...shows an unaccountable drift towards *unilateral* subjection' in *Agape, Eros and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 230.

Other participants saw verse 21 as articulating a principle which the following verses then illustrate. One said of verse 21: ‘that to me is the teaching – that’s the teaching of the passage and the rest of it is explaining what that means’ [56]. She later implied that the rest of the passage might be somewhat less applicable to life today: ‘I just think it’s using the language of the day’.

Some other participants suggested that the emphasis in verse 21 is on the latter part of the verse: ‘out of reverence for Christ’. This has the effect of lessening the sense of inconsistency by moving the focus of concentration, although it does not altogether resolve it:

‘by putting that verse 21 at the beginning it’s anchoring it in one’s relationship to God. And therefore, that’s what should be the key to everything – everything should flow that if you’ve got the right relationship with God, then you would automatically want to have that sort of relationship with your partner’ [10].

Verse 21 unreconciled with verse 22

Participants for whom there was a continuing disparity between verses 21 and 22 tended to see verse 21 as a statement not of balance, but instead of gender equality: as one put it, ‘[verse 21] contradicts in a way, doesn’t it?...it says just ‘be subject to one another’ as though we’re all equal’ [28]; participants in a different group made similar comments: when asked how verse 21 ties in with the rest of the passage, they replied, ‘well it doesn’t really, does it? [42]...Because it says it’s more equal, in a way isn’t it...subject to one another...’ [41]. As a statement of gender equality, verse 21 was held not to fit with the verses that follow.

Although they could not reconcile the difference, some participants offered explanations for it: such as the addressees of each of the first two verses being different:

‘it says just ‘be subject to one another’ as though we’re all equal, but I suspect that actually it’s really talking to the men, saying “men, you be equal to each other and you take care of each other,” but actually wives are a sort of...lower order species and...that’s the pecking order’ [28].

One participant thought that the verses could be by different authors: ‘I almost wonder if it’s a different writer possibly...’ [36]. Another participant speculated that the discrepancy between the two verses might be explained as an internal struggle on the part of the author:

‘I think poor old Paul is...struggling...because I think he was probably a died in the wool, old-fashioned sort but that Christ had touched him and he was trying to change and move on and break away from what had gone before...but it still looks as though he’s still got his feet stuck in it...’ [29].

The Muslim Group

Participants in the Muslim group, after noting a disparity between verses 21 and 22, found ways of reconciling the verses based on similarities with their own scriptures. These ways suggest that both verse 21 and verses 22 onwards try to reflect some kind of balance in the treatment of husbands and wives:

‘Well it [the passage after verse 21] tries to stay with that [verse 21] because it does say the husband needs to be nice to their wi[fe]...Because it’s like that in our texts as well – it’s like the husband, you need to be nice to your wife...’ [27].

Another participant then added:

‘...in our texts, and I don’t know the words verbatim but it’s the woman should be subservient, she should obey her husband and the husband must look after her and the children and take responsibility for everything...he is responsible for her, so there is not equality, but both get something out of it...’ [26].

This is very similar to the reconciling approach adopted by several non-Muslim participants.

Notably in the Muslim group, one of the participants expressed her surprise at the parallels she found between the texts of the two faiths: ‘I didn’t think this was in...is it Christianity? I didn’t think they’d have the same thing...so it surprises me a lot...I thought Christians were actually more equal and more adaptable to society than Islam was...’ [27]. For this participant, Ephesians 21-33 fell short of the gender equality they expected to find in a Christian text.

3.4.4 The analogy with Christ and the church

Verse 23 of the passage (which begins ‘for the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church’) introduces an analogy between the husband/wife relationship and the Christ/church relationship which forms the subject matter (to some extent) of the following eight verses. Much therefore depends on how this analogy is understood, and in particular how far it can be pressed.⁵⁴⁵ Accordingly, participants in the group discussions were asked how they read verse 23: ‘what do you understand by these words: “the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is head of the Church”?’ Included below are comments made not only about this particular verse but also about the analogy more widely, mostly in response to this particular question, but occasionally including relevant material from interviews. Overall, comments revealed both a spectrum of understandings of ‘head of’ and also a tendency to regard the analogy as full rather than partial.

A range of interpretation of ‘head of’

Similarly to readings of ‘subject to’ outlined earlier, the varying meanings suggested for ‘head of’ formed a spectrum according to the extent of hierarchy participants felt the expression implied. At one end of this range were readings which imputed to ‘head of’ notions of significant authority:

‘it makes me think he’s in charge’ [19]

‘it does actually imply again this subjugation of the wife to the husband’ [32]

‘being “head of” is very hierarchical’ [37].

The first three of these comments refer to the marital relationship, but the last participant highlighted the use of ‘head of’ in connection with Christ and the church: she continued by saying, ‘so that’s how the church became with the pope as the head of the church, you know – a masculine hierarchy...’[37]. Some participants considered that the phrase not only gave practical authority to a husband, but also spiritual authority:

⁵⁴⁵ Ernest Best warns against taking the analogy too far: ‘the analogy...is of course not perfect and must not be overstretched; in the Christ-church relationship Christ is always the giver and the church the recipient; this is not true of husband and wife,’ see *Ephesians* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 1998), 531.

‘it’s more of a spiritual how to live, rather than just do what I do or say....“the husband is head of the wife”...it sort of assumes the husbands will always know the right thing to do, or the best thing to do, or is even spiritually superior...’ [28].

Another participant immediately agreed with this, and took it a step further – taking the analogy in verse 23 to mean that a wife’s relationship with Christ was always to be mediated through her husband:

‘it assumes that the husband has the relationship with Christ or with the church and the wife just has to follow the husband...she’s not good enough to have the relationship actually with Christ or the church...’[30].

Further along the spectrum were those readers who detected some idea of hierarchy in ‘head of’ but preferred to express it in terms of leadership – which seemed to imply a softening in the term compared with the definitions given above:

‘if you think about it in the sense of leadership then then...that sounds better to me. I don’t know why, but I think because with leadership there comes responsibility...it’s a privilege and responsibility at the same time’ [33].

For this participant, a husband was not only given some kind of authority, but also responsibility – which would perhaps moderate how a husband chose to exercise that authority. Some participants suggested a more specific reading: they felt that the point of the comparison in verse 23 was to confer *spiritual* leadership upon husbands:

‘a lot of people say the husband should be like the spiritual leader of your family...I think it’s from this passage “the husband is the head of the wife”...as in he should be thinking about the family – how he can lead them spiritually as well’ [50].

A little later the same participant elaborated further: ‘the idea being...as Christ is the head of the church, the husband should be the one thinking about the spiritual health of the family and that should be his priority...’. Here again, the term ‘leadership’ is used and while this does seem to refer to a general authority given to husbands (as indicated by the use of ‘as well’ at the end of the first quotation above), its focus in

the case of verse 23 is on the spiritual realm. Again, a husband's responsibility is stressed – 'he should be thinking about...' – but in this case it is also defined in terms of promoting 'the spiritual health of the family'. One result of defining a husband's authority in this way is that it sets some ethical boundaries: a husband is not given blanket authority to act in ways that might damage the spiritual well-being of the family.

Some of those who occupied this middle ground on the spectrum saw the comparison with Christ not as indicating specifically spiritual leadership on the part of a husband, but as ruling out certain kinds of control:

'If you look at the actual relationship between Christ as head of the church, Christ isn't kind of coming down every week and saying 'right you lot, do this', he very much allows the church to get on with it...he inspires the church as to what he wants rather than domination. The relationship between Christ and the church is certainly not one of domination at all...he's just...very gently suggesting it through the Holy Spirit...' [53].

Here again, the comparison between the husband/wife and Christ/church relationships is seen as setting a boundary: this time the boundary does not concern the ends which a husband should have in view, but is instead to do with method – the way in which a husband can exercise authority is defined: gentle suggestion rather than domination.

At the other end of the spectrum were those participants who saw the allusion to 'head' in verse 23 as indicating little or no hierarchy:

'thinking of Christ as the head of the church, he's there as an example of love and responsibility and care, so that really sort of changes the angle of what head of the wife means...it's not an authority thing...so much as a...positive statement about love, care, and example as opposed to 'I'm the one in charge...' [45].

This quotation indicates that Christ's headship of the church is taken not in terms of authority, but as exemplary: Christ simply offers a model to be followed.

Taking the analogy fully

Verse 23, as already noted, introduces a complex and lengthy comparison which occupies the next 8 verses, with the focus moving in verse 25 from the behaviour expected of a wife to that of a husband. Verse 25 ('husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her') begins an analogy between the love asked of husbands and that of Christ for the church, but it is questionable how far this analogy is to be taken: whether it only refers to the kind of love a husband is to show, or whether all the attributes and actions of Christ (as set out in verses 26 to 30) are also to be applied to husbands. One of the notable features of the 'ordinary' readings in this study was how many of them took the analogy fully – assuming that all features of the description of Christ were applicable also to husbands. This supports work by Jill Marshall (see chapter 2, section on literary frameworks) that the underlying metaphor tends to be filled out in the minds of readers.

With reference to verse 23, some took the verse to mean that a husband is responsible for a wife's salvation: "Christ is head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour" – so there's responsibility on the husband to act as the saviour, which...is pretty hard on him' [57]. Verse 25 was understood by some to imply that husbands too should be prepared to die for their wife or family: one commented, 'He [Christ] gave his life for the church, as you'd expect a man to give his life for his family' [20], while another said 'the husband has to be prepared to die on the cross for his wife' [53].

There were also a number of comments in similar vein about subsequent verses in the passage, particularly verses 26 and 27:

'in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish'.

These purposive clauses could be taken to relate solely to Christ's relationship with the church, with the point of comparison with the marital relationship being limited to a husband's love of his wife (in verse 25). In this study, however, these verses

were often understood to have a wider application than this. So, one participant said ‘it does seem to be rather onerous on the woman – I mean she’s got to be holy without a spot or a wrinkle and it doesn’t say men should be, does it?’ [21]. Another commented, ‘I feel like the responsibility for the husband is to make his wife holy and cleansed and pure’ [15]. Although there were some participants whose comments seemed to take the Christ/church and husband/wife comparison as limited to the love a husband is asked to show,⁵⁴⁶ many (as illustrated above) interpreted it far more fully than this.

The Muslim group

The Muslim group found the expression ‘head of’ to denote a definite hierarchy. The husband/wife and Christ/church comparison not only gave a husband authority over a wife, it also (for one participant) implied that a wife should worship her husband:

‘That’s he’s the head of, he’ll be in charge, you’ll listen. It’s like Christ is...it’s goes on too, verses 25 and 26...that he’s the lord of the church, so he’s the lord of you, so you worship him just as you would worship Christ, I think...’ [27].

Another participant said of verse 23, ‘it’s about being unquestioning...’ [26].

There was some evidence of the analogy being taken as full: one participant read the analogy as implying that a wife should love her husband just as she would Christ, which seems to extend the analogy by assuming that the church would love Christ:

‘So...the wife is the church and the husband is Christ and then it goes on to say...‘in order to make her holy by cleansing and the washing with water by the word so as to present the church to himself in splendour without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind, that she may be holy and without blemish’...so it says...love your husband just as you would love the lord and we get told the same thing as well – love your husband just as you would love Allah...’[27].

⁵⁴⁶ Such as the participant who said this: ‘If you felt this, they [husbands] were always...loving you, obviously the way Christ loved the church is very sacrificially...thinking about making her holy, so whatever he can do to put her in the best light, and loving her as much as loving his own self and his own body...that’s a pretty high calling for the husband...’ [50].

As the participant then pointed out a similarity with her own scriptures, it may be that this influenced her to extend the analogy in this way.

The comments of the Muslim group did not include any observations about Christ as an example of love, care or acceptance (as was evident in some other group discussions). This highlights that when Ephesians 5:21-33 is read in isolation from other biblical texts or a broader Christian doctrine, such Christological themes may not readily be apparent.

3.4.5 Reading the passage as a whole

So far, this description of responses to the text has concentrated on participants' views of particular phrases and verses. The purpose of this section is to analyse views of the passage as a whole: to examine how participants explained the interaction between the phrases I had highlighted and the remainder of the text. Sometimes these views were offered during group discussions, but mostly the data for this section is taken from responses given in interviews to question 6 ('could you summarise what you understand this passage to mean?'). I have divided the views into five categories: those which found a consistent gender hierarchy in the passage, those finding the passage consistently un-hierarchical, participants who detected some kind of hierarchy but with limitations, a fourth group who considered the passage gave mixed messages, and a fifth group who suggested alternative thematics for the passage aside from gender relationships.

Consistently hierarchical

For some participants, the passage gave a consistent prescription of a gender hierarchy in which husbands have authority over wives: there is no equality or reciprocity of treatment. Thus one interviewee, when asked to summarise what she took the passage to mean, said

'it seems more focused on the way a husband should behave towards his wife and basically the wife doesn't seem to have much say...apart from the fact that a wife should respect her husband, it doesn't really say how she needs to conduct herself, does it?...well, I suppose "be subject to your husband"...the wife is very much submissive to the husband...- more of a sort of a patriarchal relationship...'[531].

Her view was echoed, though in less detail, by others:

'to me I suppose it means that, which I suppose is why it annoys me so much, women will do as they're told, they will have no say in the matter really. And that's it' [511].

Hierarchy with limitations

For another group of participants, the passage reflected some gender hierarchy, but this had limitations. One reader said,

‘So talking first of all about marriage and how...the husband is...the leader and the wife...submits or the last decision’s to him...but then it...goes into about Christ and about loving each other and I think the man’s job in here is pretty hard as well, about loving your wife as Christ did...’ [512].

This quotation interprets the passage as proposing hierarchy expressed in terms of male leadership and wifely submission. The submission is however immediately clarified as ‘the last decision’s to him’ which seems to imply that a husband’s judgement will prevail as a last resort.⁵⁴⁷ There is also some balance suggested between the difficulty of the requirements made of a wife, and those of a husband: ‘the man’s job in here is pretty hard as well’. Another participant expressed it like this,

‘I think it means that the husband and the wife should do their part, each of them, to honour the other person. So I think the husband’s job is to lay down his life for his wife, to really sacrifice and make sure she’s feeling served and cared for in lots of ways. And as a response I think the wife’s job...is respecting your husband and...sometimes putting your own agenda aside in order to follow, or let him lead...especially in...spiritual things, or big decisions....but not that you don’t discuss it as a couple, and I think it’s important to feel like you’re both heard’ [538].

In this case, the passage is seen as promoting parity between husband and wife in the sense that both play their part and each honours the other. The husband’s role is described first and is expressed in terms of sacrifice and care for a wife. The wife then responds to this by ‘sometimes putting aside her own agenda’ so that the husband can lead in spiritual matters or in the case of ‘big decisions’. There is male leadership, but this is limited to particular cases (big decisions, spiritual matters) and is expressed as a response by a wife to her husband’s care. It seems that a wife’s submission follows on from a husband’s playing his part. A similar idea was also expressed by several other participants, for example,

⁵⁴⁷ It is unclear whether this participant means this, or whether she means that a husband would have the final say in all decisions; other participants seemed to imply that this kind of right of ‘last decision’ referred only to situations in which agreement could not be reached: for example, the participant who said, ‘if there was a difficult decision then he would need to make the final call, but in practicality...there’s rarely times that you’re so adamantly opposed to one another...’ [50].

‘it does say wives be subject to your husbands and I interpret that as being... you might at times defer to their decision on something, but reading the rest of the passage, recognising that they are working for your best interests...’ [534].

Here, a wife deferring to her husband is in recognition that he is ‘working for her best interests’. This might suggest that a wife would no longer follow her husband’s decision if it became clear that he no longer had her best interests in view. One participant envisaged this arising ‘if...the husband’s abusing the wife or not being faithful to her...there are cases of where divorce is allowable...’[538]. Another participant gave broader guidance about this: a wife might not need to be subject to her husband – ‘if he isn’t under the authority of Christ, then...you shouldn’t be obeying stuff that he’s saying or telling you to do if he is not doing it in Christ and in the Lord...’[33].

Many of these examples demonstrate readings that find gender hierarchy in the passage but put boundaries on a husband’s authority or on a wife’s duty to submit. There are limitations of scope on a husband’s authority – to be exercised for ‘big’ decisions, spiritual matters or possibly as a last resort. There are limitations of circumstance on a wife’s submission, from which she is released in cases of abuse or infidelity by her husband, and when he is not acting ‘in Christ’. Interestingly too, some of these participants made clear that they would only apply the gender hierarchy in Ephesians 5:21-33 to marriage: it need not imply any such hierarchy in the workplace, for example.⁵⁴⁸ This might be seen as another boundary put on the reach of the passage.

Consistently un-hierarchical

A third group of participants saw little or no gender hierarchy in the text:

‘I think it’s about being loving and respectful and almost sacrificial towards each other and being prepared to put your needs second to the needs of your spouse...for both ways because where it talks about wives being subject to their husbands I think that means being prepared to put his needs above yours, but equally where it...talks

⁵⁴⁸ For example, participant 512 said in response to my question about whether or not this applied in the workplace, ‘I think this is just for marriage’, which was also confirmed by participant 538 in interview.

about the husband being the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, and husbands loving their wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, I actually think that, to follow that through, husbands also need to put their needs second...'[535].

Here 'subject to' is read as 'being prepared to put his needs above yours' – which need not imply hierarchy – and being 'head of' is identified with (effectively elided with) the concept of self-sacrificial love to indicate that 'husbands also need to put their needs second'. Husband and wife are treated equally: the same thing is asked of both. Another participant said of the meaning of the passage, 'I think that it is...that you respect each other, love each other equally...' [503].

Mixed messages

The fourth group of participants differed from the first three in that they did not find the passage to present a consistent picture on hierarchy in gender relationships. This was most clearly articulated by one of the Muslim participants:

'...here in 27, it says 'to present the church to himself in splendour without a spot or a wrinkle or anything of the kind'...I don't think it's anybody else's right to try and cleanse me...so I think...it puts the men in charge of the women...Equality comes in at 28 – in that 'in the same way husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies' so it is...treat people how you would want to be treated too...And then I get angry again at 33...because again it's underlining that the man is in charge and she will get love, but she does have to respect...' [521].

This participant finds some verses imply a gender hierarchy – for example verses 27 and 33, yet others (the example she gives is verse 28) suggest gender equality. A similar line was differently expressed by another participant who considered that most of the passage need imply no gender hierarchy (only reciprocity) but that this was not the case with verse 22:

'if I take out the 'wives be subject to your husbands' bit it speaks to me of reciprocal love and respect, that's probably the main thing...' [536].

Alternative thematics

In summarising what they took Ephesians 5:21-33 to mean, many participants pointed out that the passage addresses not only the marriage relationship, but also that between Christ and the church. Some participants, however, went a step further than this and speculated what the passage might be taken to mean if the husband/wife relationship were no longer seen as the main focus, or no longer seen at all: they drew attention to alternative thematics. One participant summarised the meaning of the passage as ‘a symbol of what the church is supposed to be...’ [507] When I then asked if this would make the text an illustration of the church’s relationship with Christ, she replied, ‘And with other members, I think...taking the sex side out of it...I mean you’re prepared to go out of your way to do something for somebody if you see it’s necessary...’ In relation to issues of gender relationships – ‘the sex side’ – this participant said, ‘I think you need to look beyond it’. Instead, her comments indicate that the passage is mostly to be taken as referring to all relationships within the church, which are to be characterised by willingness to meet others’ needs.

Another participant, when asked what she understood the passage to mean said,

‘it lays out our roles I guess in a marriage – I see it as a bit wider than that...in general in society how it can work or should work – Christ is at the head of it, or overseeing it, and then we’ve got our roles to play that we bring to the table...’ [541].

For this participant, the passage has a broader frame of reference than simply marriage: she sees it instead as suggesting something for society as a whole, in which each person has a contribution to make, overseen by Christ. She later suggested that if the passage were written today it might refer to other groups, ‘I wonder if today...it would be about husbands and wives, or if it would be about inter-faith communities or different...women and men or different groups...’ These comments seem to suggest that the passage might be understood as suggesting a society in which all contributions are valued, and in which there is accountability to Christ.

A third participant concentrated on the theme of Christ’s relationship with the church, which she felt the text characterised as enabling the church to fulfil its potential, and then re-applied that back to marriage:

‘...I’m interested in the church subject to Christ, and Christ loving the church, give himself up for her, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, in other words, that Christ was going to help the church to fulfil its potential? In the same way, should a husband help to fulfil his wife’s potential?’ [523].

In this instance, a focus on the Christ/church relationship instead of the marriage relationship finds different possibilities for understanding the latter aside from questions of hierarchy. This suggestion echoes my definition of ethical responsibility towards women – as involving maximising potential – and therefore suggests that Ephesians 5:21-33 can be read in ways in line with that definition.

Another participant raised the issue of same-sex marriage, and wondered,

‘what are the messages that...are transferable for non-heterosexual relationships...what would that mean actually if it’s not husband and wife, are there still messages there about power...in relationships...’ [513].

This is a very interesting speculation: that when not viewed as mainly or even at all about gender relationships, the passage may have something to say about power in relationships in general. Like all the previous suggestions, this opens up fresh possibilities for meaning in Ephesians 5 by shifting the interpretative focus from questions of gender hierarchy. I will return to this possibility later in the thesis.

3.4.6 Hermeneutical techniques

The five broad ways of reading the passage as whole which have just been outlined depend upon different ways of handling its words and phrases: they illustrate different hermeneutical techniques. These techniques can be divided into three groups which I have called: varying degrees of construal, textual editing and thematic analysis.

Degrees of construal

In chapter 2, I described the work of Walter Brueggemann and Richard Briggs in identifying degrees of construal – being the extent to which reader-choice plays a part in the definition of words and phrases of a text. Drawing on this work, I judged that some scholarly readings demonstrated maximal construal: the reading of a word or phrase in which reader-choice plays a significant part. I suggested that indicators of maximal construal might include close context-specific definition of particular words or phrases, and apparent re-definition of those words when compared with dictionary definition. Applying the same criteria to readings of participants in this study suggests that the various views about the extent of gender hierarchy in the passage rest upon different degrees of construal of its key words and phrases.

Participants who concluded that the passage consistently advocates gender hierarchy in marriage often understood ‘subject to’ and ‘head of’ (verse 23) to denote obedience on the part of a wife. So, for example, one of the participants quoted in the previous section summarised the meaning of the passage as ‘women will do as they’re told, they will have no say in the matter really’ [511], a paraphrase of obedience. The other participant quoted said “‘be subject to your husband’...the wife is very much submissive to the husband’ [531]: here, ‘subject to’ is explained as ‘very much submissive to’, again suggesting obedience or complete deference on the part of a wife to a husband. These explanations tie in with one end of the spectra of construal noted for ‘be subject to’ in section 3.4.2 above and for ‘head of’ in section 3.4.4. These readings might be described as showing minimal construal: the definitions given for ‘subject to’ seem broadly to tie in with dictionary definition and

are not heavily context-dependent.⁵⁴⁹

Participants who found a limited gender hierarchy in the passage took ‘subject to’ to mean ‘follow’ and ‘head of’ to mean ‘leader’: so, for example, one of the participants who suggested, as part of her summary of the meaning of the passage: ‘the husband is...the leader and the wife...submits or the last decision’s to him’ [512]. These definitions imply something less extreme than wifely obedience – a wife follows a leader rather than obeying or having no say in decisions. ‘Submit’ seems to be defined as ‘the last decision’s to him’: which implies that a husband is not responsible for all decision-making, but only in certain cases or as a last resort. This both qualifies and contextualises the meaning of ‘be subject to’: it is understood in a specific way as it appears in this particular passage which limits its scope: a wife is not expected to leave all decisions to her husband.

This context-specific definition of ‘be subject to’ is further illustrated by the participant who said: ‘it does say wives be subject to your husbands and I interpret that as being... you might at times defer to their decision on something’ [534]. Here, the words ‘I interpret that as being’ seem to imply some acknowledgement of reader-choice in the definition of ‘subject to’, which is in turn understood in a particular way in the context of this passage about husbands and wives. These ways of reading ‘subject to’ and ‘head of’ might be described as medial construal: they allow for some idea of hierarchy in these terms and thus stay in touch with dictionary definition, but the terms are distinguishable from some of the synonyms suggested by a dictionary – such as ‘subjugate’ or ‘render dependent’ – and are circumscribed when applied to the marital relationship in Ephesians 5.

Participants who concluded that there is little or no gender hierarchy in the passage seemed to take ‘subject to’ and ‘head of’ to be equivalents or to have the same meaning. Thus, one participant quoted previously defined a wife’s being subject to her husband as ‘being prepared to put his needs above yours’ and then said of the

⁵⁴⁹ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (OUP: 1985) gives an initial definition of the verb ‘to subject’ as ‘to make (persons, a nation or country) subject to a conquering or sovereign power; to bring into subjection to a superior; to subjugate’. It also suggests ‘to render submissive or dependent’ and ‘to submit to’. These possibilities are very close to those suggested by the participants who felt that Ephesians 5 was consistently hierarchical in terms of gender: there is hierarchy implied in all of these dictionary suggestions.

responsibility given to husbands as ‘head of’ his wife and as loving her, ‘ I actually think that, to follow that through, husbands also need to put their needs second...’[535]. By this reading, both wife and husband are essentially asked to do the same – to privilege the needs of the other. I would regard this as exhibiting maximal construal: taking ‘be subject to’ as privileging the needs of the other seems to define its meaning in substantially different ways from a dictionary definition. I do not mean this, or the comments made on medial construal above, to be in any way critical of the readers: the biblical text is open to all these possible ways of reading. As I commented in the conclusion to chapter 2, maximal construal (and the same might apply to medial construal) is a technique which resolves the considerable complexities of this text by producing readings in which the text maintains a consistent position on gender relationships. It therefore represents one way of making sense of its difficulties.

One of the major contributions of the Muslim group to this study was to highlight the various kinds of construal to which I have just referred. Arguably, the Muslim group exhibited a different form of construal in their readings of the passage: ‘subject to’ became ‘bow down to’ or ‘serve’, while verse 23 was read as suggesting that a wife should ‘worship’ her husband. Muslim readers found the text to be strongly hierarchical – even more so than non-Muslim participants in this study, very few of whom saw Ephesians 5 as suggesting a wife should be a servant to her husband, or should worship him. The Muslim interpretations appear to be linked with their finding significant similarities between the Ephesians text and certain Islamic texts which they also interpreted as strongly hierarchical. Their response sets the readings of the non-Muslim participants in context, and in doing so, draws attention to the ways in which some non-Muslim participants read the text as showing softer notions of gender hierarchy.

Textual editing

A different way of dealing with the words of the text was suggested by some of those participants who considered that the text contained mixed messages on gender relationships which could not easily be resolved. In order to find a consistent message in the passage, they suggested that it might be necessary to remove or avoid some parts of it – for example, ‘if I take out the ‘wives be subject to your husbands’

bit it speaks to me of reciprocal love and respect...’ [536] This, like the various ways of construing words, represents one way of dealing with the complexities of the passage.

Thematic analysis

Participants who looked at themes other than gender relationships to determine the meaning of the passage demonstrated a third kind of hermeneutical technique. Instead of adopting a reading style which pays close attention to all the words and phrases of the text, they looked instead at the broad themes that could be found within it – I have therefore termed this kind of reading ‘thematic analysis’. Some of their descriptions of the meaning of the passage indicate that they are standing back from the text, looking at overall impression rather than detailed composition: so, for example, this summary of the meaning of the passage from one participant: ‘leaving aside the technicalities of leaving father and mother etc., it’s a symbol of what the church is supposed to be...’[507]. This participant is explicit about her approach not resting on the details of the passage as much as on an overall picture – she talks about ‘leaving aside the technicalities’. To arrive at the alternative themes they suggested for the passage, other participants too spoke about the broad direction of the passage – so, for example, the participant who said, ‘it lays out our roles I guess in a marriage – I see it as a bit wider than that...in general in society how it can work or should work...’ [541].

Some participants spoke not of one overall theme, but of a particularly arresting theme they found in part of the passage. Here too, though, the focus was on the theme and where it might lead, rather than on the words used to express it. In this example, the theme is Christ enabling the church to fulfil her potential – the participant finds that the description of the relationship between Christ and the church leads in this direction:

‘...I’m interested in the church subject to Christ, and Christ loving the church, give himself up for her, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, in other words, that Christ was going to help the church to fulfil its potential?’ [523].

These varied hermeneutical techniques all demonstrate possibilities for dealing with the difficulties of Ephesians 5 simply as a piece of writing. In the hands of the participants in this study, they also represented principled ways of explaining the text, guided by a general commitment both to the New Testament as a whole and to the interests of women. Some of these techniques provide options for finding value in the text: whether that is by reconciling its diverse components or finding fruitful and interesting themes among this diversity.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter set out to describe the fieldwork undertaken to uncover interpretative possibilities for Ephesians 5 among ‘ordinary’ readers. Two ‘thick’ descriptions have resulted from this: the first is of the ideological and cultural context in which 57 participants read the text, and the second is of significant features of their responses to the text. To distil further the summary of context given in section 3.3 above, this participant group indicated that they perceived their cultural context to be characterised by two changes for women: a change away from the assumption of gender-based roles in marriage, and a change towards greater equality of opportunity with men in education and in the workplace. Ideologically, there was widespread support for gender equality, defined as not privileging or disadvantaging either gender. As a group, however, they were split on the question of generic differences between women and men – with some finding very few such differences (physical strength and biological only) and others suggesting more extensive variations. They generally held the Bible in high esteem, either as ‘word of God’ or as a resource for spiritual and/or practical guidance.

This particular cultural and ideological context forms the backdrop for participants’ responses to the text of Ephesians 5 and may help to explain some features of those responses. As an example, the initial negative emotional response of some participants may be partly ascribable to the text’s apparent reversal of (recent) cultural progress away from assumed gender roles in marriage. Even those who did not share this emotional reaction to the passage were aware of the likelihood that it might occur, perhaps underlining the general perception of a cultural shift against such roles. Within this context, participants found diverse ways of tackling the words and phrases of the text, some of which may be more helpful for my aims in this thesis than others.

The hermeneutical technique of maximal construal is familiar from the analysis of scholarly readings in chapter 2. The interpretation of ‘ordinary’ readers adds further possibilities to the idea of construal in relation to this passage. Muslim and non-Muslim participants together demonstrate how a full range of construal can operate in relation to some of the words of this passage: for example, ‘be subject to’ might be

read as asking a wife to bow down to, to obey, to follow, or simply to be unselfish towards her husband. Other hermeneutical options used by participants included what I have called textual editing (passing over some parts of the text in order to make sense of the whole) and thematic analysis (looking for general themes in the passage rather than closely reading its words and phrases).

This last technique shows certain similarities with the *Sachkritik* employed by scholars as described in chapter 2. The themes participants found could be likened to options for the *Sache*, or intended subject matter of the text. As I noted in the conclusion to chapter 2, this kind of hermeneutic may be especially helpful for my particular purposes. ‘Ordinary’ readers found creative and theologically interesting possibilities for alternative themes in the passage, aside from that of gender relationships. Of particular note are interpretative ideas about the exercise of power in relationships (which shows some similarity with Elna Mouton’s identification of power as a theme in chapter 2) and Christ’s enabling the church to fulfil her potential. These two ideas do not need to be mutually exclusive. Perhaps the exercise of power and fulfilling the potential of others can be Christologically linked in the reading of this text.

These observations start to hint at how these alternative thematics might provide a way of meeting the objectives of this study, at least as far as theologically fruitful reading is concerned. They are, however, based on just some of the data provided by ‘ordinary’ readers in this project, and hermeneutically they mainly concern techniques – ways of handling words and phrases. In the next chapter I will analyse other data these readers provided to illustrate the wider hermeneutical frameworks upon which ‘ordinary’ readers drew for their interpretations.

4. Compiling the map: hermeneutical frameworks of ‘ordinary’ women

4.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the second part of the map of ‘ordinary’ readings of Ephesians 5:21-33. Whereas chapter 3 concentrated on hermeneutical techniques, this chapter takes a step back from this detail by analysing the broad hermeneutical lines of approach, or frameworks, within which participants read the text. As for the analysis of scholarly readings in chapter 2, these frameworks represent the interpreters’ primary settings for the text: the locations within which its meaning is best appreciated. I have, in general, retained framework categories and definitions from chapter 2, and summarise them here.

Historical frameworks set the text in the historical circumstances of its origin: they seek to determine meaning through referring to the context of author and addressees.

Socio-critical frameworks set the text against contemporary standards of social justice and evaluate it accordingly.

Theological frameworks set the text either within an understanding of Christian doctrine or within a broader biblical context, or both. They seek to understand whether and how it might be inspired by and/or revelatory of God.

Lived experience frameworks set the text within the circumstances of the readers’ own contexts. Personal experience is explicitly mentioned as influencing meaning, and interpretation is often pragmatically orientated – it is concerned with what ‘works’ in practice.

Missing from this list (compared with chapter 2) is the category of literary frameworks, defined as interpretation which places the passage in its context as part of a letter and/or as a piece of rhetoric, drawing on one or more literary theories to understand the text. I did not give participants in the fieldwork information to contextualise the passage in this way and although sometimes someone referred to the text as part of a letter (or mentioned other passages in Ephesians), no-one developed these ideas in ways comparable with the scholars cited in chapter 2. I have therefore not used this category here. This contrasts with historical frameworks, for which I also did not give participants information or access to

scholarly ideas. However, some participants did choose to emphasise the historical setting of the text in ways similar to those of scholars in chapter 2, as the analysis below shows.

Classifying readings between frameworks

The classification of readings relies on my judgement of comments made by participants in this fieldwork. I have not attempted to categorise the interpretation of all individual participants – only those who gave sufficiently detailed responses to indicate the use of one or more particular frameworks. The data for these classifications often came from answers to general questions about the passage (such as ‘what, if anything, does this passage have to say to us today?’), although some questions did invite comment on a particular line of approach (such as the ‘historical’ question in group discussions which began by asking, ‘what do you imagine marriage might have been like at the time this passage was written?’). I did not start by assuming any necessary correlation between answers given to questions about personal ideological positions and hermeneutical frameworks chosen: for example, I did not assume that all self-identified feminists would choose a socio-critical approach for Ephesians 5. Instead I looked for patterns in comments and responses which would be suggestive of hermeneutical framing.

While participants rarely made exclusive use of a single hermeneutical framework in their interpretations, it was often possible to identify one framework which seemed primarily determinative of meaning – although lived experience was nearly always employed, either as the main framework or in support of another. Sometimes participants appeared to draw equally on two or more different frameworks, for example combining theology with socio-criticism. This chapter deals with each hermeneutical framework in turn, before concluding how the map of ‘ordinary’ readings as a whole might contribute towards finding theologically fruitful and ethically responsible ways of reading Ephesians 5.

4.2 Hermeneutical frameworks

4.2.1 Historical frameworks

This section deals with interpretations which give importance to situating Ephesians 5:21-33 within the context of the time at which it was written, treating the passage as an historical document. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I did not inform participants of theories put forward by scholars about the historical circumstances of the text's origin. Instead I asked a general question (in group discussions) about marriage in the ancient world – the question was ‘What do you imagine marriage might have been like at the time this passage was written?’ This was usually followed with a second question: ‘Does this make any difference to how we understand this passage today?’⁵⁵⁰ As a result, across the participant group as a whole, there was significantly more comment on this general question than theorising about specific situations which may have occasioned the writing of the text. That said, the latter did occur, as did the response that historical questions were of little or no relevance. I have therefore divided this section to cover these three kinds of approach: reading the passage as tailored to specific historical circumstances, reading the passage in the light of broader historical assumptions about marriage and the view that the historical setting of the text is of little interest.

Interpretation based on historical particulars

The most thorough-going example of interpretation based on historical particulars came from a participant who viewed the passage as the result of a mistaken expectation of an imminent eschaton:

‘I put myself into the position of whoever wrote it, whether it was St Paul or some other person in the early church, that as far as we can understand, they were expecting the end of the world within their life-time. You would hardly...try to effect a social revolution if it was all going to be brought to a conclusion anyway. You...wouldn't expect people to disturb that...I mean he goes on about slaves obeying masters and you can feel shocked that he didn't say slavery is wrong...but of course he wouldn't! He's looking at the harmony, the peace between people, in that community right

⁵⁵⁰ The analysis in this section is based on responses to this question, combined with replies to some of the more general text-based questions put to participants both in interviews and in group discussion. Especially relevant here are some of the answers to the question ‘what, if anything, does this passage have to say to us today?’

now with that expectation, so I don't think that his perception was something that we need to take upon us now, it was a totally different historic situation...' [532]

This reading assumes a particular historical situation and set of beliefs which so conditioned the passage that very little of relevance today can be drawn from it: 'I don't think that his perception was something that we need to take upon us now'. The text is read as an instruction to maintain a social status quo, on the grounds that the author expected the end of the world to occur soon and pragmatically concluded that there was little to be gained by disturbing social structures. When I later asked the participant what the passage might have to say to us today, she replied, '...mutual respect...as a principle, which you can apply not just to husband/wife relationships, but all relationships...' She singled out the last verse of the passage ('each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband') as especially illustrating this point because 'there's a mutuality in it...and it doesn't make that comparison with Christ and the church as the body of Christ...' For this participant, the husband/wife and Christ/church analogy was especially problematic – she described it as a 'comparison with the *authority* of Christ' [my italics], indicating that she saw it as underscoring the authority of a husband over his wife. Value was therefore to be found in the last sentence, with the rest of the text seen as applicable only to particular historical circumstances.

This kind of interpretation is similar to that of scholars described in chapter 2 who saw the text as the response to a threat: despite the differing natures of the threats they suggested, they all read the text as tailored to a specific historical situation or set of expectations. Some other 'ordinary' readers raised comparable possibilities:

'I almost wonder whether if this was written in a time of threat, which I suppose it could have been, then there was an attempt to reinforce what people traditionally think creates stability in society, tradition, history and maybe the writing of this was part of something of that attempt, I don't know...' [36]

'I wonder why he felt the need to say that – "wives be subject to your husbands", why was there a need...even at that time, for him to emphasise that?...were women becoming more outspoken or going out of the home more in the wake of Christ and his teachings?' [40]

These interpretations/speculations have the historical genesis of the text very much in view – as one of the participants quoted above put it,

‘I think that’s one of things that makes the Bible interesting really, is enter...trying to enter into their minds and see what they were exploring and what they were having to live with....’ [532]

As I noted in chapter 2, while this kind of focus may produce theological fruit, such fruit can seem to be something of a by-product – in relation to Ephesians 5 at least. Such historical interpretation can be intellectually interesting (as the comment by participant 532 above seems to suggest), but it is not necessarily theologically so, especially when the passage is read as conforming to ancient social norms for purely pragmatic or defensive reasons.

Interpretation based on broader historical assumptions

Many group discussions about marriage in the ancient world tended to identify patriarchy as its distinguishing feature. Participants spoke about restrictions for women in education and employment: ‘...women didn’t have jobs...they weren’t educated, and they...didn’t have a lot of independence...’ [50], and curtailment of property-owning and other rights: ‘women couldn’t own property...and women had no rights...men had all the rights’ [31]. Some thought that women were regarded as possessions: ‘I do think women were chattels then...’[23]. The question this raised was whether Ephesians 5:21-33 acted to moderate ancient patriarchy, or to re-enforce it. Some participants suggested that the passage might be seen as counter to an ancient patriarchy in which wives were little more than possessions of their husbands:

So, then could this be radical, what Paul’s saying to the men...when he says ‘each of you should love his wife as himself’...Because these men may never have heard that before...considered that before...’ [1].

‘...I’ve heard it said...that...if a wife is property and basically they didn’t really have rights...then this is quite a positive, supportive text for wives because it’s putting onus on the husband...to be a good husband which if you view your wife as just part of your chattels, then there’s no onus to do that really...’ [46].

For other participants, however, the different treatment of husbands and wives in the passage militated against ideas that it was radical, even in its historical context: one participant said in response to a discussion which included the comment by [1] above,

‘It’s interesting the words...Paul never says to the men and women “you should both listen to each other”. He chooses different things to say to the men and different things to say to the women...’ [2].

For another participant, the text reflected ancient ideas of marriage without proposing an alteration to them:

‘I feel it was very much written in a very different culture and that’s a problem...I feel that the description of marriage is possibly the description of how people referred to, or perceived marriage in the time that this was written...’ [529].

These different views highlight again the conflict in the text: it can be seen as complying with ancient patriarchy (especially in its instructions to wives to be subject to their husbands) and yet also as conflicting with it (notably in its instruction to husbands to love their wives). When the passage is taken in the second of these two ways it can be read as encouragement to confront social inequality more generally, as this interviewee suggested when I asked her how interpreting the passage as radical in its ancient setting might be relevant for today:

‘I think the notion that the church can stand up for everyone’s rights would be relevant to me and an important message that you could take from it and...I think someone else in the group was saying...Jesus wasn’t a radical...well to me he was’ [513].

Other participants, however, expressed different ideas about ancient marriage. One said, ‘I think it’s a modern propaganda that women in the past were all totally downtrodden – I simply think it’s not true...you have women in the New Testament who were trading independently...’ [53]. Another participant also suggested grounds for similarity between marriage in the ancient world and today: ‘...there probably was every kind of marriage you can imagine, every kind of marriage we have now...people don’t change, do they?’ [55]. This second comment was made to support the participant’s view that understanding ancient marriage makes little

difference to interpretation of Ephesians 5 today. A view of Ephesians 5 as radical did not arise in this group discussion, possibly implying that the more hierarchical/patriarchal ancient marriage is understood to be, the easier it may be to view the text as revisionist.

Interpretation not based on historical considerations

Some participants regarded questions of history as of limited relevance to interpretation of Ephesians 5. Sometimes a view of the Bible as inspired word of God militated against giving its historical setting much weight in interpretation: when I asked one group whether an understanding of ancient marriage made any difference to how we might interpret the passage today, one participant replied that it did not, because ‘it was inspired by the Holy Spirit and he knows things are going to change and he says the correct words which can apply to all ages, which we can all get value from...’ [53]. However, another participant pointed to the particular Christological references in the passage as giving it application beyond its original historical setting:

‘there are other passages in the Bible [in] which you’ve got to look very carefully at the context...I’m thinking of the one where Paul says to women...“don’t speak in church”...and actually he was talking to a certain group of women I believe...who were causing trouble...so...you can’t just bring that forward to the 21st century...but with this passage, I think it’s more tricky because you can see that it is definitely right because it’s talking about Jesus – the image...of Jesus and the church and that the marriage should be symbolic of that, so you can see that that’s a general instruction and theme that is right but then...the context of it back then, marriage was different, so it’s very tricky...’ [33].

For participant 33, as for participant 53, theological considerations weigh against the usefulness of an historical framework. This is not (or not only) due to her view of the Bible as a whole, it is as a result of theological references in the passage itself. The comparison between marriage and Christ’s relationship with the church indicates to the participant that marital advice in Ephesians 5 transcends its historical context, unlike the content of some other biblical passages which can be read as specifically historically conditioned (and therefore not be ‘brought forward’).

The Muslim group

Participants in the Muslim group suggested an ancient setting for the text in which women were regarded as prizes:

‘...whenever they went to rape and pillage and conquer another village or whatever it was, they stole the jewels and the women, and they killed the men. So, they were prizes...’ [26].

‘...the more women you had, the harem...you’re more of a man – it’s like the more jewels you have, the more gold you have’ [27].

For some of the group, the Ephesians text not only reflected the degrading treatment of women typical of such an ancient setting, but also gives offence today: ‘texts like this...offend me because I think women are looked at...as an object...’ [24]. This last comment implies that the text is seen as something more than an ancient piece of writing. Behind its ability to offend seems to lie the appreciation that women are still treated in degrading ways, and the suggestion that until women are no longer objectified, this kind of text cannot be consigned to the past. For reasons other than theological, historical frameworks of interpretation that regard the text as purely an ancient document may be found wanting.

Conclusion

There are several observations that can be made from attending to how participants in this study dealt with the issue of the historical world ‘behind’ the text.

1. Theories about specific historical circumstances prompting the writing of this problematic passage can sometimes draw out its difficulties rather than consider its possibilities. Explanations of the passage as directed towards the short-term preservation of an existing social order, or as a defence against a social threat to early Christian communities, raise theological questions. The first of these would make the text an unlikely vehicle for enduring theological truth, while the second suggests that the passage recommends social accommodation for the sake of preservation, which seems to sit uncomfortably with belief in the power of the Christian gospel. Participants who put forward such specific historical theories implied that the text is intellectually interesting but theologically and ethically compromised, and so the task

of interpretation is to explain the existence of such a text, rather than attempt to negotiate/resolve its problems.

2. Reading the text against the backdrop of a general historical assumption of ancient marriage as patriarchal can tend towards the kind of impasse noted in chapter 2 when some scholars read the passage in comparison with other ancient household codes. Just as scholars were divided into two groups – those who saw Ephesians 5 as revisionist and those who saw it as compliant – so ‘ordinary’ readers were similarly divided on whether the text revised or complied with ancient patriarchal marriage. The view that the passage altered ancient patriarchy seemed to be aided by (either or both of) two factors: a perception of ancient marriage as especially demeaning of women, and a perception of the gospel as socially radical. It might be that the second of these factors is the more significant: participants in the Muslim group (without detailed familiarity with the Christian gospel) understood ancient marriage as seriously disadvantaging women, but did not view the passage as aimed at changing that. This perhaps suggests that it is assumptions about the Christian gospel as socially reformist which enable Ephesians 5 to be seen in this way.

3. This study illustrates that for some who continue to use the text devotionally today, questions of its history are of little help. While there is evidence from other studies that ‘ordinary’ readers of the Bible are generally not focused on issues to do with its historical background,⁵⁵¹ in the case of Ephesians 5 Christological references in the text can especially militate against such a focus. Such references suggest that the passage has enduring theological significance.

4. Even for those whose interest in the text is not devotional (as demonstrated in this study by the Muslim group), there can be a further issue that prevents their seeing it purely in historical context – an awareness that the prescription in the passage, taken to be demeaning of women, is still followed. The Muslim participant who described herself as offended by the text seemed to be expressing a sense of solidarity with other women: all are ‘objectified’ by it. This solidarity implies a continuing threat presented by the passage, based on an awareness of its possible political dimensions.

⁵⁵¹ In *The Bible and Lay People*, Andrew Village set out to measure the biblical interpretative horizons of ordinary readers. Village defined such horizons as ‘different foci of attention [by Bible readers]...: the world of the author, the world of the text and the world of the reader’ – see Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, 77. He found that the ‘text-horizon’ and ‘reader-horizon’ were more popular than the ‘author-horizon,’ and concluded that this was ‘in line with the idea that lay people are less interested in the historical background or origins of biblical texts and more interested in the meaning of the text or its application’ See Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, 85.

These observations affirm some of the preliminary conclusions reached at the end of chapter 2 – suggesting further ways in which historical frameworks may not be especially helpful for the particular aims of this thesis. I will now consider the second hermeneutical framework – that of socio-criticism.

4.2.2 Socio-critical frameworks

Readings within socio-critical frameworks treat the text as a potentially damaging social prescription. Integral to the use of this framework, as discussed in chapter 2, is evaluation of the text against standards of justice. One of the comments quoted in the previous section illustrates this kind of evaluation – the participant said, ‘texts like this...offend me because I think women are looked at...as an object...’ [24]. The text offends the participant because it does not appear to accord women full human dignity: it fails to meet standards of justice. In this case the conclusion makes it clear that an evaluative process has taken place; it may be less apparent whether such a process has happened when participants reach positive conclusions about the text. In order to decide whether an ‘accepting’ interpretation evaluates the text, I have adopted the same approach as in chapter 2, relying on two indicators: first, whether readings differentiate between elements of the Ephesians passage, and second, whether they demonstrate a point of judgement beyond the biblical text. The existence of both of these suggests that a positive conclusion may be the result of a socio-critical evaluation.

The process of group discussion and individual interview meant that ‘ordinary’ readers were invited to give their views on the passage in a less structured way than the scholars surveyed earlier in this thesis. I have therefore taken data from several different parts of the fieldwork process to reach a judgement about whether participants demonstrated a socio-critical approach to the text. I concentrated first on those participants who described themselves as feminist, or who expressed considerable sympathy with feminist aims, on the grounds that this might indicate a point of socio-critical judgement from which the text could be read. I then compared this with interview responses to the first question about the text: ‘how would you describe your reaction to this passage?’ Responses to this question often suggested how participants framed the text. Finally, I looked at responses to question 11 in the interviews (‘Do you feel that Ephesians 5:21-33 puts women at a disadvantage compared with men? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?’). This question in effect invites participants to apply standards of justice towards women to the passage, and was therefore revealing of their readiness to do so.

Participants who approached the text using socio-criticism, like the scholars who took a similar line, drew attention to the conflict in the text and expressed concerns about the ways in which the text could continue to be used to the detriment of women. They also pointed out the significance of the context in which the passage is read today. This section explores these three areas.

Conflict within the text

The scholars surveyed in chapter 2 who approached the text from a socio-critical perspective indicated the conflict in the text when it is taken to be about gender relationships. They did this by presenting plausible but opposing readings, highlighting the capacity of the text to be understood as liberating and yet also as oppressive of women. ‘Ordinary’ socio-critical readers also exposed this feature of the text through their varied responses to the question of whether the passage disadvantages women. For one woman, the question posed a dilemma because the text pulled in different directions – she first highlighted different aspects of the text:

‘Certainly not through verse 21, no. “Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church”...nowhere does it say wives love your husbands, does it? It says wives be subject to your husbands, and respect your husband...it doesn’t say love your husband...’ [510].

She later added, ‘I’m not coming down on one side or the other, am I?’ and finally commented, ‘Yes I still feel there’s a slight divergence of opinion...discontinuity in this passage’. For this participant, verse 21 suggests that women are not disadvantaged by the text but the following verses indicate otherwise. Overall she finds ‘discontinuity’ in the text’s treatment of women.

Other participants were divided on the issue: some felt the passage clearly put women at a disadvantage,

‘I think it does...I can’t read it any other way...I think the language of subjection is one thing. The power dynamic that appears to be in there – wives are required to be subject, husbands are required to love...’ [528].

Others felt that the passage was more balanced than this – one commented, when asked if there was anything that she didn't like about the passage,

‘I think the vocabulary, the ‘be subject’...but it's not as bad when you put the next bit in because actually what it asks the husband to do is more...than the wife really...so I think it's tempered, very much’ [504].

She later added, ‘I still feel that men and women should be equal in their relationship and it doesn't quite imply that’. The three women quoted above were generally happy to own the term ‘feminist’ when I asked if they would so describe themselves: ‘Yes, I'm...broadly still of that breed...’ [510], ‘I think I would, yes...yes’ [528] and ‘I suppose so, but it depends on your terms. If it's equal rights, I am a feminist...’ [504]. All of their comments indicate appraisal of the text, either finding that the text as a whole does not meet standards of justice for women, or discriminating between different verses. Each of these interpreters can be described as taking a socio-critical approach, and yet their differing conclusions imply that the text itself is, at the very least, confusing in its treatment of gender relationships.

Use of the text

One of the major contributions of socio-critical readings both by scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers lies in their foregrounding of the political dimensions of Ephesians 5 – highlighting the ways in which the text can reach beyond the context of Christian marriage and be used to the detriment of women in other settings. Scholars surveyed in chapter 2 pointed to use of the text to justify treating women unfavourably in workplaces and in churches, as well as to trap women in abusive marriages. ‘Ordinary’ readers in this study also considered its potential to be used in these ways: one found that it implied the silencing of women – ‘to me I suppose it means that...women will do as they're told, they will have no say in the matter really’ [511]. Another thought it could be used as grounds for a husband to intimidate a wife ‘it's a bit dangerous...if a woman was in a vulnerable position and her husband had those views...he could...bully her a little bit by saying “well this is what it says”’ [531].

One of the distinctive contributions of ‘ordinary’ socio-critical readers to this study was to draw attention to the capacity of the text to be read as legitimising marital abuse generally, with effects going beyond the trapping of wives in abusive fundamentalist Christian marriages (to which scholars pointed). The passage can be read as a general statement of the rightness of patriarchy, and therefore as upholding all the suffering such a system can bring to wives, whether religious or not, and to families in general. In this study, several participants described their awareness of the abuse their mothers suffered at the hands of their fathers. I deal with this more fully in the section ‘lived experience frameworks’ below; relevant to this section on socio-critical readings is a comment by one of these participants who said of her reaction to the passage, ‘I haven’t formed a proper intellectual response to it, but I think...there was a great deal wrong with the patriarchal way...largely because I saw it at work in a bad way in my family...’ [518]. This quotation underlines that the negative consequences of patriarchy need not be limited to wives in fundamentalist marriages, or even to women in general – but can affect whole families. Ephesians 5:21-33 can be taken as prescribing and reinforcing a system which enables men to inflict suffering on those not able to challenge them – with wide-reaching consequences.

The importance of context in using the text today

Awareness of the destructive ways in which the passage might be used, and of the potentially harmful effects of the system it might be seen as promoting, suggests that the context in which the text is read can be highly significant. Some ‘ordinary’ socio-critical readers referred to this when describing their experience of hearing the text read in church. One participant referred to her experience in the Church of England and said, ‘all sorts of things are read which are very difficult...you want to unpick them a little bit and you’ve got to listen to them as the word of God...’ [529]. She then pointed to a number of difficulties she had with Ephesians 5, among them this:

‘I suppose it encompasses the things that I don’t like about the established churches...the Anglican and the Catholic churches in that they’re...very patriarchal...and therefore I find it uncomfortable reading because I feel it’s the kind of text that can be used to make a point now about how things should be set up...’

For this participant, Ephesians 5 can be taken as supporting the patriarchal structures of some churches when it is read out carrying the weight of ‘the word of God’. The text in this setting becomes unchallengeable: it cannot be ‘unpicked’ as the participant would like to do: the implication is that patriarchy in churches becomes similarly unchallengeable.

Conclusion

Socio-critical readings by participants in this fieldwork affirm some of the same features of the text as the scholarly readings considered earlier in this thesis; they also help to fill out a range of possible implications of using the text as part of Christian devotional practice. In particular these readings draw attention to the following:

1. As with the scholarly readings in the same framework, these ‘ordinary’ readings highlight the tension in the text when taken to be about gender relationships. Participants highlighted ‘discontinuity’ in the text, and the way in which the latter part of the text ‘tempered’ its initial verses.
2. The text is open to being read as a justification of patriarchal systems in general. Scholars illustrated how this can limit options for women in the home, workplace and church, as well as confining fundamentalist Christian women within abusive relationships. These ‘ordinary’ readings illustrate the wider negative results that patriarchal systems can produce – for families, whether religious or not. Ephesians 5:21-33 is capable of being taken as justifying such systems, and by extension, such abuse.
3. These ‘ordinary’ readers suggested a third issue with Ephesians 5 – concerning the significance of the context in which the text might be read. A text, which by some socio-critical standards is at best ambivalent on the question of the oppression of wives, has consequences for how churches and the Christian faith are perceived. The participant in this study who described her difficulty in hearing this and similar texts described in a church setting as ‘the word of God’ also said, ‘that’s probably one of the reasons I left the Church of England’[529]. One of the Muslim participants described herself as surprised by verse 5:22 (‘wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord’) ‘because my view and expectations of Christian teachings were not of subservience...’[521]. This participant had not expected to find an oppressive requirement of women in a Christian text – it was an unwelcome

surprise: 'I don't want to accept that God would have one person to be more dominant'. When Ephesians 5:21-33 is presented in contexts which imply it is somehow representative of Christian belief, then for some hearers/readers, an affirmation of patriarchy is given the status of doctrine.

4.2.3 Theological and biblical frameworks

This section explores the readings of participants who drew, either wholly or partly, on a theological frame of interpretation for Ephesians 5:21-33. Instead of (or as well as) taking the text to be an historical document or potentially damaging social prescription, these readers regarded it as part of the biblical witness to God. As detailed in chapter 3, 63% of the interviewees who were asked said they would either wholly or partly describe the Bible as word of God, indicating that many participants might look to frame the passage theologically. The readings suggested by these participants can be divided into three groups (similar to the scholars whose theological readings were included in chapter 2): those who drew on the teaching of a particular church tradition, those who read the passage in the light of other biblical passages about gender relationships, and those who applied themes of Christian theology (such as Christology or the Trinity) to the text. The data for this section comes both from group discussions and interviews: sometimes participants' theological framing of the text became apparent early on in discussions, at other times it was articulated more fully at interview.⁵⁵²

The context of tradition

Participants referred to a variety of church traditions in their interpretation of Ephesians 5.⁵⁵³ While Roman Catholics in this study tended to refer to public pronouncements on behalf of the church – either in the form of official documents or sermons given by priests, evangelical Christians from other denominations pointed to teaching and advice often given by named individuals (ministers and/or authors⁵⁵⁴) within their tradition. Those who cited church tradition of whatever sort tended to

⁵⁵² I asked a question in both discussion and interviews about other biblical texts concerning gender relationships: discussion question 10: 'Where else in the Bible would you look for help about how women and men should relate to one another?' and interview question 10: 'Is there anywhere else in the Bible you would look when thinking about the relationship between men and women?'. However, the texts participants mentioned in reply to these questions were only sometimes used to frame their readings of Ephesians 5, and if they were, it had usually become clear earlier in the discussion/interview. The data for this section is therefore not primarily taken from responses to these questions.

⁵⁵³ Andrew Village notes that Catholic and Protestant traditions both put emphasis on the importance of communal interpretation, in *The Bible and Lay People*, 125.

⁵⁵⁴ In his ethnographical account of group Bible study in America, James Bielo notes that 'instead of relying primarily on their local clergy, lay Evangelicals look to a cadre of published teachers for theological and moral instruction' – see Bielo, *Words upon the Word*, 111. There was evidence of this among those who self-described as evangelical in this project: some participants quoted published authors, and one named a minister with a high profile among UK evangelicals.

draw on it to support readings in which the text encouraged a husband's leadership in terms of decision-making in the home. So, one interviewee who acknowledged her 'evangelical background' said,

'I remember going to...marriage preparation under [name of minister] – have you heard of [name of minister]?...and him saying that there should be discussion about things, decisions that have to be made, but somebody has to make...the final decision and in a sense...I would recognise it as being [my husband]' [509].

Here a particular minister is identified and emphasised – the participant has received teaching 'under' him, and he taught that Ephesians 5:21-33 accords a husband the right of final decision making in marriage. A very similar conclusion was reached by one of the Roman Catholic participants, who said,

'...at the end of the day a decision has to be made, ok, and somebody has to give. Now this passage could suggest that in a sense there isn't a person who has to give, and it's almost you throw the dice, but to me it doesn't, and the church has never understood it to mean that...ultimately you can't get away from the fact that in a marriage there has to be a final arbiter in these tricky decisions...' [53].

In this instance, reference is not made to a particular minister but to the understanding of the church as a whole – again to support a reading of the passage which makes a husband ultimate decision-maker.

Participants also drew upon tradition to define the meaning of 5:22 ('wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord'). Thus, one Roman Catholic participant made reference to a papal encyclical:

'Pope Pius 11th taught in 1930 in *Casti Connubii*, 'the submission of the wife neither ignores nor suppresses the liberty to which her dignity as a human person or as her normal functions as wife, mother and companion give her the full right. It does not oblige her to yield indiscriminately to all the desires of her husband...' [55].

Here, traditional interpretation sets limits on the submission of a wife who is not required to consent to everything her husband demands. A different suggestion, but

one which also implied limitations on the subjection asked of wives, was made by a participant who self-described as evangelical:⁵⁵⁵

‘I suppose it’s also what you think about being subject to. Because...I read a book by [name not clear] and she’s saying that Jesus is subject to God and is supposed to be humble – so it’s not necessarily a bad thing’ [15].

Here a publication is cited which suggests that a comparison is made between the subjection asked of a wife and that of ‘Jesus to God’: it is humility which is requested, and perhaps some kind of equality implied, by this (apparently) Trinitarian reference.

One participant seemed to identify a difference between traditional readings of the passage and her experience of how priests handled it at Mass:

‘I just find it a complex passage...I guess what I’ve struggled with the most with this is not the writing itself, but how people have used it over the years, or how people have interpreted it...I don’t think I ever recall a priest...going with what I would call the old-school way of talking about this – ‘wives be subject to your husbands’...he’s the head of the house. I just remember them always really struggling and trying to explain it as an ideal about how God has said family life should be really. So yeah, I think I still struggle with how people...interpret it, but then the words are there, so it’s just a complex passage...in some ways I think it’s quite a beautiful passage, because it’s so about love and self-sacrificing love...’[541].

This implies a struggle on the part of priests who did not take the passage as prescribing a hierarchy in the home, and a similar dilemma for the participant, caught between some (traditional) interpretations with which she does not agree and the words of the text which seem to lend weight to those interpretations. Yet in this struggle, the participant finds beauty in the passage – in the theme of self-sacrificing love. A struggle with the text, and with the interpretations to which it has given rise, suggest a thematic broader than the conduct of marriage.

⁵⁵⁵ This was in response to the interview question 2: [For Church of England attendees only]: ‘In terms of Church of England labels, would you describe yourself as Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical or Broad Church (neither Anglo-Catholic or Evangelical)?’

The context of biblical texts about gender

As with the similar scholarly readings, ‘ordinary’ interpretations which read the text among other biblical texts about gender relationships demonstrate the opposing ways in which the passage can be taken. Some readings found Ephesians 5 to be consistent with the wider biblical witness, and both the passage and the Bible as a whole testified to gender equality: so, one interviewee, when asked whether the passage put women at a disadvantage compared with men, replied,

‘no because...I think there’s responsibility both on women and men for their partnership in marriage and because it says elsewhere that we were all created in the image of God and...with a background of that, I think God thinks of women and men as equal anyway, possibly different, but equal’ [535].

The reference here is to Genesis 1:27 – ‘so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them’. This indicates to the participant that God regards men and women as equal, which she also finds reflected in the passage: she views the passage as treating husband and wife equally, giving both responsibility.

Other participants, however, considered that the passage was inconsistent with a broader biblical picture of relationships between women and men. One participant felt that verse 5:21 (‘be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’) reflected Christ’s love for, and equal treatment of, women: ‘I see that first sentence like that...that Christ loved everybody, and he certainly loved women, and he was the great mover away from the anti-women thing, the subjugation of women thing...’ [29]. However, when asked whether she felt there was a disconnect between 5:21 and what follows in the passage, she said,

‘I do, in some respects – I think poor old Paul is...struggling...I really do, because I think he was probably a dyed in the wool, old-fashioned sort but that Christ had touched him and he was trying to change and move on and break away from what had gone before...but it still looks as though he’s still got his feet stuck in it...’

For this participant, while verse 5:21 reflected Jesus' attitude towards women, the remainder of the passage did not. Ephesians 5:21-33 as a whole therefore demonstrated both consistency and also inconsistency with Jesus' treatment of women, as (presumably) set out in the accounts of the four gospels. Taken together with the previously-quoted 'ordinary' readers who had a different opinion, this offers a further demonstration of the polarisation of views which can occur when Ephesians 5 is read within the frame of biblical texts concerning gender relationships.

Doctrinal contexts

Trinitarian and ecclesiological framing of the passage

Some participants in this study, like some of the scholars, framed their readings of the passage (at least partly) by referring to the relationship between members of the Trinity or between members of the church. The first of these doctrinal themes was sometimes introduced to explain how a notion of gender equality could be reconciled with the requirement that wives should submit to husbands in Ephesians 5:21-33.

The fullest example of this was given by a participant in a group discussion:

‘there can be equality...so I know that they didn't talk about the Trinity in the way in which we talk about the Trinity, say in the Bible, but...God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have got different roles but they're equal....and...I see it a bit like that...we've got different roles but that there can be equality within that and...there can be a different emphasis in the relationship... So that for me to submit....that could be...the emphasis that is from the woman to the man but then the emphasis from the man to the woman is that he has to...be sacrificial or whatever. And so it's slightly different perhaps but I'm ok with that' [1].

Here the relationships between members of the Trinity seem to provide a lens through which the husband/wife relationship prescribed in Ephesians 5 can be seen. When viewed in this way, a wife's submission and the sacrifice asked of a husband are different roles or 'emphases' and do not detract from their equality. This provides a way of understanding and accepting the gender relationships set out in the passage (as indicated by the final comment 'I'm ok with that') rather than suggesting alternative themes which may underlie it.

Some participants spoke not of relationships between members of the Trinity, but instead about relationships between members of the church. They focused on the notion of the church as ‘body’. One interviewee, when asked to describe her reaction to the passage said,

‘there is that initial reaction of wives being subject to your husbands, but then it fits, but then if you take it in context with Christ being the head of the church and that we are part of that, Christ’s body here on earth...’ [509].

When I then asked her more about the ‘context’ she referred to here, she added, in connection with verse 5:23 (‘for the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour’),

‘Now if you don’t understand from another passage in Ephesians about the body...we are the body of Christ and all different parts of that body and we’re all important, that unseen private part is just as important as that which is seen, then you miss that point’.

Here the idea (from another biblical text) that all members of the body of the church are important helps to define the reference to the body in Ephesians 5:23. The implication is that husband and wife are equally important as fellow members of the church. In a similar way to the reference to the Trinity quoted above, the theme of the church as ‘the body of Christ’ provides a lens through which Ephesians 5 can be read: it enables the requests made of husbands and wives to be understood and accepted (the subjection asked of wives ‘fits’ when it is read in this way).

Christological framing

If understandings of Trinitarian theology and of the church as a body sometimes helped to explain and contextualise the submission asked of a wife, then Christological ideas helped to explicate what the passage asked of a husband. For some participants, the husband/wife relationship was ill-suited for comparison with that between Christ and the church, and the analogy served to re-enforce a gender hierarchy:

‘It’s the analogy with the church that I find more problematic because...it doesn’t feel appropriate...to compare it...because why would the man who is as full of sin as everyone else and just mortal,

how do you compare that to Jesus with the church which just feels like a whole different ball-game...that's about different sorts of leadership – wisdom and guiding and I guess that's trying to say men are naturally wise and know best?' [16]

This participant reads the analogy as inappropriately suggesting similarities between husbands (who are humanly sinful and mortal) and Jesus – sinless and divine. She concludes that the point of comparison might be to do with wisdom and therefore that the passage might be putting forward the view that 'men are naturally wise'.

Others, however, saw a different kind of Christology reflected in the passage – one that laid emphasis on Christ's humanity rather than his divinity. This tended to push against notions of hierarchy in the text. One participant said of verse 5:25 ('husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her'),

'when I think of Christ in this context, I think of him washing people's feet, I think of him being with the lowest of the low, I think of him pouring himself out, giving everything he had physically, emotionally, spiritually...So...that's the Christ that I'm...picturing when I read that. So for me, I see him more down on the ground rather than up on a pedestal' [1].

These comments include references to gospel accounts of Jesus' life – such as 'washing people's feet' – which stress his humility. There is also mention of Christ's 'pouring himself out' which suggests Philippians 2:7 (Christ Jesus 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness'). The result tends towards a non-hierarchical view of Christ's relationship with the church, which accompanies a similar view of the husband/wife relationship as set out in the passage: when asked about her understanding of 'be subject to', she replied, 'I think of being...accountable to one another which maybe puts it more level...'

These comments underscore the Christological complexity of the passage – it can be read as referring to Christ as ruler or 'head' of the church and yet equally as indicating Christ as servant or supporter of the church. The former ties in with Christ as divine, as King, with implications of powers and attributes that we do not possess. The latter is suggestive of Christ as fully human, alongside us. Like the scholars who

framed the passage in terms of Christology (Morna Hooker, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Elna Mouton), ‘ordinary’ readers are similarly divided according to how they handle the dual nature of Christ in relation to this text.

That said, the allusions to Christ in Ephesians 5 do seem to offer fertile ground for creative themes that need not be limited to gender relationships. Many of the alternative thematics noted in chapter 3 specifically draw on the Christological comparisons and imagery of the passage, as exemplified by the following:

‘I’m interested in the church subject to Christ, and Christ loving the church, give himself up for her, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, in other words, that Christ was going to help the church to fulfil its potential? In the same way, should a husband help to fulfil his wife’s potential?’ [523].

Here, a focus on the Christology of the passage, on Christ’s actions as filled out in the extended analogy starting at 5:25 (‘husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’), leads to theological possibility that can be applied back to marital relationships (as the participant does), but could equally well be a model for the exercise of all leadership, or a characteristic of all Christ-like love – that it helps others to fulfil their potential.

Other suggestions were also prompted by the references to Christ in the passage: one participant said, when discussing the meaning of ‘the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church’:

‘Christ is almost like the cornerstone of the church and the roots...what grounds you...and putting that thought on it, that your husband being what roots you and grounds you and supports you....’
[46]

This links Ephesians 5:21-33 with a passage earlier in the same letter – Ephesians 2:19-21 – in which the addressees are described as ‘members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone’. This indicates one way in which Ephesians 5:21-33 may be understood as consistent with the rest of the letter, and that both may then be seen as reflecting Christ supporting the church. The participant relates this image to

the marital relationship, but again, it could be taken as more widely applicable – that all leadership involves the giving of support.

Conclusion

‘Ordinary’ readers who approach Ephesians 5:21-33 within a theological or biblical framework help to fill out this part of the map of readings in a number of ways:

1. Those who drew upon particular church traditions to read it explained how their interpretations worked out in their own lives. Unlike the particular scholars described earlier who were concerned with the implications of the text for female vocations in general and/or the text’s connection with theological anthropology, the focus for participants in the fieldwork was decision-making in their homes. Often the text was taken as giving a husband the right and responsibility of leadership, defined as making the last call in areas of particular importance for the family/relationship. There was also evidence, however, of a struggle with this kind of reading, and of alternative interpretation from within the same church tradition (references to priests who seemed to challenge the text as promoting a husband’s leadership). This struggle resulted in a wider interpretation suggested for the passage – that it might be taken as exploring self-sacrificing love, especially as demonstrated by Christ.
2. Readers who framed the text with other biblical texts about gender tended to affirm the conclusion reached earlier about scholars who took a similar line: if the biblical witness more generally is taken to point to equality between the genders, then Ephesians 5 can be read as in compliance with, or as contrary to, that witness. This tends to present a choice between acceptance and rejection.
3. Participants, like the scholars earlier, suggested a variety of doctrinal themes that might apply to the passage. Trinitarian references and allusions to the idea of the church as ‘body’ provided interesting ways of explaining, minimising or relativizing the gender hierarchy in the passage. While sometimes Christology performed the same function, it could also polarise readers when applied to the husband/wife relationship – according to whether Christ was seen as divine ruler or as human companion/servant. Readers highlighted that the text can be taken either way: it presents Christ as head of the church (with suggestions of some sort of authority), and yet also as giving himself in service of the church.
4. Participants also, and very helpfully for this study, explored the possibilities of the

Christology of the passage in creative and novel ways. As well as the theme of self-sacrificing love (as in point 1 above), other participants suggested that Christ's headship of the church might be seen as supporting it or grounding it; that Christ's 'giving himself up' for the church might be reminiscent of his self-emptying activity as described in Philippians 2; that Christ's love for the church might be directed towards enabling her to fulfil her potential. All of these ideas can be applied to, but need not be constrained by, patterns of marital relationship.

4.2.4 Frameworks of lived experience

Readings within this framework approach Ephesians 5:21-33 as a potential pattern for living and explicitly negotiate the text in terms of personal experience. Such interpretation is concerned with whether and how the text works in practice. Among participants in this fieldwork, this framework often accompanied another approach to the text, for example, lived experience might be cited as underlying a socio-critical reading of the text, or a theological interpretation supported by its out-working in the life of the interpreter. Among the scholars consulted in chapter 2, there were relatively few instances in which particular personal experience was mentioned in connection with a reading of the passage, and so I dealt with each separately. In contrast, participants in the fieldwork frequently described experiences which helped them to make sense of the text. It may be that such reflection was encouraged by the second question of the group discussions which invited participants to consider how the relationship between a husband and wife works in practice, before turning to the passage. It may, however, equally be the case that some participants' overall view of the Bible as a guide for life (as noted in chapter 3, section 3.3.4) prompted this kind of approach. Whatever the cause, this interpretation provided a rich resource, suggesting how the text is differently heard against a range of diverse experiences. I have grouped these experiences into four categories: marriage vows, marriages guided by the text, abuse or discrimination and balancing work inside and outside the home.

Marriage vows

In chapter 3 (section 3.4.2) I noted that many participants raised the issue of marriage vows when asked to comment on Ephesians 5:22 ('wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord'). It was clear that this verse reminded many women of choices they had made to obey, or not, their husbands at their weddings. It may be that reading Ephesians 5 through the lens of experience of marriage vows encourages the polarising of attitudes towards the text: just as women had to decide whether to accept or reject the vow of obedience, so they were perhaps prompted to accept or reject the passage. When discussing her level of comfort with the passage as a whole, one interviewee said,

‘if I let [my husband] read it, I wouldn’t want him to get any ideas...he might just wind me up about it – but...I’m trying to think about our marriage vows now and I don’t remember...whether I said obey or not...this...for me is very similar to that and it can be really quite contentious having that word and that’s how I still feel this passage is...’[501].

This indicates that the passage reminds the participant of controversy concerning the word ‘obey’ in marriage vows: whether to accept the word or reject it. The participant also feels that the passage might give her husband ‘ideas’. Although these ‘ideas’ might take a light-hearted form (involving his ‘winding her up about it’), the comment seems to hint at worry that the passage might be read as giving her husband a certain licence with which the participant would not be happy.

The passage also reminded another participant of her experience making a decision about marriage vows. During a group discussion about verse 5:23 (‘for the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church...’) she said,

‘I think this comes back to ‘obey’ doesn’t it, in the marriage ceremony really...you didn’t feel you had a choice. When I got married and they were just beginning to get a choice, but when I asked the rector, the vicar, so did we have to use it. I did say obey – I told my husband I wasn’t going to, but...I knew the vicar so well and it was going to upset him, so I didn’t want to upset him. But really I would have preferred not to say it...’ [14].

In this case, however, the participant felt that a choice was taken away from her by the vicar: she followed his preference rather than her own so as not to cause him distress. For this participant, the passage (especially verse 23) reminds her of lack of choice, of surrendering control over the vows she was about to make. A man in a position of authority (the vicar) in effect determined the vows for her, and determined that she would make a promise she did not wish to make. For this participant, Ephesians 5 suggests the same loss of control, and the same removal of choice.

An interesting alternative view was offered by a participant who chose to include ‘obey’ in her marriage vows, on the basis that the relevant biblical texts (Ephesians 5 included) suggested a marital relationship based on mutual love and respect:

‘We got married 25 years ago and I chose to have ‘obey’ because we discussed it and...we decided it was all about mutual respect and love and it worked both ways...but it was a huge shock, and it happened...and we said our vows in church with those words everyone was looking at each other – they couldn’t believe that we’d done it but it was important to us because we looked at that passage – the passages really carefully and decided we would do that. But it’s an individual choice...’ [20].

These comments indicate a very close connection between Ephesians 5 (and other unnamed passages) and the marriage vows, so that a reading of the biblical text determines the meaning of the vows. Ephesians 5 is taken to emphasise mutuality rather than hierarchy, and the same is then said of vows which include a wife’s promise to obey her husband. It was this way of reading which persuaded this participant to include the traditional vow of obedience at her wedding, though this came as a ‘huge shock’ to those present. Here, a carefully worked out joint understanding of vows and Ephesians 5 enabled the participant and her husband to take both on their terms.

These various references to marriage vows in connection with Ephesians 5 demonstrate how the passage can be read as controlling of women – whether that is by giving a husband licence with which a wife is not comfortable, or whether it is in the limiting of a wife’s choices. Read in this way the passage presents women with a decision, reminiscent of marriage vows of obedience, to accept or refuse it. When the passage was read differently – taken as not controlling of women, but proposing instead mutuality between husband and wife – such a reading was underpinned by a joint understanding between husband and wife informing their decision about marriage vows.

Marriages guided by the text

Several participants in this study spoke of Ephesians 5:21-33 as providing a pattern for marriage that had worked for them. One said,

‘I always felt after I met [my husband], I always felt safe and cared for, loved, provided for...not as in a domineering way, but...in a way that he would look after me...and when we had the children and I wasn’t working, he would provide for us and he always saw that as his role, as the provider, even though...it was very much a

partnership relationship...he always...supported me in everything I wanted to do, I don't think I would have achieved half of what I achieved in my career if he hadn't been there encouraging me, giving me confidence....so it was that sort of a head...' [506].

This participant read the passage – in this comment concentrating on the idea of a husband as 'head' of a wife (in verse 23) – in the light of her experience of a loving marriage. 'Head' here denotes 'provider' and also a supporter and encourager. This constitutes a thorough-going example of interpretation framed by lived experience: textual meaning and practical outworking go hand in hand. It also became clear that the second half of the passage played a very important role in this participant's interpretation. Commenting on the passage as a whole, she concluded that wives were given a 'special position', which she explained as follows:

'I think it's because...“husbands love your wives just as Jesus loved the church and gave himself up for her in order to make her holy by washing of water by the word”...to me it's not saying that...you're the boss, you're in charge, you're dominating your wife, it's telling them that you love your wife, you care for your wife, you must respect her...having said that, I think it's a partnership but the reason I think the wife is privileged is because this husband is being given that charge, you love your wife' [506].

In this reading, the instruction for husbands to love their wives is central – it is the source of the participant's view that women are privileged by the text. It is this part of the passage that prompts the participant's interpretation that a husband is to love, care for and respect his wife.

The question this might raise, and did raise for other participants, is what might happen if a husband did not love his wife in this way. One participant put it like this,

'It would be very difficult talking to someone who was in a marriage [where] the husband's very disrespectful and not loving her and abusing her verbally...then it's a really hard thing to be like “well, you just need to submit to your husband”' [50].

Similar comments were made by several other participants – highlighting that the passage 'works' when a husband loves his wife, but that the requirement for a wife to be subject to her husband would otherwise be difficult:

‘now having been married for 19 years...it does make sense really...[my husband] has to respect me and then sometimes I have to give in, so it doesn’t seem as bad, but possibly cause we’re in a nice place, but if I’d married someone different and they exacted this according to the letter, [I] might be in a different place...’ [501].

‘if Christ is asking me to submit to [my husband] who is a man, (whispers) it doesn’t actually bother me...and maybe that’s part of who he is...it’s easy for me to feel that because he’s such a...gentle kind of a person’ [1].

This second observation was then immediately followed by this from another participant,

‘If you were in an abusive relationship, you would read that with horror, wouldn’t you? But in a loving relationship...it’s so completely different’ [4].

For each of these participants, the text worked well in practice as a pattern for their marriage; all, however, acknowledged that it might not work as well if a husband did not act responsibly or lovingly. This draws attention to a significant issue with reading this passage as a blue-print for marriage: it offers a view of marital relationships which is heavily dependent on the actions and behaviour of a husband and seems to suggest little means of escape for a wife when a husband does not act in loving ways. While the women quoted here testify that the passage worked well for them as guidance for marriage, their comments also suggest that applying it to *all* marriages might be problematic.

Experiences of abuse or discrimination

The difficulties involved with regarding Ephesians 5 as guidance for all marriages were underscored in this study by the readings of participants with experience of abusive fathers. In the section on socio-critical readings above, I noted that one of these participants viewed Ephesians 5 as a statement in support of patriarchy – a system from which she and her family had suffered. When asked to describe her reaction to the passage, this participant said,

‘I think there’s a lot, there was a great deal wrong with the patriarchal way...largely because I saw it at work in a bad way in my family. So...I suppose if you saw it at work in a good way,

maybe you'd have a different opinion. But my mother came from a working class background, although she educated herself and she did quite well for herself afterwards, but...it was that working class culture where you got drunk on a Saturday and beat your wife up and nobody bothered too much about that, and my father was quite a violent man and he drank a lot...whereas if I had a father I could have respected, maybe I would have....I was always deeply suspicious of anything patriarchal, even in a so-called good man, I couldn't see it. It's only lately since I've got older I think maybe there are some good men out there...' [518].

This response to the passage confirms some of the doubts expressed by participants whose own marriages had been helpfully guided by Ephesians 5: that the extent to which the passage might work as a prescription for a marriage which is life-giving for a wife depends on the husband. This was affirmed when the participant just quoted suggested that had her father been someone she 'could have respected', perhaps her response might have been different. The passage is open to being read as handing power to husbands with no guarantee for wives (or children) that this power will be exercised responsibly. The instructions to husbands to love their wives can be treated separately from the instructions to wives, so that a wife's submission is not contingent on a husband's love. This, indeed, seems to be the way in which participant 518 took the instructions to husbands when she said of the passage as a whole,

'It has very little to say to me...I mean he mentions love, yes...husbands...they should love their [wives]...he repeats that quite a few times...so that's the good part of it, I think that's the only good part of it that I'm getting out of it really...' [518].

For this participant, the instruction that husbands should love their wives constituted the one useful or acceptable part of the passage – it did not, however, seem to lessen or mitigate the rest of the text, but was taken separately.

Another participant did regard the instruction to husbands as counter-balancing what the text asked of wives, saying of the latter, 'I think it's tempered, very much' [504]. This did not mean, however, that she could fully accept 'wives, be subject to your husbands': 'I still feel that men and women should be equal in their relationship and it doesn't quite imply that'. Later in the interview, when discussing how women and men are equal, she said 'my Mum's lovely, was lovely, and...I have seen how it can

be and I resolved there and then – I made my own set of rules...’ She went on to explain,

‘my father was an accomplished adulterer and...it was in the days when you had to prove fault and...it took two days to bring all the witnesses – he was prolific, there are many stories...and many of the men that I knew, that knew him, found that quite entertaining, rather than thinking about how my Mum would feel...’

This participant’s experience of the damage caused to her mother by her father’s ‘prolific’ adultery, and of seeing her not treated with respect or consideration, had prompted her to make her ‘own set of rules’ to determine how women and men should be treated equally. The participant spoke of equality between women and men as giving each ‘entitlement to be treated in the same way...and listened to in the same way’: this formed the content of the rules she made. When judged by this set of rules, Ephesians 5 did not ‘quite’ comply. Although the instruction to husbands ‘tempers’ the instruction to wives, it does not completely introduce equal treatment into the passage: it does not ensure that a wife will be listened to or treated with the same respect as a husband.

The contributions of these two participants highlight a power imbalance in the text which affords little protection for wives whose husbands are abusive. The text does not need to be read as a bargain, such that a wife is free to walk away if a husband fails to love her in the way prescribed: it can simply be read as creating an inequality in marriage which can expose women to the risk of abuse.

Another participant also illustrated how the text can be read as a pattern for marriage that is constraining for wives. This participant approached the text from her experience growing up at a time when career options for married women were severely limited. Having described her reaction to the text as one of ‘objection to the fact...that anybody should even think that way...’ [511], she went on to explain,

‘Remember I belong to the generation of...women who were just beginning to get some rights in this country because until just after the last war you couldn’t teach if you were married...so I was just the generation that was beginning to get these rights...’

Of the meaning of the passage, she then said,

‘to me I suppose it means that, which I suppose is why it annoys me so much, women will do as they’re told, they will have no say in the matter really. And that’s it. It tells the husbands what they’re to do, which is good what the husband is asked to do, but the woman appears to have no say in it whatsoever.’

This participant’s experience is not of abuse, but of a time when there was legally enforced discrimination against married women in the teaching profession. For her, the passage gives no right of decision-making to married women, just as the law used to limit the options of women teachers who also wanted to get married. While what the passage asks of husbands is ‘good’, it does not change the position of the wife who has to defer to her husband’s judgement.

All of these participants show how Ephesians 5:21-33 can be read by those especially alert to risks of abuse of, or discrimination against, women. The experiences of these readers give vantage points from which to probe into the power dynamics suggested by the text, exposing its possible implications for wives. Their experiences enable them to be particularly aware of the need for safeguards for women against abuse and discrimination. It is instructive that they do not find the safeguards in this text to be sufficient: although for one participant the instructions to husbands come close to providing a modification of a wife’s submission, they do not quite achieve the equal treatment she has seen to be necessary. The power imbalance remains, and there is no ultimate assurance for wives that it will not lead to their abuse or to limitations on their choices and opportunities.

Balancing work outside and inside the home

In chapter 3 (section 3.3.1) I noted that the shared experiential context within which many of the participants read Ephesians 5 was marked by increasing opportunities for women to work outside the home. Some participants spoke of this as a change from the practice of previous generations; others pointed to an increased workload that they felt this had given women, who took on responsibility not only for their work outside the home, but also for most of the domestic tasks as well. Some

participants read the text with specific reference to their own experience of this change in roles of wives and husbands: in this section I deal with these readings.

Several women viewed the text as advocating a domestic role for married women, or at least as presenting difficulties for marriages in which both spouses work outside the home. Here I am concentrating on three different perspectives: a participant who works outside the home, another who does not, and a participant in a group discussion in which the issue of such work was debated. The first of these participants – who works outside the home – said, when asked about the meaning of the passage in interview,

‘It feels like wives are more, in this passage, more subservient, coming under what your husband thinks and how he makes decisions about things...husbands have to do it in a loving way but I think there are two distinct roles...Because I think for [my husband] and I, our roles aren’t as stereotypically defined as a lot of people’s...I couldn’t be a housewife...[my husband] does more childcare than a lot of people...he does a lot of the shopping, I land up doing all the cleaning, so there is some division but I don’t think it’s necessarily divided the same way that a lot of traditional....so that’s why...the wife and husband role...isn’t quite the same...’[533].

When I then asked the participant if she felt that the passage reinforced the stereotypical way of doing things, she replied, ‘I think so, yes.’ When asked what the passage might have to say to us today, she responded,

‘what comes out to me is the attitudes, so even though you haven’t got the wife and husband role, wives should respect their husbands in the same way that husbands should respect their wives and love each other...’

For this participant, the passage suggested a ‘subservient’ role for women, with which she considered that her own way of life did not comply. She says that she ‘couldn’t be a housewife’: that work outside the home is important to her. She speaks of her married role and that of her husband as not fitting with stereotypes in which a wife does domestic tasks such as childcare, shopping and cleaning: she shares these with her husband. The ‘subservience’ in the passage is thus taken as giving a wife responsibility for the home-based tasks. As this kind of ‘traditional’

role no longer fits with life today, the value of the passage lies instead in the attitudes it suggests that husband and wife should have towards one another – of respect and love.

The second participant, who does not work outside the home, felt that such work could be problematic for her marriage and for others. When she was asked to summarise the meaning of the passage, she spoke about a husband as leader and decision-maker in line with Genesis:

‘So talking first of all about marriage and how...like with Genesis the husband is the leader and the wife submits or the last decision’s to him...but then it...goes in to about Christ and about loving each other and I think the man’s job in here is pretty hard as well, about loving your wife as Christ did...and then it goes on to about nourishing each other...about becoming one...’ [512].

When I later asked her whether there was any disconnect between this passage and life today, she replied,

‘Yeah, I think with women working and earning money is the thing...I think men do have a “I will be the earner and I’ll earn more...” I think that’s probably either what they’re brought up with or it’s part of how God created them, it seems to be from Adam that...makes men have it in them to be more of a hunter-gatherer...there are anomalies but generally...so I think...[my husband] would really struggle if I went out to work because partly our family life would be different and harder...so I think that could arise as a problem in marriages with the work and responsibility and that sort of thing...’

These comments indicate that the participant sees Ephesians 5:21-33 as setting out a pattern of marriage in which a husband’s leadership reflects essential male characteristics, including a predisposition to provide for his family – ‘I will be the earner’. In the light of this, women working outside the home could present difficulties for marriage, and the Ephesians text is taken as suggesting that a wife’s role is primarily domestic.

The third participant put forward her view during a discussion in the Muslim group which offered interesting insights on how Ephesians 5 could be read in the light of

wives working outside the home. During a debate about the question ‘what, if anything, does the passage have to say to us today?’ the participant said,

‘I think to be fair to this passage, it talks about the husband, it really does emphasise about how he should love his wife and...I think out of everything most people just want to be loved. I think that’s the most important thing...and if the husband does follow this and he does love her – his wife – as much as the Christ asked him to...then maybe it could work...but I think it’s a lot down to the husband as well...I think for me, I want my independence, I just want to work. But I think if he did love me as much as that... yes, I would serve him, maybe I would, I don’t know’ [27].

This suggests that following the marital pattern in the passage is an alternative to work outside the home. The participant considers that the kind of love asked of a husband in the text might induce a wife to ‘serve’ her husband, but that for herself she values her independence: ‘I just want to work’. A wife’s submission (construed by the Muslim group as ‘service’) to a husband seems to be taken as involving commitment to the domestic realm rather than to work outside.

These three sets of comments on the passage are from different viewpoints concerning work outside the home: the first participant does such work and ‘could not be a housewife’, the second does not do such work and feels it would harm her marriage, and the third participant very much values the independence such work brings. They also demonstrate different theological commitments to the passage – in the sense that the last comment is from a Muslim participant and the previous two both from participants who described the Bible as the ‘word of God’. Despite these differences, they all understand the passage to be suggesting that submission to a husband in marriage entails a wife taking responsibility for domestic tasks. This is a similar understanding to that of the scholar Lisa Lickona, whose traditional theological reading drew on her experience as a ‘wife, mother, and farmer,’⁵⁵⁶ and concluded that women can realise their full potential in the domestic realm (as described more fully in chapter 2 (section 2.2.7)).

⁵⁵⁶ Lickona, ‘A Commentary on Ephesians 5,’ 395

Conclusion

These readings from lived experience form an especially useful and interesting part of the overall map of interpretation I am seeking to compile. Without wanting to press the analogy of a map too far, these readings might perhaps be compared with the work of a group of cartographers who sketch the contours of a terrain by each measuring it from a different vantage point. In a similar way, these ‘ordinary’ readers show the contours of the text from a variety of diverse perspectives. In doing so, they highlighted the following:

1. When read as a pattern for marriage, the text can appear to be something akin to a closed question: inviting a yes/no response. Readers for whom the passage was reminiscent of the choice they had made about the marriage vow of obedience underlined the capacity of Ephesians 5 to polarise its readers in this way. Their varied experiences of negotiating these vows also showed how the text can be taken as controlling of women, as limiting of their choices, unless spouses agree otherwise.
2. The text, however, does not have to be taken as controlling or limiting of women. It can be read instead as a prescription which gives a husband certain responsibilities for providing for and supporting his wife. Those who considered that their own marriages had helpfully been guided by the text demonstrated this way of reading. Such interpretation gave significant weight to the instructions to husbands in the text, and in so doing identified a potential issue if a husband did not act responsibly towards a wife.
3. This last issue was underscored by participants who viewed the text in the light of the abuse suffered by their mothers, or their experience of discrimination. The text can be read as handing power to husbands (or men in general) with inadequate safeguards or freedom of choice for wives (women). The instructions to husbands can be treated separately from those to wives, so that a wife’s submission does not depend on a husband’s love: such a reading limits the options available to a wife, who seems to be asked to submit whatever the circumstances. What is asked of a husband may be helpful, but it does not change the position of a wife.
4. The passage is open to the interpretation that it proposes a domestic role for wives, and thus discourages their pursuit of work and a career outside the home. Such a reading appears to constrain women whose abilities and inclinations lie outside the home.

These readings show possibilities but also significant pitfalls with Ephesians 5 when it is read as a blue-print for marriage. I do not mean to imply that those whose own marriages reflect the text are in any way wrong: they have found ways in which the text works as a pattern for their own relationship. However, the passage can become problematic when it is transferred to other marital settings, especially those in which a husband treats a wife with disrespect or violence. The text is also open to being read as limiting for women – constraining their decision-making and choices about taking on work outside the home. While this text is clearly valuable for some marriages, its very openness to such a wide range of interpretation raises questions about its value as a general marital prescription.

4.3 Conclusion

In this section I will draw together points raised in this chapter in order to suggest how ‘ordinary’ readers’ framing of the text may be helpful for the particular aims of this study. I am seeking theologically fruitful and ethically responsible ways of reading Ephesians 5: the readings of scholars surveyed in chapter 2 started to indicate that some interpretative approaches might be more helpful than others for these aims, but represented only half of the map I set out to compile. This second half of the map introduces new possibilities into the range of readings.

Historical frameworks

In some respects, the ‘ordinary’ readings included in this study confirmed the preliminary conclusions reached on the basis of scholars’ readings. So, for example, ‘ordinary’ readers’ responses to questions about the historical setting of the text affirmed that such a framework may not suit my purposes as well as others. Participants in the fieldwork who proposed that a particular set of historical circumstances might underlie the text tended (like some scholars) to explain the cause of its difficulties rather than aim at finding a way through them. Such an approach – based on the judgement that the text is theologically and/or ethically suspect – is a very reasonable one to take, it just heads in a different direction from my preferred goal. Participants also demonstrated that reading a complex text like Ephesians 5 against a backdrop of generally-assumed ancient patriarchy (as with the scholars who read it against other ancient household codes) can produce deadlock: readers are divided between those who see it as conforming with patriarchy and those who see it as a radical change. This seems to emphasise the ambiguity of the text rather than offer creative possibilities for its use. While historical approaches in general can lead to theologically promising interpretative options, there may be more obvious routes to take – as perhaps indicated by the participants who considered questions of history to be of limited relevance for their devotional use of the text.

Socio-critical readings

Participants in the fieldwork who adopted a socio-critical approach to the text demonstrated (as scholars also did) that Ephesians 5 can be read as liberating and as oppressive of women. They expose the conflict in the text in this area. ‘Ordinary’

readings also underlined that the text can be read as a statement of support for patriarchy and in consequence as justifying the damage and abuse that some men have inflicted on their families. ‘Ordinary’ readers pointed out that the openness of the text to such construal suggests risks with using it in contexts which imply that it is a self-explanatory tenet of Christianity – as might be the case, for example, if it is read out in church and simply described as ‘the word of the Lord’. This, in a sense, puts some practical boundaries around the aims of this thesis. I am looking for theologically fruitful ways in which the text might continue to be used: this might more readily be achievable in some reading contexts than in others.

Theological readings

‘Ordinary’ readers who framed the text theologically by drawing on the teaching of their church traditions, other biblical passages or particular doctrinal themes, demonstrated the varying ways in which value could be gained from the text. For some its main value lay in the structure it gave to their married life, with a husband exercising some form of leadership; others approached it differently, sometimes seeming reluctant to give up on it even when they felt it did not offer a consistent or acceptable pattern for marriage. It seemed to be the Christology of the passage which offered most to those looking to find value in the text, whether they saw this Christology as defining how a husband was to exercise leadership, or whether they looked for principles which were not necessarily tied to the conduct of marriage. While the group of ‘ordinary’ readers as a whole demonstrate that the Christological references in the passage can lead in two different directions – Christ is both head of the church and yet also giving himself in service of the church – participants who approached the text theologically made interesting suggestions for where the Christological emphasis of the passage might lie: in Christ’s self-sacrificing love, in his support (as ‘cornerstone’) for the church, in his self-surrender reminiscent of self-emptying in Philippians 2; in his love directed towards enabling the church to fulfil her potential. These are rich theological ideas, and suggest several thematic directions that theologically fruitful readings could take.

Frameworks of lived experience

When ‘ordinary’ readers explicitly negotiated the text in relation to their own experiences, many participants recalled the choice they had made about whether or

not to promise to obey their husband as part of their wedding vows. Ephesians 5 seemed to present a similar accept/reject choice. When taken as prescribing a pattern for marriage, there are aspects of the text which might encourage its acceptance and yet others which might lead in the opposite direction. Socio-critical readings (by both ‘ordinary’ readers and scholars) also emphasised the capacity of the text to be taken either as liberating (and therefore acceptable) or as oppressive (and therefore unacceptable). This constitutes further evidence that taking the primary subject matter of the text to be marriage (or gender relationships more generally) may not further my particular aims: it can deflect attention away from questions of theology by distilling the significance of the passage into a yes/no choice.

Some ‘ordinary’ readers also pointed out potential dangers of the passage as a pattern for all marriages. Readers from diverse viewpoints, especially those particularly attuned to risks of abuse or discrimination, noted a lack of textual safeguards in cases where a husband mistreats his wife. They saw an uneven distribution of power between husband and wife in the passage, meaning that a wife is dependent on a husband’s behaviour. ‘Ordinary’ readers also highlighted that the passage can be taken as suggesting wives should take primary responsibility for domestic tasks – which limits their ability to exercise other talents outside the home.

The passage does not *have* to be understood as either limiting or risky for wives – as many ‘ordinary’ readers demonstrated, finding that it had provided a helpful division of responsibilities and/or encouragement towards mutual love and respect in their own marriages. However, the fact that the text *can* be read in such ways suggests that treating it as a general pattern for all marriages may not suit my purposes well: Ephesians 5 as a prescription for marriage is open to readings which are limiting or even damaging of the potential of women.

Overall, the approaches to the text taken by ‘ordinary’ readers provide a wide-ranging and very useful resource for exploring the problems and possibilities of Ephesians 5:21-33. They complement the scholarly readings discussed in chapter 2, adding insights into the difficulties of using the text in certain contexts, the implications for families of the text as a statement of patriarchy and the constraints the text might suggest for wives’ work outside the home. These readings also open

up further options for creative Christological interpretation of the text, based on Christ's self-sacrificial love for, and enabling of, the church. I will return to these themes in the next chapter, in which I bring together the perceptions of 'ordinary' readers and scholars in order to propose a particular route through the various reading possibilities.

5. My preferred course: a hermeneutical strategy and a reading

5.1 Introduction

The research question underlying this thesis asks: in view of the continued use of Ephesians 5:21-33 in Christian communities, what are ethically the most responsible and theologically the most fruitful ways in which it can be read? This question appears, as I write this thesis, to be a timely one. In May 2018, the President of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the USA was removed from office for his reported advice to women, some of which seems to have been prompted by his reading of Ephesians 5. As *The New York Times* reported,

‘A prominent Southern Baptist leader has been removed as president of his seminary after coming under fire for controversial comments to and about women, including advice that women who are abused by their husbands should focus on praying for them, rather than on divorce, and should “be submissive in every way that you can.”’⁵⁵⁷

This advice appears to draw on Ephesians 5:22 (‘wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord’)⁵⁵⁸ to recommend that abused women stay with their abusive husbands. Ethically and theologically disastrous though this man’s pastoral advice is, it is hard to challenge it on strict exegetical grounds, at least as far as Ephesians 5 is concerned.⁵⁵⁹ Other contemporary receptions of Ephesians 5 demonstrate that it can be read as requiring a wife to submit to her husband in all circumstances: ‘ordinary’ readers consulted in this thesis drew attention to the lack of an explicit textual boundary on the submission required of a wife,⁵⁶⁰ while scholars showed how the passage continues to be implicated in cases of domestic abuse in Christian communities.⁵⁶¹ And yet other ways of reading are possible, as the map of readings

⁵⁵⁷ From *The New York Times* (accessed on 1 July 2018 online) – see <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/23/us/southern-baptist-seminary-leader-removed.html>.

⁵⁵⁸ Possibly alongside other household code references in the New Testament – such as 1 Peter 3:1-2 and Colossians 3:18.

⁵⁵⁹ This is similar to the observation made by Wayne Meeks in commenting on the exegesis of the defenders of slavery in 18th and 19th century America (as noted in chapter 1): their interpretations were hard to contest as close readings of the slavery portions of the biblical household codes – see ‘The “Haustafeln”’, 233.

⁵⁶⁰ As noted in the conclusion to chapter 4

⁵⁶¹ See chapter 2, especially section 2.2.4

compiled in the preceding chapters demonstrates. In this chapter, I set out the kind of hermeneutical approach to the passage which, in my view, best meets twin criteria of ethical responsibility towards women and theological fruitfulness: first I describe the strategy in general terms before then suggesting a reading such a strategy might produce.

5.2 A proposed hermeneutical strategy

While the readings surveyed in earlier chapters have suggested that some hermeneutical approaches may be more serviceable than others in meeting my particular aims, they all contribute towards appreciating the problems and possibilities of the text.

5.2.1 The problems of the text

Open to plausible opposing readings

Interpretation within several different hermeneutical frameworks demonstrated that Ephesians 5:21-33 is open to equally tenable yet opposing readings. Historically framed interpretation which read the text against a background of ancient patriarchy, whether encapsulated in other ancient household codes (as some scholarly readings) or held as a general assumption (as some 'ordinary' readings), showed that the text can be taken both as conforming with, and as reforming, patriarchy. Socio-critical interpretation highlighted something similar, with scholars divided on whether the text could be seen as oppressive of or as liberating women, and at least one 'ordinary' reader judging the passage to be 'inconsistent' in this area. Theological interpretation which compared the passage with the broader biblical witness on the relation between genders was also polarized between those who saw Ephesians 5 as consistent with a broader biblical inclination towards gender equality and those who saw it as inconsistent: this was true of both scholars (as set out in chapter 2, section 2.2.6) and 'ordinary' readers (chapter 4, section 4.2.3) who framed the text in this way. All of this interpretation, though it takes varying lines of approach to the passage, tends towards the conclusion that when the primary subject matter of the text is taken to be gender relationships (as expressed in marriage), there is little way beyond the deadlock of opposing opinions.

Indeterminacy

Readings which approached the text mainly as a piece of literature (scholars in chapter 2 section 2.2.5) highlighted a further difficulty with the text which complicates judgements about its primary subject matter. The literary features of the passage can be taken in many different directions. The text is open to a variety of judgements on the part of readers, in particular about how far to press its metaphors

and the significance of its intertextual references. This indeterminacy was confirmed by ‘ordinary’ readers, many of whom took the analogy between husband/wife and Christ/church fully – assuming that all features of the description of Christ were applicable also to husbands, so that a husband might be deemed responsible for a wife’s salvation or for sacrificing his life for his family if necessary (see chapter 3, section 3.3.4). One scholar tried to put boundaries on the reach of this analogy, but another (and the ‘ordinary’ readers just mentioned) showed how such boundaries are not specified in the passage itself.

Capable of being read in harmful ways

Many of the socio-critical readings, and some of those from lived experience, show the multiple possibilities for reading the text in ways harmful for women. Scholarly socio-critical readings demonstrate how, when taken as a general justification of patriarchy, the text can be employed to limit options for women in the home, workplace and church, as well as confining fundamentalist Christian women within abusive relationships. ‘Ordinary’ readings supported this, illustrating the negative impact of patriarchal systems on families, whether religious or not. Scholars’ interpretations from lived experience suggest that the passage is open to readings which can challenge the self-confidence of women. There can also be significant drawbacks with Ephesians 5 when it is read as a general pattern for marriage. Although the text clearly worked well as marriage pattern for some ‘ordinary’ readers, several (whether the text worked for them or not) suggested that it might become problematic when transferred to marital settings in which a husband treats a wife with disrespect or violence. They also indicated that the text is capable of being read as limiting for women in other ways: for example, constraining their choices about taking on work outside the home.

5.2.2 The possibilities of the text

Themes other than gender relationships

The other side to textual indeterminacy is, as scholars reading the text with a literary frame of reference demonstrated, that the passage can be taken in creative directions as well as problematic ones. A number of scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers suggested such creative directions when they found themes other than gender relationships in the text. Such themes included respect and love as characteristics of all Christian

relationships,⁵⁶² ‘the reinterpretation of power’,⁵⁶³ an assurance of the salvation of the body,⁵⁶⁴ making efforts to help others,⁵⁶⁵ and power in relationships.⁵⁶⁶ These suggestions illustrate that the text is not limited to a thematic of gender, and that other ideas too can be found within it.

Christological references

Often alternative themes arose from theologically-framed readings which concentrated on Christology. So, for example, the first three of the alternative themes listed in the previous section were explicitly linked with a consideration of Christological references in the passage or in Ephesians as a whole. ‘Ordinary’ readers made particularly rich suggestions for the directions in which the Christology of the passage might point. They noted particular emphases on Christ’s self-sacrificing love, on his support (as ‘cornerstone’) for the church, on his self-surrender reminiscent of self-emptying in Philippians 2 and on his love directed towards enabling the church to fulfil her potential.⁵⁶⁷ All of these ideas are promising for my aim to find theologically fruitful ways of reading the passage.

5.2.3 A hermeneutical approach

These problems and possibilities for the text start to suggest a hermeneutical strategy for meeting the aims of this study. I am looking for theologically fruitful and ethically responsible ways of reading Ephesians 5:21-33; I defined a theologically fruitful reading as one which contributes to our perception of God as revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ; I defined an ethically responsible reading as one directed towards maximising the potential of women, that is, realising their best imaginable good. In order to realise these aims, it seems that the best path may be one which concentrates on thematics other than gender. The text is capable of being taken in two opposing directions on gender which tends to lead to an accept/reject choice, rather than exploring theological insights. Even more persuasive, however, is the significant capacity of the text to be read in ways that prevent women from maximising their potential. Although it is not *necessary* to take it in this way, the

⁵⁶² See Morna Hooker’s interpretation in chapter 2, section 2.2.6

⁵⁶³ See Elna Mouton’s reading in chapter 2, section 2.2.6

⁵⁶⁴ See Rachel Muers’ reading in chapter 2, section 2.3.3

⁵⁶⁵ See participant 507 in chapter 3, section 3.4.5

⁵⁶⁶ See participant 513 in chapter 3, section 3.4.5

⁵⁶⁷ As detailed in chapter 4, section 4.2.3

text is *open* to being read as a thorough-going statement of patriarchy, and therefore as challenging women's self-belief, limiting them to a domestic role and even permitting their abuse. One way of avoiding this route is to take the passage's references to the marriage relationship of husband and wife as secondary to other themes which can be found within the text, themes which show promise of leading in a different direction.

Many of the alternative themes suggested by both scholars and 'ordinary' readers coalesce around Christology, particularly Christ's love, self-surrender and exercise of power. If themes such as these are pursued, then some of the readings surveyed earlier in this thesis show how they can go in directions which are both theologically fruitful and ethically responsible towards women at the same time. So, for example, the fieldwork participant who suggested that Christ's love for the church (as set out in the extended image beginning at 5:25) might be directed towards enabling the church to fulfil its potential, and that might then imply that a husband should 'help to fulfil his wife's potential' [523].⁵⁶⁸ Such a reading both contributes to our perception of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and also suggests a path towards enabling wives to excel, rather than limiting their options. Another example was given by the scholar who drew attention to the connection between Christ's love and his power – 'a power...paradoxically revealed in the "weakness" of his suffering'⁵⁶⁹ – and therefore proposed that the text could be used against 'abusive power'⁵⁷⁰ (see chapter 2, section 2.2.6). Here too is an interpretative possibility which is both theologically insightful and ethically responsible towards women (in at least ruling out abusive power).

This leads to a preliminary conclusion: that a hermeneutical strategy for achieving the aims of this thesis could focus on the Christological thematics of the text, especially those suggested by the extended description of Christ's love of, and actions for, the church. This is a theologically-framed approach, which is informed by socio-criticism (through awareness of interpretative consequences harmful for

⁵⁶⁸ 'I'm interested in the church subject to Christ, and Christ loving the church, give himself up for her, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, in other words, that Christ was going to help the church to fulfil its potential? In the same way, should a husband help to fulfil his wife's potential?' [523].

⁵⁶⁹ Mouton, 'Re-Describing Reality?', 66.

⁵⁷⁰ Mouton, 'Re-Describing Reality?', 69.

women) and by literary approaches (which expose the indeterminacy of the text, and therefore open up possibilities for its meaning aside from gender).

5.2.4 A hermeneutical technique

Of the hermeneutical techniques, or ways of dealing with the particular words and phrases of the text, noted earlier in this thesis, *Sachkritik* has most potential for enabling my reading strategy. Techniques such as maximal (and to an extent medial) construal – as illustrated in some scholarly and ‘ordinary’ readings – enabled the passage to be seen as consistent, especially on the subject of gender relationships. For the reasons just given, I would prefer to pursue the other themes of the passage, accepting inconsistency in the text on the theme of gender relationships in marriage. This suggests that I am more willing than some other readers to be critical of the text. I do also find the use of maximal construal raises some questions as a general reading technique: it tends to depart from common understandings of words so that interpretation may no longer be recognisable to other readers as based on the text. A similar kind of critique could be applied to the techniques I have called selectivity (see chapter 2, section 2.3.2) and textual editing (see chapter 3, section 3.4.6). Both of these foreground some parts of the text and pass over others. Like maximal construal, such techniques can appear to reshape the text so that it is no longer recognisable to other readers. Although I do not doubt that the uncertainties of Ephesians 5:21-33 invite the use of these techniques in order to make some sense of it, I prefer not to go down these routes.

Sachkritik, on the other hand, provides a way of acknowledging the difficulties and inconsistencies of the text. As a method it involves the identification of what is meant by a text, and then ‘measur[ing] what is said by what is meant’.⁵⁷¹ Such ‘measuring’ means that an interpreter can conclude that the words do not, or only dimly, reflect the meaning they are attempting to convey. The method (in all three of the forms discussed in chapter 2, section 2.3.3) looks for an underlying theological theme against which to measure the adequacy of the text’s mode of expression. Several of the scholars whose hermeneutics I have judged to show a form of *Sachkritik* demonstrated how this technique can be used in conjunction with themes

⁵⁷¹ Rudolf Bultmann, ‘The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,’ in J. M. Robinson (ed.), *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 241

other than gender in relation to Ephesians 5.⁵⁷²

Building on Christological themes suggested in Ephesians 5:21-33, and using *Sachkritik* as a method, I will now set out a possible way of reading the passage that meets my aims of theological fruitfulness and ethical responsibility. The purpose of this is not to imply that this is the only legitimate way of reading this passage, or that it is more persuasive than any other, but that it could sit alongside all the others I have reviewed, and possibly offer a further option to those who wish, like me, to continue to use this difficult text.

⁵⁷² See especially the readings of Elna Mouton and Morna Hooker in chapter 2, section 2.3.3.

5.3 A reading of Ephesians 5:21-33

5.3.1 Taking the *Sache* to be love-as-empowerment

In identifying an underlying theme or theological subject matter for Ephesians 5:21-33, I will begin by looking at Christ's actions for the church, as described in verse 25: 'husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her'. It seemed to be this – particularly the idea of Christ's love for the church – that prompted much of the thinking about alternative thematics for the passage among both scholars and 'ordinary' readers, as noted above. Verses 26 and 27 then amplify the result of Christ's love and the purpose of Christ's actions for the church: ²⁶'in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes so that she may be holy and without blemish'.

At this point, I would like to follow the suggestion of the 'ordinary' reader who took these verses to indicate that Christ enables the church to fulfil her potential. This reader singled out 'so as to present the church to himself in splendour' as a way of expressing that the church had been enabled to achieve her full potential, and the references to 'without a spot or wrinkle' and 'holy and without blemish' can be taken as indicating something similar – that through the actions of Christ, the church has been empowered to realise all that is possible. Going further down this interpretative route, Christ's love (in verse 25) can then be connected with his enabling, or empowering, of the church.

This way of reading starts to make sense of the multi-faceted description of Christ's actions in verses 26-27 without regarding them as a 'digression'.⁵⁷³ The length and detail given to this description, and to other allusions to Christ's relationship with the church in the passage as a whole, raise the possibility that far from being diversions, these descriptions may express the main subject matter of the passage. Such a suggestion was made by several readers surveyed in this study, including the 'ordinary' reader who said of the text as a whole, 'when I'm reading it, I'm not sure whether...his main point is about the church, or his main point about marriage...' [529]. This gives grounds for suggesting that the *Sache* or theological subject matter

⁵⁷³ As, for example, Frank Thielman does – see *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 382.

of Ephesians 5:21-33 may be most clearly represented in the allusions to Christ's actions for the church, and that those actions reveal Christ's love as empowering of those to whom it is given.

This reading finds further support in verse 29: 'for no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church'. Christ's love results in his 'nourishing' and 'care' for the church. The use of the verb translated 'nourish' – 'ἐκτρέφει' – implies that the love described aims at the growth and flourishing of the recipient. This verb – to do with providing food ('τροφή') – can have connotations of rearing a child: the verb is defined in Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon as 'to bring up from childhood, rear up.'⁵⁷⁴ In the context of Ephesians 5:29, the use of this verb suggests that something more than simply maintenance is involved in Christ's care for the Church. Implied here is nurture in order that the object of that nurture might grow and be strengthened, just as a child grows and is strengthened.⁵⁷⁵ Christ's love aims at the enabling and empowerment of its object.

There is a further aspect to Christ's love as set out in the passage: not only is it directed at empowerment of others, it also involves self-surrender. Verse 25 links Christ's love of the church with his action in 'giving himself up' for her – 'ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν.' Here the verb 'παρέδωκεν' indicates self-surrender,⁵⁷⁶ as someone might give him/herself up as a hostage, for example.⁵⁷⁷ This carries several possible implications: it suggests a privileging of the interests of others over self,⁵⁷⁸ and also

⁵⁷⁴ Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, 9th edn, (Oxford University Press, 1968), 523.

⁵⁷⁵ Thielman notes that the verb has been used elsewhere to refer to 'the physical nurture and emotional warmth that one person gives to another, whether a child..., a spouse..., or a lover' see *Ephesians*, 388. MacDonald points out that the word has appeared in an ancient marriage contract, but is also used with reference to the care of children, not least at Ephesians 6:4, see *Colossians and Ephesians*, 330. Given this instance in 6:4, connotations of a concern for growth and flourishing, similar to that shown by a parent, could also be a feature of the word as used in 5:29 – despite Best's not allowing for this possibility – see, *Ephesians*, 550.

⁵⁷⁶ As John Muddiman's translation makes clear – see *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 264.

⁵⁷⁷ As in the definition of παραδίδομι given Liddell and Scott's intermediate Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 595.

⁵⁷⁸ Thielman asserts that this comparison 'implies that the husband's love for his wife should be so broad...that it includes the sacrifice of his own social prestige and well-being, indeed his life, for the sake of his wife' which would indeed support the idea of privileging her interests above his own. Thielman notes a parallel between 5:25 and Philippians 2:5-8 – see *Ephesians*, 382. I explore such a parallel further below in section 5.3.4 on Other New Testament Evidence.

an element of risk involved in such a ‘handing over’ of self. This gives additional definition to the idea of Christ’s love as empowering of others: it carries with it the notion of surrender of self.

When this concept of empowering love is related to the kind of love a husband is to show to a wife, then it suggests (as the ordinary reader quoted at the start of this section pointed out) that a husband’s love should be aimed at enabling his wife to fulfil her potential – at empowering her. This kind of love involves a risky surrender of self which is not easily reconcilable with the preservation of privilege. Such self-surrender need not mean that there is no benefit to the husband: indeed, the practice of love encouraged here appears to be advantageous for both giver and recipient because they are connected, just as a person is inseparable from his/her own body, as verse 28 indicates, ‘he who loves his wife loves himself’. This is not an ‘either/or’ situation in which a husband has to decide *between* his own well-being and that of his wife. The interests of both are served simultaneously.

Understanding the love asked of a husband in this way undermines the charge of love patriarchy which has been levelled at this passage.⁵⁷⁹ Love patriarchy refers to a suggested characteristic of early Christianity – that it adopted patriarchal social structures, but added ‘agapeic love which reduces frictions.’⁵⁸⁰ By this account, the love asked of a husband in Ephesians 5 would simply oil the existing hierarchical social mechanism and would ultimately be self-serving for the husband, making it easier for his higher status to be maintained. The husband would then control the relationship and decide what is in the best interests of his wife. In Ephesians 5:21-33, the reference in verse 28 directed to husbands – ‘he who loves his wife loves himself’ – could be taken to refer to such a self-serving love on the part of the giver.

⁵⁷⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza applies this term (which, as she notes, was originally coined by Gerd Theissen) to the household codes – see *In Memory of Her*, 78. Richard B. Hays agrees with Schüssler Fiorenza when referring to the household code of Ephesians, but regards the ‘love-patriarchy of Ephesians...[as] not however closed and static in character...if marriage is a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the church, the exalted ecclesiology of Ephesians must deconstruct static patriarchal notions of marriage.’ Hays continues, with reference to the church in Ephesians, ‘in unity with Christ, it is nurtured into full maturity...what then must the telos of marriage be?’ See *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (London & New York: T&T Clark 1997), 65. Hays thus takes the ‘exalted ecclesiology’ of Ephesians as undermining (to some extent) of love-patriarchy in the letter’s portrayal of marriage; I find the concept of love as defined in the letter to be more radically unsettling of the idea of love-patriarchy than is Hays’ understanding of the letter’s ecclesiology.

⁵⁸⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 78.

However, when the model for a husband's love is that of Christ, involving self-surrender and aimed at empowering the other, then 'he who loves his wife loves himself' does not suggest purely self-serving love on the part of a husband, but instead that the interests of husband and wife are not necessarily opposed to one another.

This is then a possibility for the *Sache* of Ephesians 5:21-33: that the underlying theological subject matter concerns Christ's self-giving and empowering love for the church. This kind of love carries risk for the giver and is aimed at enabling and pursuing the best interests of the person loved. By use of vocabulary describing the nurturing qualities of this love, the passage encourages a kind of love which strengthens and builds up the person loved. However, this kind of love can benefit both giver and recipient: the former is not diminished as the latter grows and flourishes, but instead gains because of the connection between the two.

If there are grounds for defining *Sache* in this way, then it also has to be conceded that Ephesians 5:21-33 is far from a sustained treatment of this theme. Although verses 25-32 might urge husbands towards a love aimed at empowering their wives, these verses are surrounded by conflicting signals about their social outworking. While verse 5:21 could suggest the end result of empowering love which allows all to flourish – a kind of level social playing field in which submission is both given and received by all – verses 22-24 and verse 33 stick with an unreconstructed social hierarchy which constrains the degree of empowerment that a husband's love can confer on a wife. These verses, requiring wives to be subject to their husbands (verses 22 and 24) and even in the end to fear them (verse 33), call into question whether it is justifiable to identify the *Sache* as set out above. There is, however, further evidence from Ephesians as a whole to support my contention.

5.3.2 Tracing the *Sache* through Ephesians

There is little doubt that love is an important theme in Ephesians as a whole.⁵⁸¹ However, more specifically than this, I set out to show in this section that throughout Ephesians there are repeated allusions to God's love as empowering, and to the Christological manifestation of that love as linked with self-surrender. These two thematic aspects have important implications for the start of chapter 5, at which point (5:1-2) the addressees of the letter are urged to imitate God and to take Christ as a pattern for the love they are to show. Because it picks up specifically on chapter 5:1-2, Ephesians 5:21-33 can be read as having a *Sache* to do with love as empowerment.

The opening verses

From the opening verses of the letter to the Ephesians there are hints that God's love as an enabling force may be important to the letter that follows. In 1:4, there is a reference to love which, although unclear, could be taken to refer to the love of God. The text at issue is

⁴καθὼς ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῷ πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου, εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἁγίους καὶ ἄμώμους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ, ⁵προορίσας ἡμᾶς εἰς υἰοθεσίαν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς αὐτόν...

⁴'just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ...'

In the Greek text, it is uncertain whether 'ἐν ἀγάπῃ' at the end of verse 4 is linked with the words preceding it (as the NRSV translation above takes it to be) or with those that follow. If it is the former, then 'in love' relates to humankind rather than to God: it is arguably 'a reference to a quality the believing community must demonstrate' – along with holiness and blamelessness.⁵⁸² If it is the latter, however, then 'in love' describes God's activity: 'in love, he destined us for adoption...'⁵⁸³

⁵⁸¹ Among the scholars making this point are Margaret Y. McDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press: 2008), 231, and Frank Thielman in *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 133.

⁵⁸² See McDonald in *Colossians and Ephesians*, 198. Also taking this line are Charles H. Talbert in *Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 44 and Thielman in *Ephesians*, 50.

⁵⁸³ In favour of this possibility are John Muddiman – see *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 68 and Ernest Best – see *Ephesians* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 1998), 122-123. Pheme Perkins also seems to lean this way, commenting that 'ἐν ἀγάπῃ' 'may

Scholars on both sides of this debate are able to find similar linguistic constructions elsewhere to support their particular stance,⁵⁸⁴ indicating that a solution is not easily to be found in grammatical plausibility. A compelling argument is, however, offered by Best who points out that as this is a eulogy, its emphasis is on God's action rather than any human response: 'a statement counselling moral behaviour would not be appropriate in a eulogy.'⁵⁸⁵ Thus 'ἐν ἀγάπῃ' is most likely to relate to God's love.

If this is the case, then as Muddiman notes, 'in love' is given additional prominence: it 'would then start a new clause and receive special emphasis.'⁵⁸⁶ It would also, as Schnackenburg asserts, signal the start of a 'unit...contained as if in brackets by "in love" at the beginning and "in the Beloved" at the end'.⁵⁸⁷ Love, thus stressed, becomes the motivation for God's action in choosing 'us' for adoption through Jesus Christ. In effect, God's love results in the conferring of a higher position than before: 'God adopts believers to lift them up into a new status, similar to that of his own Son,'⁵⁸⁸ and thus empowers those chosen (however this is determined).

The phrase in verse 5, 'εἰς αὐτόν,' lends further support to this, despite its precise referent being unclear. These words – which literally mean 'into him' – may refer to God or to Christ. If to the former, then they could stress the closeness of the relationship between adopted children and God: 'the goal of the adoptive sonship of believers is a relationship with God similar to that of Jesus' own filial relationship with God.'⁵⁸⁹ On the other hand, if these words refer instead to Christ, then they seem to anticipate Ephesians 4:15: ἀληθεύοντες δὲ ἐν ἀγάπῃ αὐξήσωμεν εἰς αὐτόν τὰ πάντα, ὃς ἐστὶν ἡ κεφαλή, Χριστός ('but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way *into him* who is the head, into Christ') – italics here indicate the phrase

be intended to refer to divine election in Christ rather than to human behaviour,' in *Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 38

⁵⁸⁴ On one side of the argument, Frank Thielman appeals to other Pauline benedictions in which prepositional phrases are applied to the action of God, asserting that such phrases always follow, rather than precede, the verb to which they relate – see Thielman, *Ephesians*, 50. On the other hand, John Muddiman points to Ephesians 3:17 in which the words 'ἐν ἀγάπῃ' 'are connected with a following participle' – see *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 68.

⁵⁸⁵ Best, *Ephesians*, 122

⁵⁸⁶ Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 68

⁵⁸⁷ Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, 48

⁵⁸⁸ Best, *Ephesians*, 125

⁵⁸⁹ Thielman, *Ephesians*, 52

at issue.⁵⁹⁰ As Muddiman points out, a link with 4:15 would arguably import into 1:5 the suggestion of growth for those adopted.⁵⁹¹ Although, as Best puts it, ‘both interpretations make good sense,’⁵⁹² reading ‘εἰς αὐτόν’ as a reference to Christ better reflects themes developed later in the letter by establishing the connection between love and growth from the earliest verses. However, whether this last point is accepted or not, there is enough within verses 1:4-5 to introduce the theme of God’s love as generally enabling of its recipients, whether through the conferring of a raised position, or through the implication that growth results from their adopted status.

Chapter 2:4-6

It is early in chapter 2 that the empowerment conferred by God’s love is most noticeable. At 2:4-6, the extent of the change which results from this love becomes apparent. These verses read,

‘διὰ τὴν πολλὴν ἀγάπην αὐτοῦ ἣν ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς, καὶ ὄντας ἡμᾶς νεκροὺς τοῖς παραπτώμασιν συνεζωοποίησεν τῷ Χριστῷ — χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι — καὶ συνήγειρεν καὶ συνεκάθισεν ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ...’

‘...out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...’

In this passage, the repetition of ‘love’ (as both noun and verb) at the start lays stress on the cause of what follows.⁵⁹³ This love results in a transformation from death (‘through...trespasses’) into life. It is hard to imagine a more comprehensive empowerment than bringing life out of death. And the passage continues with more consequences of God’s love: author and addressees have not only been made alive

⁵⁹⁰ The similarity of 1:5 to 4:15 is noted by several scholars: for example, Best (*Ephesians*, 126), Thielman (*Ephesians*, 52) and Muddiman (*The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 69). Despite this, both Best and Thielman conclude that ‘εἰς αὐτόν’ in 1:5 refers to God not Christ, while Muddiman deduces the reverse.

⁵⁹¹ Muddiman detects in 1:5 ‘an attempt on the part of the editor to qualify the idea of sonship already achieved with the idea of further growth’ – see *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 69. It is not necessary to concur with Muddiman’s theory about an editor’s involvement with the text of Ephesians to allow his point about ‘sonship’ being connected in 1:5 with ‘future growth.’

⁵⁹² Best, *Ephesians*, 126

⁵⁹³ A point made by Muddiman when he says ‘the editor is fond of duplicate expressions for the sake of emphasis,’ see *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 107

with Christ (‘συνεζωποίησεν’), but also ‘συνήγειρεν καὶ συνεκάθισεν ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις.’ ‘raised up’ and ‘seated in the heavenly places.’ Here repetition of ‘συν’ at the start of three (almost) consecutive verbs underlines the point – this is all ‘with Christ.’ The force of this is to emphasise the parallel between God’s action here ‘for us’ and his actions previously described in 1:19-22 for Christ, who has himself been described in 1:6 as ὁ ἠγαπημένος ‘the beloved,’ thus connecting God’s love for Christ with what God then does for Christ. In 1:19-22, it is evident that God’s actions are both a demonstration of his own power and result in a position of power for Christ: thus God is said to have put his ‘great power’ (NRSV) to work in Christ, ‘κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ κράτους τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ ἣν ἐνήργηκεν ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ...’ and Christ is said to be ‘ὑπεράνω πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας καὶ δυνάμεως καὶ κυριότητος,’ ‘far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.’ (NRSV) Christ is here shown explicitly to be empowered – by repeated references to different words for ‘power’ all of which he is said to exceed. By drawing so closely on this passage from chapter 1, chapter 2:4-6 also becomes a text about empowerment: empowerment this time even more specifically linked with God’s love.⁵⁹⁴

It is important to note another characteristic of this love-as-empowerment shown early in chapter 2. When God empowers, it does not in any way diminish God. This is indicated by two references which together enclose the passages about God’s empowering of Christ and of ‘us:’ first, the reference to ‘τὸ ὑπερβάλλον μέγεθος τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ’ – ‘the immeasurable greatness of his power’ in 1:19, and second, at chapter 2:7 ‘τὸ ὑπερβάλλον πλοῦτος τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ’ – ‘the immeasurable riches of his grace.’ God’s power and grace remain ‘immeasurable:’ God is no less God as a result of his empowering actions. It is more as though ‘we,’ despite being creatures – ‘αὐτοῦ γὰρ ἐσμὲν ποίημα,’ ‘for we are what he has made us’ – have been drawn into God’s power through Christ.

Chapter 3:14-19

The connection between love and power is further developed in the prayer at the end

⁵⁹⁴ It is true, as Best notes, that the position of believers as set out in 2:4-6 is not exactly the same as Christ’s position at the right hand of God – see *Ephesians*, 222. However, this need not undermine my point about empowerment – believers in 2:4-6 are still raised with Christ and ‘seated...in the heavenly places.’

of the first half of Ephesians. This is an important point in the letter: as many commentators have noted, there is a clear divide between the first half of the letter (chapters 1-3) and the second half (chapter 4-6). As John Muddiman puts it when dealing with the beginning of chapter 4, ‘a formal break with the first half of the letter is signalled with “I exhort you” (parakalō), which is Paul’s formula for the application of teaching to behaviour.’⁵⁹⁵ There is therefore good reason for seeing the prayer at 3:14-21 as to some extent climactic, or at least as a point in the letter at which the most significant themes might be expected to be stressed.⁵⁹⁶

In this prayer, themes of love and empowerment are brought together, although the precise nature of the connection between them is to some extent obscured by grammatical and structural difficulties in the text.⁵⁹⁷ References to love as one of the goals of the prayer occur in verses 17 and 19. Verse 17 mentions love as follows: κατοικῆσαι τὸν Χριστὸν διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν ἐν ἀγάπῃ ἑρριζωμένοι καὶ τεθεμελιωμένοι (‘and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love’ – NRSV). Here it is uncertain whether ἐν ἀγάπῃ is to be taken with the words before it, or those after it: whether the prayer is for the Ephesians to be ‘rooted and grounded in love’ as the NRSV has it, or that Christ might dwell in their hearts through faith, in love.⁵⁹⁸ This in turn makes it unclear whether the love at issue is that shown by God, or by the Ephesians: as Muddiman notes, if ἐν ἀγάπῃ is linked with the words preceding it then it appears similar to ‘faith’ and is therefore a characteristic of the Ephesians rather than God.⁵⁹⁹ Many commentators agree that grammatically ἐν ἀγάπῃ is best understood with ἑρριζωμένοι καὶ τεθεμελιωμένοι, which would be left unexplained if separated from ‘in love.’⁶⁰⁰ If this argument is accepted, then ‘love’ here can be understood as God’s love, especially given the subsequent reference in verse 19 to ἀγάπην τοῦ

⁵⁹⁵ Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 177. For a further illustration of a commentary which emphasises the break between the end of chapter 3 and the start of chapter 4, see Charles H. Talbert’s outline of Ephesians which posits a change at this point from ‘the language of worship’ in chapters 1-3 to ‘the language of exhortation’ in chapters 4-6 - Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 39.

⁵⁹⁶ Even Best, who denies that this is the ‘high point of the letter,’ still regards it as ‘a turning point,’ see *Ephesians*, 336.

⁵⁹⁷ Pointed out in Thielman, *Ephesians*, 228-238, by Talbert who refers to ‘the complexity of the thought in this passage’ in *Ephesians and Colossians*, 101, and by Best who describes verses 14-19 as ‘one long unwieldy sentence’ – see *Ephesians*, 335.

⁵⁹⁸ Thielman has a detailed analysis of this debate in *Ephesians*, 231-233.

⁵⁹⁹ Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 169.

⁶⁰⁰ See Thielman, *Ephesians*, 231; Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 169; Best, *Ephesians*, 342.

Χριστοῦ where it is clear that divine love is intended.⁶⁰¹ Furthermore, God's (or Christ's) love is, in verse 17, linked with a metaphor of planting, through the use of the word ἐρριζωμένοι, 'rooted.' This imagery of planting recalls earlier references to God's love as life-giving: when coupled with 'rooted,' love is characterised as life-supporting and enhancing. Thus, the most plausible path through the linguistic uncertainties of verse 17 results in an affirmation of God's love as a kind of soil which nurtures growth – an image suggestive of empowerment.

When this understanding of verse 17 is taken with verses 16 and 18, then a link between God's love and God's enabling becomes more explicit. Analysing in a broad-brush way, the 'rooted and grounded in love' of verse 17 sits in between two requests for some form of strengthening for the Ephesians. Verse 16 contains the prayer that the Ephesians δυνάμει κραταιωθῆναι διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος αὐτοῦ (are 'strengthened...with power through his Spirit'). Verse 18 begins ἵνα ἐξιχύσητε (translated in the NRSV as 'I pray that you may have the power...' but the words 'I pray' do not occur in the Greek at this point, so an alternative translation might be 'so that you may have the power' – see further comment below). As many scholars note, ἐξιχύσητε does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament: it marries 'a normal Greek verb for "to be able"' with 'an additional emphasising prefix.'⁶⁰² The result is a verb which seems to intend something more than 'to be able:' possibly more like 'have the strength to.'⁶⁰³ This creates a pattern – first a request for power/strength for the Ephesians in verse 16, then an observation that the Ephesians are 'rooted and grounded in love' in verse 17, followed by a further request for strength in verse 18.⁶⁰⁴ The prayer appears to reflect an assumption that empowerment will follow from God's love: an assumption arguably made clearer if ἵνα ἐξιχύσητε is taken, as Muddiman notes it can be, as 'a purpose clause dependent

⁶⁰¹ As noted by Thielman – see *Ephesians*, 233 and Best in *Ephesians*, 343. Schnackenburg argues that 'brotherly love...only comes into consideration later' in the letter, and that therefore the reference here must be to 'the love bestowed by God' – see *Ephesians*, 150.

⁶⁰² Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 170.

⁶⁰³ McDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 276. Thielman looks at other uses of this word outside the biblical texts and concludes that 'it often has the nuance of growing in power,' see *Ephesians*, 233.

⁶⁰⁴ Some scholars find other more complex structural patterns in the passage – as noted by Talbert, who agrees that 'the thought of 3:14-21 moves in a concentric fashion,' see Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 101. Talbert's comment appears to indicate that he has sympathy with the chiasmic structure identified by Elna Mouton (in *Reading a New Testament Document Ethically* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 66), who, interestingly for my argument, finds the central thematic motif of the chiasm to be 'love.'

on the reference to “founded on love” in verse 17.’⁶⁰⁵

Verse 19 contains the second mention of love in this prayer. The verse begins with a plea that the Ephesians would γινῶναι τε τὴν ὑπερβάλλουσαν τῆς γνώσεως ἀγάπην τοῦ Χριστοῦ (‘know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge’). Best notes that the majority of scholars agree that ‘the love of Christ’ in verse 19 provides the subject matter too for the previous verse: ἵνα ἐξισχύσητε καταλαβέσθαι σὺν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἁγίοις τί τὸ πλάτος καὶ μῆκος καὶ ὕψος καὶ βάθος (‘I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth’).⁶⁰⁶ It is otherwise doubtful how to understand ‘the breadth and length and height and depth’ of verse 18 unless it is taken to apply to ‘the love of Christ’ which appears in verse 19. If this interpretation is accepted, then ‘the love of Christ’ becomes the object of the two verbs ἐξισχύσητε καταλαβέσθαι, meaning that divine love not only provides the means for strengthening (ἐξισχύσητε) but is also its goal. The prayer therefore seems to articulate the idea that love leads to empowerment, and empowerment to knowledge of love (the love of Christ): there is a symbiotic relationship between God’s love and God’s empowerment.

Chapter 4:15-16

As the letter moves into the paraenesis of the second half, the identification of love with empowerment and flourishing continues, although now it is in the context of how the Ephesians are to behave. Of particular significance is 4:15-16, in which the Christian community – now called ‘the body of Christ’ (4:12) – is urged to show love to one another:

¹⁵ἀληθεύοντες δὲ ἐν ἀγάπῃ αὐξήσωμεν εἰς αὐτὸν τὰ πάντα, ὃς ἐστὶν ἡ κεφαλή, Χριστός, ¹⁶ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα συναρμολογούμενον καὶ συμβιβασόμενον διὰ πάσης ἀφῆς τῆς ἐπιχορηγίας κατ’ ἐνέργειαν ἐν μέτρῳ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου μέρους τὴν αὕξησιν τοῦ σώματος ποιεῖται εἰς οἰκοδομὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ.

‘¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.’

⁶⁰⁵ Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 170.

⁶⁰⁶ Best, *Ephesians*, 346.

This passage links love with corporate growth both at the beginning of verse 15 and then at the end of verse 16. As with previous instances of ‘ἐν ἀγάπῃ,’ it is doubtful whether the phrase in verse 15 is to be taken with the words preceding it or those following.⁶⁰⁷ Best argues that it is to be understood with ‘speaking the truth’ for reasons both of grammar and content. The latter are particularly persuasive: Best asserts that if ‘in love’ qualifies ‘speaking the truth’ then it restricts the ways in which followers of Christ can tell the truth to one another – ruling out manipulation, among other things.⁶⁰⁸ This makes Best’s interpretation convincing on ethical grounds. Reading ‘ἐν ἀγάπῃ’ in this way, however, separates it to an extent from what follows and means that love and growth are not as closely connected as the alternative interpretation would make them. However, even as a modifier for ‘speaking the truth,’ love still plays a part in the growth to which verse 15 refers.

In verse 16, growth of the body (τὴν αὐξήσιν τοῦ σώματος) is related to the body’s building itself up in love (οἰκοδομῆν ἑαυτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ). The language here raises questions about the kind of association between growth and love intended. Best seems to regard love as the subject of growth: ‘growth is not in knowledge, still less in numbers, but in love.’⁶⁰⁹ By this reading, the increase in love for one another among members of the community represents their ‘part’ in the achieving of goals set out in verse 13 – of unity, maturity etc.⁶¹⁰ Others see ‘love’ in verse 16 as the means by which ‘spiritual’ growth is to be accomplished: ‘when all members are using their spiritual gifts out of love, the body is building itself up.’⁶¹¹ Perhaps there need not be too sharp a distinction between these two possibilities – by both accounts corporate empowerment (the body ‘building itself up’) and love are closely related, and both are aimed at communal unity.⁶¹² The force of verses 15 and 16 together seems to be that love and strengthening of the community go hand in hand. At this

⁶⁰⁷ Thielman takes it with ‘speaking the truth’ – see footnote 39 in *Ephesians*, 285, while Muddiman leaves the question unanswered – see Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 207.

⁶⁰⁸ Best, *Ephesians*, 407-8. Schnackenburg also makes this point, noting that the function of ‘in love’ here is as ‘an expression which repulses all cunning which tries maliciously to deceive’ – see *Ephesians*, 187.

⁶⁰⁹ Best, *Ephesians*, 413.

⁶¹⁰ Best, *Ephesians*, 413.

⁶¹¹ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 117. See also *Ephesians and Colossians*, 115 where Talbert discusses ‘spiritual growth’ as the kind of growth intended in Ephesians 4.

⁶¹² As Talbert puts it, at 4:16, ‘the focus returns to the function of gifts to foster unity’ – see *Ephesians and Colossians*, 117.

point it is important also to note the role of Christ in this growth: Christ appears to be both target ('we must grow up in every way into...Christ') and resource ('from whom the whole body...promotes the body's growth') for the corporate development of which the verses speak.

Chapter 5:1-2

So far, I have tried to show that Ephesians presents both God's love, and the love to which the Christian community must aspire, as empowering of those loved. In doing this, I have referred to three passages in which love and empowerment are especially linked. It is important to note that these passages represent the fullest treatments of love in the first 4 chapters of the letter – there are no others (which might have emphasised other aspects of love) avoided by this analysis. This makes it especially likely that when addressees are urged to 'be imitators of God...and live in love' at the start of chapter 5, they are encouraged towards a love which is empowering of others.

This argument is supported by the allusions within the first two verses of chapter 5, which not only require addressees to imitate God's love, but also offer Christ's action as a pattern for this love:

¹γίνεσθε οὖν μιμηταὶ τοῦ θεοῦ, ὡς τέκνα ἀγαπητά, ²καὶ περιπατεῖτε ἐν ἀγάπῃ, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς καὶ παρέδωκεν ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν προσφορὰν καὶ θυσίαν τῷ θεῷ εἰς ὄσμὴν εὐωδίας

'¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.'

The first point is that addressees are asked to imitate God 'ὡς τέκνα ἀγαπητά' ('as beloved children'): this suggests that their imitation is to be based on the way in which they themselves have received God's love – which previous chapters have established as aimed at their enabling and flourishing. Secondly, they are to model their love on Christ's love, and on his action when he 'gave himself up for us.' The precise content of this action is not here elaborated,⁶¹³ but the use of the verb

⁶¹³ Some scholars detect 'the use of an accepted form' here – which might explain the lack of elaboration of 'gave himself up for us.' See Best, *Ephesians*, 469 and also Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, 212-3.

‘παρέδωκεν’ recalls the ‘handing-over’ of Jesus to his enemies, and to death.⁶¹⁴ Best notes that however these actions of Jesus are soteriologically understood – whether as atonement, ransom etc. – it seems clear that his self-surrender was for the benefit of others.⁶¹⁵ The connection is therefore made between love, self-surrender and promoting the good of others.

Verses 5:1-2 are especially important for the instructions to husbands in the household code. In the latter, 5:25 constitutes a restatement of 5:2, the only significant change (apart from the alteration of addressees) being the replacement of ‘us’ in 5:2 with ‘the church’ in 5:25. The close similarity of the two verses can be seen most clearly when the clauses describing love are put side-by-side:

καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς καὶ παρέδωκεν ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν (5:2)
καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς
(5:25)

There are two consequences of this direct parallelism: first, the love asked of husbands is not essentially different from the love asked of the community as a whole – which again undermines the argument that a husband’s prescribed love is an example of love-patriarchalism because it would make little sense to characterise all relationships within a community in this way. The second consequence is the inference which the parallel encourages, that a husband’s love is to emulate the love of God: 5:2 is the second half of an instruction which begins at 5:1 with the call to imitate God, and so by echoing 5:2 so closely, 5:25 also contains the suggestion that a husband’s love should imitate that of God.

Verses 5:1-2 therefore make a close connection between the kind of love described in 5:25 and all that has been said not only of Christ’s love, but of God’s love in the letter as a whole. Thus the developed theme of love-as-empowerment is continued in Ephesians 5:25 and following. Finding a theme of empowering love in 5:25 does not depend solely on 5:1-2, because throughout the letter, references to love have consistently drawn out empowerment as its result, so that by the time a reader/hearer reaches 5:25, the idea of love-as-empowerment is already in place, even without 5:1-

⁶¹⁴ Muddiman highlights the use of the same verb for Jesus’ betrayal in Mark 14:21 and 1 Corinthians 11:23 and of his being handed-over to death in Mark 9:31 and Romans 4:25 – see *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 231.

⁶¹⁵ Best, *Ephesians*, 470.

2. These verses, however, underline the correspondence between 5:25 and all that has gone before, and thus further clarify how 5:25 might be read.

5.3.3 The impact of love-as-empowerment on community life

If, as has so far been argued, Ephesians defines love as aimed at the enabling of the person loved, then this will necessarily have an effect on the kind of community the letter is seeking to promote. This is a community which is being ‘rooted and grounded in love’ (3:17), which is urged to ‘bear with one another in love’ (4:2), and in which the members are asked to ‘walk in love, as Christ loved us’ (5:2). If these references to love are to be understood as implying empowerment of one another, then the resultant community must be one which eschews fixed hierarchies of power. Such hierarchies, in which power is consistently exercised by some people without change, would be incompatible with the kind of fluidity of control implied by a general concern to empower others.⁶¹⁶ There seem to be a number of indications in the letter as a whole that the community it is concerned to promote is not one characterised by fixed hierarchies: to show this, I will use one part of the work of Michel Foucault.

Using the work of Michel Foucault

Foucault defines a relationship of power as ‘an action upon an action’:⁶¹⁷ the exercise of power is about influencing or directing the actions of someone else. He demonstrates that at the level of a community or society, this kind of exercise of power is intrinsic. A community cannot dispense with power relations (as Foucault defines them) within it – they are part and parcel of society: ‘a society without power relations can only be an abstraction.’⁶¹⁸ For a society to function, some people need to have responsibility for decision-making in each area of societal life: responsibility for leading and guiding others. And so, within a family or society, as Sarah Coakley puts it, ‘Foucault has shown us that we all wield ‘power’ in *some* area, however insignificant it may appear to the outside world (power over our children, our aged

⁶¹⁶ Kathy Ehrensperger notes Jacques Derrida’s opposition to ‘the stabilized encoding of hierarchies which lead to lasting appropriations of power,’ see *Paul and the Dynamics of Power* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009), 32. This description articulates well the kind of social structure which the widespread practice of empowerment would undermine.

⁶¹⁷ Foucault, Michel, ‘The Subject and Power’ in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 3*, James D. Faubion (ed.), Robert Hurley and others (trans.) (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 340.

⁶¹⁸ Foucault, Michel, ‘The Subject and Power,’ 343.

dependents, even our domestic animals).⁶¹⁹

None of this, however, need rule out the possibility of those with power choosing to empower others: even if Foucault's work appears too sceptical to dwell seriously on this prospect, it does not necessarily exclude it.⁶²⁰ If those with power choose to empower other individuals/groups to the point of giving up influence over them, Foucault might see this as the end of a particular power relation⁶²¹ within a broader society inevitably characterised by a multiplicity of other power relations. Thus, at a societal level, practices of empowerment do not mean that 'power over' ceases to exist: they instead mean that the locus of power is always shifting. As some are empowered, they in turn exercise power over others and seek to empower them. No one individual or group retains the function of acting upon the actions of others.

If Foucault's ideas are applied to the community life proposed in Ephesians, then they might help identify the kind of power which the letter encourages – whether this is power embedded in a static hierarchy (or hierarchies), or having a more variable and fluid quality. Foucault offers a useful tool for this purpose. In an essay of 1982 which has been described as a 'definitive [statement]...of [his] whole interest in the topic of power and his view of how power can be studied',⁶²² Foucault listed five points which in his view 'the analysis of power relations demands...be established'.⁶²³ Sandra Hack Polaski used this five-point proposal to 'identify...the discourse of power' exercised by Paul in the letter to Philemon.⁶²⁴ Polaski's work may be, as she states, 'characterised as a "hermeneutics of suspicion,"'⁶²⁵ a position

⁶¹⁹ Sarah Coakley 'Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing' in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 34.

⁶²⁰ Ehrensperger asserts that Foucault 'still operates within the constraints of a paradigm of power as power-over' and therefore does not easily conceive of empowerment: 'Foucault's approach does not allow for a perception of power which has positive and empowering impacts on social relationships', see *Paul and the Dynamics of Power*, 21. My reading of Ehrensperger's argument is that she ultimately regards Foucault's analysis as incomplete: it needs to be supplemented with ideas of empowerment but is not fundamentally incompatible with them – thus, she uses Allen's three-fold theory of 'power-over, power-to and power-with,' which incorporates Foucault's insights and adds to them, see *Paul and the Dynamics of Power*, 30-31.

⁶²¹ Foucault asserts that 'power exists only when exercised by some on others,' see 'The Subject and Power,' 340.

⁶²² Colin Gordon, 'Introduction' in Foucault, *Power: Essential Works*, xii.

⁶²³ Foucault, 'The Subject and Power,' 344.

⁶²⁴ See Sandra Hack Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 52-72.

⁶²⁵ Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power*, 21.

to some extent informed by a Foucauldian scepticism in which ‘the articulation of an ideology is a power claim.’⁶²⁶ It does not, however, appear necessary to adopt such scepticism in order to use the tool which Foucault offers: it guides attention towards particular features of the exercise of power – it represents a way of making an enquiry without pre-determining its outcome.

Foucault’s five-point analysis scheme

Foucault’s five areas to be considered in analysing power relations are as follows:

- 1. ‘The system of differentiations** that permits one to act upon the actions of others’.⁶²⁷ These differentiations both allow power relations to develop and constitute the end or result of those power relations: ‘every relationship of power puts into operation differences that are, at the same time, its conditions and its results.’ Among Foucault’s examples of such differentiations are ‘juridical and traditional differences of status or privilege’ and ‘differences of know-how and competence.’ A stable hierarchy will depend upon marked divisions between groups within a society, which act as boundaries preventing individuals from crossing from one group into another. Once such differentiations are established, then the following four points help identify how they are perpetuated.
- 2. ‘The types of objectives** pursued by those who act upon the actions of others.’ Foucault’s examples include ‘maintenance of privileges, accumulation of profits, the exercise of statutory authority, the exercise of a function or trade.’⁶²⁸
- 3. Instrumental modes** by which power is exercised. Illustrations include ‘the threat of arms,’ ‘the effects of speech,’ and ‘more or less complex means of control.’⁶²⁹
- 4. ‘Forms of institutionalisation’** which shore up power relations. These can include ‘traditional conditions,’ ‘legal structures,’ ‘matters of habit or fashion (such as one sees in the institution of the family),’ or ‘an apparatus closed in on itself, with its specific loci, its own regulations, its hierarchical structures...’⁶³⁰

⁶²⁶ Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power*, 21.

⁶²⁷ Foucault, Michel, ‘The Subject and Power’ in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 3, 344.

⁶²⁸ Foucault, Michel, ‘The Subject and Power’ in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 3, 344.

⁶²⁹ Foucault, Michel, ‘The Subject and Power’ in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 3, 344.

⁶³⁰ Foucault, Michel, ‘The Subject and Power’ in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 3, 344.

5. ‘The degrees of rationalisation’ of power relations. By this, Foucault means the extent to which the instruments of power are adapted to their arena of operation: he says that ‘the exercise of power....is something that is elaborated, transformed, organised; it endows itself with processes that are more or less adjusted to the situation.’⁶³¹

I will apply this analysis method to Ephesians in two parts: first, I will consider the letter excluding the household code, and secondly the code itself.

The Ephesian community in the letter outside the household code

Characterised by unity rather than division

Many scholars have noted the emphasis on communal unity in Ephesians as a whole. Among scholars surveyed earlier in this study, Morna Hooker noted this theme (see chapter 2, section 2.3.3).⁶³² This stress on unity rather than division seems to remove the conditions which might allow fixed systems of differentiations to take root in the community envisaged in the letter as a whole. In the first half of the letter, an emphasis on the unity of Christ’s followers is most clearly expressed in ways in which Jews and Gentiles are described as brought together by Christ. In a lengthy passage from 2:11 to 2:22, there is repeated insistence on the coming together of the two groups: Christ ‘has made both groups into one,’ (2:14) ‘so that he might create...one new humanity in place of the two’ (2:15). The passage includes a metaphor of the united community as a house in which Christ is the cornerstone (2:20). In the concluding two verses of the chapter, the new-found unity of the previously-two groups is stressed by the use of two verbs: the first, in verse 21, is ‘συναρμολογουμένη’ (‘joined together,’ NRSV). The effect of this compound word is to emphasise the togetherness of the groups: ‘ἀρμολογουμένη’ alone would have conveyed the notion of two groups now joined; the addition of ‘συν’ underlines the meaning further. Then, in verse 22, ‘συνικοδομεῖσθε’ (‘built together’, NRSV) makes the point again. Jews and Gentiles are now one and there is no sense in which either group has an advantaged position over the other: both are ‘members of the household of God.’ (2:19)

⁶³¹ Foucault, Michel, ‘The Subject and Power’ in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 3*, 344.

⁶³² Muddiman says ‘the appeal for unity among Christians is the overarching theme of Ephesians in its final form’ – see *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 49.

The unity of the addressee community is also the subject of the start of chapter 4, and is introduced with a plea to ‘maintain the unity of the Spirit’ (4:3). The Greek word for unity in this verse is ‘ένότης,’ a rare word, repeated later in verse 13.⁶³³ In verse 16, the same theme finds a different expression with the reference to the ‘whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped.’ Lack of differentiation between members of the community is further indicated by the ethical and behavioural advice of 4:1–5:20, which is given to all, without distinguishing some people from others.⁶³⁴ Perhaps most relevant for consideration of the household code, there are no gender differentiations made outside the household code (anywhere in chapters 1-4 or in 6:10-24): nothing which would then allow men to act upon the actions of women. As with the passage about Jews and Gentiles in chapter 2 of the letter, an emphasis on unity within the community of Christ’s followers militates against the distinctions which might allow one group to exert authority over another.

Outside the household code, there is one point at which some differentiation is explicitly introduced. In 4:11-13, the letter speaks about different gifts given to those within the community:

¹¹καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν τοὺς μὲν ἀποστόλους, τοὺς δὲ προφήτας, τοὺς δὲ εὐαγγελιστάς, τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους, ¹²πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ¹³μέχρι καταστήσωμεν οἱ πάντες εἰς τὴν ένότητα τῆς πίστεως...

‘¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith...’

There seems to be general agreement among scholars that this passage identifies some people with certain gifts, and that not everyone in the community has one of these gifts.⁶³⁵ This means that these verses differentiate those with these gifts from

⁶³³ Best notes that the word is found only here and in 4:13 in the New Testament – see *Ephesians*, 364

⁶³⁴ Francis Watson makes this point in relation especially to 5:18-21 in *Agape, Eros and Gender*, 224

⁶³⁵ See Best, ‘it is not suggested that every believer will be one of these people,’ in *Ephesians*, 388; also Talbert refers to ‘gifts to some (Eph 4:11)’ and contrasts this with ‘gifts to all Christians (Eph 4:16)’ in *Ephesians and Colossians*, 112; Muddiman notes a difference between 4:11 and 4:7 – ‘the

others within the community. This could be classified as an instance of ‘differences of know-how and competence’ which constitute one possible social ‘differentiation’ according to Foucault’s definition. There is, however, considerable scholarly disagreement about the implications of this differentiation, prompted by two main issues concerning how the Greek text should be understood.

The first of these relates to the object of ἔδωκεν (‘he gave’) in verse 11. Some commentators argue that the object of this verb consists of people rather than gifts – so the verse should be translated (instead of the NRSV translation given above) ‘and it was he who gave the apostles, the prophets...’⁶³⁶ Others, however, regard gifts as the object of the verb, so that something like the NRSV translation would stand. Muddiman lists several arguments in favour of this latter approach, not least of which is that if people constituted the object of the verb, it would not be clear to whom, or to what, these people had been given (there is no indirect object to the verb).⁶³⁷ The significance of this is set out by Thielman, who is on the same side of the debate as Muddiman: ‘the first option [i.e. that favoured by MacDonald, Talbert and Best] places the accent on the *role* certain people play whereas the second option places the accent on the *work* a particular gift allows certain people to perform [Italics original].’⁶³⁸ If this ‘second option’ is taken, following Muddiman and Thielman, then the differentiations introduced at this point in Ephesians do not concern position, but task; they are not aimed at elevating the status of the gifted, but at what those so gifted might be able to achieve for the community as a whole.

This reading is supported by a particular approach to the second disputed element of this passage: the interpretation of verse 12. Here, some assert that the πρὸς...εἰς...εἰς construction introduces three elements that are all on a par with one another, so that it is the five named gifts which are to be used for equipping the saints, the work of ministry and building up the body of Christ. Thus only the ‘gifted’ undertake the work of ministry and the building up of the body of Christ. The alternative reading of verse 12 is that εἰς...εἰς is secondary to πρὸς: by this

application [of the giving of gifts] is more restricted here [verse 11] than we have been led to expect by verse 7,’ see *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 198.

⁶³⁶ This is the translation given by MacDonald – see *Colossians and Ephesians*, 285, and argued for at 291. See also Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 112 and Best, *Ephesians*, 388.

⁶³⁷ See Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 198 note 6.

⁶³⁸ Thielman, *Ephesians*, 290.

reading, the five gifts are to be used to equip the saints, so that they can all then participate in the work of ministry and the building up of the body.⁶³⁹ As Thielman points out, if the second of these two ways of reading verse 12 is preferred, then it has implications for the interpretation of verse 11. If everyone is involved in ministry and the building up of the body, if these functions are not exclusive to some gifted groups, then ‘the emphasis of verses 11-12 falls on the activities gifted individuals perform rather than on the offices they hold.’⁶⁴⁰

This reading of verses 11-12 has several implications for an analysis according to Foucault’s classification. It is true that the gifts mentioned would allow some ‘to act on the action of others’: when each exercises their particular gift, others without that gift will necessarily defer to them. However, at this point it is important to refer to more of the detail of Foucault’s definition of differentiations: that they form both the conditions for, and the results of, a relationship of power. As differences in ‘know-how,’ the gifts represent a condition for power relationships: they allow such relationships to develop. However, if the emphasis in 4:11-13 is on ‘activities’ rather than ‘offices,’ then there need be no suggestion that certain relationships of power are the prescribed result for the community. The text, interpreted as above, seems to aim at something other than the solidifying of distinctions between its members: it aims instead at equipping all members for ‘the work of ministry’ and for ‘building up the body of Christ.’ Thus the goal does not appear to be one of shoring up an exalted position for those with gifts, but on directing the use of those gifts.

Aiming at the communal good and social fluidity

This has further implications for an analysis based on Foucault’s model, in terms of the types of objectives pursued by those who exercise power. Foucault’s illustrations of ‘types of objectives’ imply the gaining of personal advantage, or at least something not necessarily directed at the communal good: ‘maintenance of

⁶³⁹ My explanation of this dilemma paraphrases the detailed account given by Talbert in *Ephesians and Colossians*, 113-114

⁶⁴⁰ Thielman, *Ephesians*, 290. Although it is surprising that some commentators opt for the second reading of verse 12 (whereby everyone in the community is involved in ministry), but continue to hold to a reading of verse 11 that appears to delineate positions rather than functions (see, for example, Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 112-114), I feel that Thielman’s argument here is justified. If two out of three actions in verse 12 are performed by the whole community, then that alters the emphasis of the pair of verses away from the standing of ‘gifted’ groups.

privileges, accumulation of profits, the exercise of statutory authority, the exercise of a function or trade'. The objectives in verses 4:11-12 are to do with the corporate good. When those with gifts act upon the actions of others, the function they exercise is explicitly a means to a communal end.

The Christian community as conceived by the letter to the Ephesians is therefore to be characterised by unity rather than internal division, and by gifted individuals exercising their gifts for the communal good. The qualities encouraged in the community at the beginning of chapter 4 – of humility, gentleness, patience and 'bearing with one another' (4:2) – appear the opposite of behaviours which might enable some to control others (Foucault's 'instrumental modes'). All of this suggests that this community is not marked by fixed social hierarchies of power. Elna Mouton argues persuasively that the community presented in Ephesians is characterised by social fluidity, not social structures – that old boundaries and divisions have been removed, as the community finds itself in liminal space between the old and new.⁶⁴¹

The Ephesian community as presented in the household code

In contrast with the rest of the letter, the household code presents clear distinctions between wives and husbands, children and parents and slaves and masters. Different behaviour is asked of each group, and hierarchies are sustained with commands for wives to 'be subject to' husbands, and children and slaves to 'obey' their parents and masters respectively. However, even within the household code, the picture of differentiations is not a consistent one. The whole of the household code is both introduced by,⁶⁴² and concluded with, verses treating all addressees alike: the directive to mutual subjection in 5:21 thus finds a parallel in the statement of commonality at 6:9: 'you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and

⁶⁴¹ Mouton draws on work by anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, and theologians such as Mark Kline Taylor, to define 'liminality' as a stage in a process of societal change 'during which previous roles, regulations, structures, and certainties may be relativized and fundamentally rearranged' ('(Re)describing Reality,' 61). She then argues that 'the structure of the Ephesian rhetoric' suggests a movement within such liminality: 'the structure of this movement is a continual recycling of their life and world view – an ongoing reinterpretation of traditions, language and behavior in terms of Jesus Christ' – see '(Re)describing Reality,' 62.

⁶⁴² It is clear that verse 21 must be linked with what follows because the verb it contains needs to be understood also in verse 22 – as Francis Watson points out, verses 22-33 do not constitute 'a self-contained set piece, capable of independent life outside its context.' See Watson, *Agape, Eros and Gender*, 222.

with him there is no partiality.’⁶⁴³ The first of these verses (5:21) seems to place all people together on a level: all are to be subject to one another – subjection is not the duty of any one group. Verse 6:9b emphasises the similarity in position of both slave and master before God. The differentiations of 5:22 – 6:8 are therefore undermined by the verses which surround them.

A second feature of the household code which tends away from differentiations occurs in the second half of the address to husbands. Here, at several points, the unity of husband and wife appears to be a concern – especially in the quotation from Genesis 2:24 at 5:31: ‘for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two will become one flesh.’ This theme of husband and wife joined together works against ideas of clear distinction between them. Together with 5:21 and 6:9b, 5:31 raises some doubt as to whether the differentiations the code also contains are meant to be sustained or not.

If there is a somewhat blurred picture of social differentiations in the household code, it is similarly unclear about the objectives of those who exercise power in the household setting. I will focus on husbands because they receive most textual attention. Although the objectives of husbands as set out in the text could be taken as self-interested, they can just as easily be seen as aimed at the good of marriage as a joint enterprise. For example, at verse 28, husbands are urged to ‘love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.’ This has been described as ‘an alarmingly self-serving motivation’ for men to love their wives.⁶⁴⁴ Such a reading of this verse suggests that objectives of self-preservation or self-enhancement could be attributed to husbands, with wives simply useful tools for this purpose. However, there is an alternative way of construing verse 28. The passage goes on to emphasise the unity of husband and wife in the quotation from Genesis 2:24 at verse 31 (as already noted). It is therefore possible (as I argued in relation to verse 29 earlier in this chapter) that a husband’s love serves the interests of both husband and wife, because they are joined together. Verse 28 can be read as aiming at a kind of communal good (as in the case of the different gifts in 4:11-12).

⁶⁴³ As Elna Mouton puts it, ‘as a general injunction and motivation, respectively, Eph. 5:21 and 6:9b frame the household code by reinterpreting its patriarchal structure from a christological perspective.’ See Mouton, ‘(Re)Describing Reality?’, 69.

⁶⁴⁴ Johnson, ‘Ephesians,’ 579.

The readings by both scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers analysed in chapters 2-4 of this thesis demonstrate that the first part (and majority) of the household code can be taken in two different ways on the subject of the relationship between husband and wife: it can be read as oppressive of women, and yet also as liberating of them. This makes it possible to find Foucauldian signs of a fixed hierarchy of power in this part of the code, and yet also possible to find signs that undermine such a hierarchy: while the differentiations exist, it is unclear whether they are strengthened or modified.⁶⁴⁵

Foucault and the analysis of community life in Ephesians – a conclusion

At the start of this analysis, I suggested that if love-as-empowerment is a major theme of Ephesians and might therefore constitute the *Sache* of 5:21-33, then the letter could not also encourage a community characterised by a fixed hierarchy of control. Instead, the practice of love-as-empowerment suggests a communal life in which power dynamics are fluid: as one person is empowered, so they are also empowering of others. Foucault’s tool for analysing power relations provides a systematic way of identifying the kind of power relations envisaged in Ephesians. The features it exposes – particularly points of discontinuity between the household code and the rest of the letter – have been noted by many scholars. The value of Foucault’s method lies in its ability to draw these features together to give a view of the exercise of power across the letter as a whole: a view which is complex but may be summarised as follows.

1. Apart from the household code, the letter aims at a society in which power is not consistently exercised by a privileged few. Through emphasis on communal unity, on the communal good as an objective (rather than individual self-advancement) and on humility, gentleness and patience as ethics, much of the letter removes or minimises conditions which allow or

⁶⁴⁵ It is interesting that Muddiman takes the household code to be a further example of the overcoming of divisions in Ephesians: referring to 2:14 and following, he says, ‘the work of Christ destroys division, enmity and oppressive regulations by breaking down barriers and creating a Church in which peace, reconciliation and common access to God are made available. This is to be developed ethically later in 4:1 – 5:20 and in the household code, where mutual love and submission overcome the divisions in families’ – see *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 126. For Muddiman, therefore, the letter as a whole, including the household code, is set against institutions and structures that perpetuate societal division.

assist some people to maintain a fixed position of influence over others. The letter does not put forward a society in which there are no power relations (following Foucault, this would be a practical impossibility), but suggests power relations which aim at something other than their own perpetuation – as when it describes the different roles of prophet, evangelist etc.

2. There is a disparity between the rest of the letter and the household code in relation to the exercise of power. The code appears both to assume and support a hierarchy in which certain groups (men, parents and masters) will always act upon the actions of others (wives, children and slaves). This picture is, however, complicated by references which do not fit readily within it: the reciprocal submission of 5:21, the theme of unity of husband and wife (which counters the differentiation necessary for one to control the other), and the suggestion of some kind of parity of slave and master before God with which the code as a whole concludes.⁶⁴⁶ This leaves a somewhat confused impression, and makes it at least possible that the code – and especially the husband/wife instructions which constitute most of it – may be directed towards something other than a straightforward re-statement of hierarchy.

The picture of power relations thus presented could be consistent with the practice of love-as-empowerment. In places – most notably chapters 2 and 4 – there is more than just a possibility of this: at these points, the text seems directed towards social relations in which the exercise of power is changeable rather than solidified in fixed social rankings. This leans towards empowerment as a general practice. Even in the household code, it is still possible to trace the effects of love-as-empowerment in the anti-hierarchical parts of its inconsistent social prescription.

⁶⁴⁶ I have avoided mention of the love asked of husbands in this analysis, so as not to produce a circular argument.

5.3.4 Other New Testament evidence: love, empowerment, self-emptying

Suggesting a *Sache* for 5:21-33 is an exercise in possibility rather than certainty. The complexities of the passage and its relationship with the rest of Ephesians produce several possibilities for its underlying meaning, aside from love-as-empowerment. Outside the passage itself, I have so far found evidence for my argument in the linking of love and empowerment in the letter leading up to chapter 5, and in the community life prescribed in these chapters – which is, at the very least, consistent with general adoption of empowering practices. In this section, I will cast the net more widely – and look elsewhere in the New Testament for evidence which might support a theme of love-as-empowerment in Ephesians. Of necessity, this will be selective: a full treatment of the theme of love-as-empowerment in the New Testament would require far more space than I have available here. I will therefore focus on three particular texts which are especially relevant to this theme: 1 Corinthians 12:1-14:12, Romans 12:9-13 and Philippians 2:1-11.⁶⁴⁷ I have chosen these texts because they each develop either the idea of love or that of self-surrender which is linked with it in Ephesians 5:25. The last of these texts was suggested by one of the ‘ordinary’ readers as having a bearing on Ephesians 5:25, which she said reminded her of Christ ‘pouring himself out’[1].⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁷ Potentially adding further weight to the arguments put forward here is work by Kathy Ehrensperger who has argued that ‘the exercise of power within the early Christ-movement was...overall aimed at empowering one another for a way of life in response-ability to the call of God’ – see *Paul and the Dynamics of Power* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 15. In particular, Ehrensperger presents a good case that Paul understands his own role (in relation to the addressees of his letters) as primarily that of teacher – a relationship directed towards the empowerment of the student. It would be possible to build on Ehrensperger’s arguments by asserting that Paul sees himself as teacher to his addressees out of his love for them and therefore that love and empowerment are linked. Textual support for this might be found especially in 1 Corinthians 4:14-21 (a passage used particularly by Ehrensperger to support her argument – see *Paul*, 130) which begins with a reference to Paul’s love for the Corinthians – they are ‘τέκνα...ἀγαπητά’ (‘beloved children,’ 4:14) – and continues by referring to Paul as both parent (understood by Paul as an educational role, argues Ehrensperger) and teacher. I have, however, not included a detailed consideration of 1 Corinthians 4:14-21 here because it does not focus on the theme of love: it is more appropriate in support of Ehrensperger’s argument about the exercise of power.

⁶⁴⁸ It may also be significant that when ‘ordinary’ readers were asked in group discussion where else in the Bible they might look for help about how women and men should relate to one another, women in 6 different groups mentioned 1 Corinthians 13.

1 Corinthians 12:1-14:12

1 Corinthians has been described as ‘a continuous reflection on love.’⁶⁴⁹ The letter contains a passage – 1 Corinthians 13 – which has been called ‘one of Paul’s finest moments:’ here the theme of love is explored at length.⁶⁵⁰ Although aspects of 1 Corinthians 13 have led some scholars to conclude that it was originally composed separately from the rest of the letter,⁶⁵¹ few argue that the passage does not fit thematically (or grammatically) with the chapters before and after it, and so I will consider not only 1 Corinthians 13 but also how the surrounding text develops the theme of love.⁶⁵²

In 1 Corinthians 12-14, love is discussed in the context of an argument about the use of spiritual gifts: Paul asserts that ‘love must govern the exercise of all the gifts of the Spirit.’⁶⁵³ Paul names the topic of spiritual gifts at the start and end of chapter 12, *περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν...* (12:1) and *τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ μείζονα* (12:31), and again at the start of chapter 14, *ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ πνευματικά* (14:1)⁶⁵⁴ – references which surround the treatment of love in chapter 13 and underscore its context. The main thrust of the argument, set out in 14:1-5,⁶⁵⁵ is that the Corinthians should seek and use those spiritual gifts that benefit the community as a whole, rather than those that instead benefit members as individuals. To this end, Paul contrasts speaking in tongues which no-one can understand (*οὐδεὶς γὰρ ἀκούει* in 14:2)⁶⁵⁶ with the declaration of prophecy which *ἄνθρωποις λαλεῖ οἰκοδομῆν καὶ παράκλησιν καὶ*

⁶⁴⁹ J. Paul Sampley, ‘The First Letter to the Corinthians: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections’ in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* vol. X (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 950.

⁶⁵⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 625.

⁶⁵¹ The ‘high literary quality’ of 1 Corinthians 13 is one aspect cited by C. K. Barrett to argue that it was written independently of the rest of the letter and then inserted into it – see *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd edition (London: A&C Black, 1971), 299.

⁶⁵² Despite his conclusion about its independent origin, Barrett also asserts that ‘this does not mean that the chapter was not written by Paul or that it was not intended by him to stand at this place’ – see Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 299. ‘The many verbal and conceptual links between 1 Corinthians 13 and the rest of the letter’ lead Richard B. Hays to reject the kind of argument put forward by Barrett – in *First Corinthians* (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 221.

⁶⁵³ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 221.

⁶⁵⁴ The expressions used for spiritual gifts here differ - *τὰ χαρίσματα* and *τὰ πνευματικά* - but as Fee notes, they are ‘nearly interchangeable’ – Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 576.

⁶⁵⁵ As Hays puts it, ‘the theological reflections in chapters 12 and 13 provide the essential presuppositions for the specific advice that is finally given in chapter 14...’ *First Corinthians*, 206.

⁶⁵⁶ Although this expression literally means ‘for no-one hears,’ as Thiselton notes, ‘the issue in these verses clearly turns on intelligible communication...’ – see *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids MI and Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company and Carlisle UK: The Paternoster Press, 2000), 1084. As a result, the expression effectively means ‘no one understands.’ (Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1085).

παραμυθίαν (‘speak[s] to other people for their up-building and encouragement and consolation’: 14:3). From this Paul summarises in 14:4 that ὁ λαλῶν γλώσση ἑαυτὸν οἰκοδομεῖ: ὁ δὲ προφητεύων ἐκκλησίαν οἰκοδομεῖ (‘those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church’). Within this discussion of the relative merits of spiritual gifts, love has a pivotal place because love drives the concern to benefit other people, and to use the gifts for the communal good.⁶⁵⁷

Paul’s line of argument has important implications for the theme of love-as-empowerment. Paul’s exploration of the use of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians underscores a connection between love and the up-building (οἰκοδομή) of the Christian community. In the first five verses of chapter 14, a passage which begins with the injunction διώκετε τὴν ἀγάπην (‘pursue love’), up-building is repeatedly stated to be the goal of the advice given: at 14:3, 14:4 and 14:5. Furthermore, the link between the two concepts has already been made prior to this passage: many commentators cite 1 Corinthians 8:1 at this point – in particular, Paul’s statement there that ἡ δὲ ἀγάπη οἰκοδομεῖ (‘love builds up’).⁶⁵⁸ Indeed, commenting on the lack of repetition of ‘love’ in 1 Corinthians 14 after verse 1, J. Paul Sampley asserts that ‘the Pauline connection between love and upbuilding is so fully established (cf. 8:1) that [Paul] no longer needs to use the word “love”; he can (and does) now shift to “building up”...and he is in fact talking about love without using the term.’⁶⁵⁹ Whether or not Sampley overstates his case, love and upbuilding are firmly linked in 1 Corinthians. This implies that love results in the growth and strengthening of the community, just as a house is built upwards from its foundations and its frame reinforced by the stays and supports which are added in the process.

This gives further weight to the idea that love in Ephesians is to be understood as enabling and strengthening. Indeed, if Sampley is right, a reader familiar with 1 Corinthians would understand love to be almost synonymous with communal up-building even before opening the text of Ephesians. To underline the point,

⁶⁵⁷ As Hays says, ‘...love (chapter 13) requires the spiritual gifts to be used for building up the community’ (*First Corinthians*, 234); Fee asserts ‘the reason for the gifts is the edification of the church, which is precisely what love aims at’ (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 572).

⁶⁵⁸ Thus Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 657 and Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1087-8.

⁶⁵⁹ Sampley, ‘The First Letter to the Corinthians,’ 956.

Ephesians makes the connection between the two ideas explicit at 4:16 with the reference to the Christian community as ‘building itself up in love’ (οικοδομῆν ἑαυτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ). Not only does Ephesians 4:16 echo 1 Corinthians’ conceptual frame of reference, it uses the same vocabulary.

Furthermore, in both 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Ephesians 4 there is an emphasis on the metaphor of the Christian community as a body,⁶⁶⁰ and on love as enabling that body to flourish.⁶⁶¹ In Ephesians 4:16 ‘building itself up in love’ is connected with promotion of growth for the body - τὴν αὐξήσιν τοῦ σώματος. In 1 Corinthians, as discussed above, love is the impetus for spiritual gifts to be used to build up the community (or ἐκκλησία in 14:4) – a community characterised as the body of Christ. The consequences of being a ‘body’ are spelled out in 12:26: καὶ εἴτε πάσχει ἐν μέλῳ, συμπάσχει πάντα τὰ μέλη: εἴτε δοξάζεται [ἐν] μέλῳ, συγχαίρει πάντα τὰ μέλη (‘if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it’). Members of this body are in some sense joined, so that joys and sorrows are shared. It may in part be this verse that prompts Sampley’s reflection on 1 Corinthians 13-14:1:

‘Paul supposes that one’s good is not achievable apart from the well-being of others in the body of Christ to which all believers equally belong...we who have been fully loved by God honor and relish that love most completely only in the sharing of it with others. So, to look after the interests of others is inescapably to benefit all persons in the community and therefore to benefit oneself.’⁶⁶²

This reflection ties together love and the good of the Christian community as the body of Christ: its mode of expression may differ from the 1 Corinthians texts on which it is based, but it reflects the line of thinking of those texts. Especially interesting for the purposes of this thesis is its potential application to Ephesians 5:25 and following, made possible by the marked similarities in the way the two letters

⁶⁶⁰ Many scholars point out the parallels between these two texts – for example, Talbert notes a similar focus on unity and diversity within the Christian body in both Ephesians 4:7-16 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-30 – see *Ephesians and Colossians*, 109; MacDonald remarks on the correspondence between the lists of ministries in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11 – see *Colossians and Ephesians*, 291.

⁶⁶¹ MacDonald notes the parity between Ephesians and 1 Corinthians when they link love and the up-building of the community: ‘Paul uses the concept [of up-building] often in 1 Corinthians to stress the importance of love shaping the relationship between church members (1 Cor 8:1; 10:23; 14:3-4)’ see *Colossians and Ephesians*, 293.

⁶⁶² Sampley, ‘The First Letter to the Corinthians,’ 956-7.

define love. In Ephesians, when a husband is urged to love his wife, there are good grounds for understanding his task as one which promotes her flourishing (or ‘well-being’ as Sampley has it): this will ‘inescapably...benefit’ the husband too, or as Ephesians puts it, ‘he who loves his wife loves himself’ (5:28). The many points of similarity between Ephesians 5:25ff and 1 Corinthians 12-14 therefore push against the idea that the Ephesians text exhibits love-patriarchalism. In 1 Corinthians there is no implication that some in the body can decide what may be in the best interests of others: the intra-community relationships to which addressees are encouraged are characterised by mutual respect and reliance, together with an undermining of notions of status or importance.⁶⁶³

Romans 12:9-13

In many ways, Romans 12:9-13 shows marked similarities with 1 Corinthians 12-14. Both passages are concerned with love⁶⁶⁴ in the context of discussions about the Christian community as a body, and the use of spiritual gifts within the community.⁶⁶⁵ Thus the reference to ἡ ἀγάπη in Romans 12:9 follows a passage about the Christian community as a body in Christ (ἐν σωμά...ἐν Χριστῷ in 12:5) with diverse gifts such as ‘prophecy’, ‘ministry’ and ‘teaching’ (ἔχοντες δὲ χαρίσματα...εἴτε προφητείαν κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως, εἴτε διακονίαν ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ, εἴτε ὁ διδάσκων ἐν τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ...: 12:6-7). Although Romans 12:9-13 is not as sustained an exploration of love as 1 Corinthians 13, there seems little doubt that the verses from Romans develop the theme of ἡ ἀγάπη introduced in verse 12:9.⁶⁶⁶ Thus Paul unpacks the elements of ‘genuine’ (ἀνυπόκριτος) love as follows:

¹⁰τῇ φιλαδελφίᾳ εἰς ἀλλήλους φιλόστοργοι, τῇ τιμῇ ἀλλήλους προηγούμενοι, ¹¹τῇ σπουδῇ μὴ ὀκνηροί, τῷ πνεύματι ζέοντες, τῷ

⁶⁶³ As Thiselton concludes on chapter 12, ‘all have their place in a single body which shares *the same status in Christ*.’ [Italics original]. See *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1023. Hays, referring to the use of the body analogy, asserts that Paul ‘employs the analogy...to urge more privileged members of the community to respect and value the contributions of those members who appear to be their inferiors...’ – see *First Corinthians*, 213.

⁶⁶⁴ Commenting on the Romans passage, N. T. Wright notes that ‘love stands at the top of the list, as often in Paul’ before pointing especially to 1 Corinthians 13 – see ‘The Letter to the Romans’ in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* vol. X (Nashville TE: Abingdon Press, 2002), 711.

⁶⁶⁵ James D. G. Dunn remarks ‘as in 1 Cor 12-13, Paul’s thought moves from talk of the body of Christ to the theme of love...’ see *Romans 9-16* (Nashville TE: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), 737. Later, citing 1 Corinthians 13, Dunn comments on Romans 12:9 that ‘Paul’s teaching moves in an accustomed sequence of thought from charism to love’ – *Romans 9-16*, 752.

⁶⁶⁶ As Joseph A. Fitzmyer puts it, Romans 12:10-13 ‘sum up the ways in which genuine love is to be manifested without pretense’ – see *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 652.

κυρίῳ δουλεύοντες, ¹²τῇ ἐλπίδι χαίροντες, τῇ θλίψει ὑπομένοντες, τῇ προσευχῇ προσκαρτεροῦντες, ¹³ταῖς χρείαις τῶν ἁγίων κοινωνοῦντες, τὴν φιλοξενίαν διώκοντες.

‘¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.’

While there is no explicit mention in these verses of love as connected with communal growth or up-building, the prescribed love is clearly intended to strengthen the bonds between members of the community. The mutual affection and honour of verse 10, and the ‘contribution’ to needs and hospitality of verse 12 speak of ways of behaving which would draw members closer together, increasing the internal cohesion of the body.⁶⁶⁷ In addition, there are some clear parallels between the qualities of love set out in this Romans passage and the details of 1 Corinthians 13: τῇ ἐλπίδι χαίροντες (‘rejoice in hope’) and τῇ θλίψει ὑπομένοντες (‘be patient in suffering’) of Romans 12:12 reflect ἡ ἀγάπη...πάντα ἐλπίζει (‘love...hopes all things’) and ἡ ἀγάπη...πάντα ὑπομένει (‘love...endures all things’) of 1 Corinthians 13:7. More generally, the generosity and hospitality encouraged in Romans 12:13 might be seen as the practical outworking of χρηστεύεται ἡ ἀγάπη (‘love is kind’) in 1 Corinthians 13:4.⁶⁶⁸ The close relationship between these two texts allows the assumption that in Romans, as in 1 Corinthians, Paul views love as the quality which will promote the ‘up-building’ or flourishing of the Christian community.

This Romans text therefore adds some more details to the notion of love set out in 1 Corinthians. Here in Romans, love is characterised by ‘mutual affection,’ by showing ‘honour’ to one another. It shows itself in acts of sharing so that the needs of others are met (ταῖς χρείαις τῶν ἁγίων κοινωνοῦντες in verse 13). If these are the hallmarks of ‘genuine’ love, then there is a good argument for supposing that they can also be applied to the love asked of husbands in Ephesians 5:25. If so, then bound up in a husband’s love are affection for his wife, showing honour to her, and

⁶⁶⁷ As Wright puts it in relation to 12:10-13, ‘the rest of the list consists of lightning sketches of ways to build up the community’ – *The Letter to the Romans*, 711.

⁶⁶⁸ Dunn notes ‘the echoes of 1 Cor 13:4-7 in [Romans 12] vv 12, 16, and 17’ – see *Romans 9-16*, 752.

sharing so that her needs are met. More than this, the Romans passage implies that mutuality is part of genuine love. The repetition of ἀλλήλων in verse 10 underlines the reciprocal nature of the actions prescribed and suggests that genuine love is not solely a one-way display of caring and considerate deeds. This does not mean that Ephesians 5:21-33 consistently advocates mutuality in the marriage relationship, but it does support the argument (already set out) that the love asked of a husband is to be distinguished from love-patriarchalism and that this love pushes against the social hierarchy which the passage elsewhere promotes.

Philippians 2:1-11

In proposing a *Sache* of love-as-empowerment for Ephesians 5:21-33, I have suggested that the passage urges husbands towards a love which not only strengthens and enables a wife, but which also carries some risk for husbands themselves – through the comparison with Christ’s love and self-surrender in 5:25. This idea of a love involving uncertainty, in which control is given up, provides the grounding for love-as-empowerment: empowering the person loved necessarily implies some relinquishing of control over them. A passage in Philippians – Philippians 2:1-11 – also encourages relationships which are characterised by love and by risky service of the interests of others. This may therefore lend support for a theme of love-as-empowerment in Ephesians – or at least for the foundations upon which that theme is developed.⁶⁶⁹

Philippians 2:1-11 contains several similarities to the paraenesis found in Ephesians 5. First, the Philippians passage begins with an exhortation to love as one of the qualities Paul encourages within the community:

⁶⁶⁹ Some scholars find a clear link between the love asked of husbands in Ephesians 5:25 and Christ’s actions as set out in Philippians 2:6-8. In particular, Virginia Ramey Mollencott argues that ‘the husband/Christ comparison [in Ephesians 5] is limited only to a loving Christ in the experience of *kenosis* or deliberate self-sacrifice.’ In other words, Mollencott finds εαυτὸν παρέδωκεν in Ephesians 5:25 and εαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν in Philippians 2:7 to be synonymous. See Mollencott, ‘Emancipative Elements,’ 48. She is followed in finding such a link by Elna Mouton – see ‘Re-Describing Reality?’ 179-180 and Thielman, (see *Ephesians*, 382). Many other scholars of Ephesians do not, however, mention Philippians 2 when dealing with Ephesians 5:25 (it is absent from Best, Muddiman, Talbert, and MacDonald, as examples). This tends to suggest that a straightforward relationship between the two passages (and a direct identification of ‘gave himself up’ in Ephesians 5:25 with ‘emptied himself’ in Philippians 2:7) cannot be taken as read. While I agree with Mollencott that the two passages can helpfully be compared, that position needs to be justified rather than assumed.

¹Εἴ τις οὖν παράκλησις ἐν Χριστῷ, εἴ τι παραμύθιον ἀγάπης, εἴ τις κοινωνία πνεύματος, εἴ τις σπλάγχνα καὶ οἰκτιρμοί, ²πληρώσατέ μου τὴν χαρὰν ἵνα τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε, τὴν αὐτὴν ἀγάπην ἔχοντες, σύμψυχοι, τὸ ἐν φρονοῦντες.

‘If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.’

Just as the Philippians are urged to a way of life involving τὴν αὐτὴν ἀγάπην ἔχοντες, so the Ephesians are encouraged at 5:2, περιπατεῖτε ἐν ἀγάπῃ (‘live in love’). Secondly, the behaviour requested in each letter is modelled on that of Christ: in Ephesians love, both within the community and on the part of husbands, is to reflect the love of Christ: καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς καὶ παρέδωκεν ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν (at 5:2, and then repeated almost exactly in relation to husbands at 5:25). At Philippians 2:5, addressees are told τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. The translation of this clause is disputed not least because its language is unclear – it literally means, ‘think this in you which also in Christ Jesus.’ There are, however, good arguments for understanding this verse as an ethical exhortation, encouraging addressees to imitate Jesus Christ.⁶⁷⁰ Thirdly, in both letters the specific actions of Christ which provide the basis for the patterns of behaviour encouraged are comparable, if not the same: Ephesians speaks of Christ’s self-surrender (ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν in 5:2 and 5:25) and Philippians of Christ’s self-emptying or ‘kenosis’ (ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν in 2:7).

This last point needs elaboration in the light of the extensive debate about the content of ‘kenosis’ as described in Philippians 2. The numerous grammatical and semantic

⁶⁷⁰As Morna Hooker notes, there is debate about whether this clause refers to ‘the example of the earthly Jesus’ or to ‘the events of the saving kerygma’: according to the verb supplied in the second half of the clause, this is either an exhortation to imitate Jesus’ example, or an exhortation to adopt attitudes consistent with being ‘in Christ’ – see ‘The Letter to the Philippians’ in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* vol. XI (Nashville TE: Abingdon Press, 2000), 506. There are good arguments in support of both of these options, including, as Hooker sets out, other occasions on which Paul appeals to Jesus Christ’s example to support ethical instructions – see Hooker, ‘The Letter to the Philippians’, 507. Hooker herself argues that the two interpretations need not be mutually exclusive: ‘Paul’s appeal... is *both* to the attitude shown by Christ Jesus *and* to the attitude that is therefore appropriate to those who are “in him”’ [italics original] – see ‘The Letter to the Philippians’, 507. Elsewhere, Hooker points out the similarity between the arguments in Ephesians 5:2 (and 5:25) and in Philippians 2, stating that in each, ‘the appeal is to the example of Christ, but it is also to the Gospel events which have brought about the readers’ redemption and made them members of the body of Christ’ – see ‘Submit to one another,’ 176.

arguments about the text itself, and the Christological differences to which they lead,⁶⁷¹ are generally secondary to this thesis. Whether *ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν* relates to the event of the incarnation⁶⁷² or to Jesus' actions during his earthly life (for example, eschewing of worldly power),⁶⁷³ this phrase connotes an action in which privilege (whether of position or of enforcing one's will) is surrendered. The next main verb following *ἐκένωσεν* takes the idea of giving up privilege further: in 2:8 Christ is said to have humbled himself - *ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτόν*. This suggests surrender not only of privilege but also of control, a suggestion supported by the following reference to Christ's obedience: *γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου* (2:8). Although it is not clear to whom or what Christ was obedient,⁶⁷⁴ obedience suggests a willingness to allow someone else to take control.⁶⁷⁵ All of this – the self-emptying and the self-humbling and obedience which further define it – thus implies risky self-denial and renunciation of the right to impose one's will on another.

These qualities are in line with the practice of empowerment, which aims at the opposite of imposing one's will on another person. Arguably too, the Philippians passage is more than just 'in line with' practices of empowerment. The community relations proposed here, founded on Christ's example of 'kenōsis,' are to demonstrate a 'humility [which] regard[s] others as better than yourselves' (2:3). This may not be quite as indicative of empowering practices as the references to growth and flourishing in Ephesians, but it is suggestive of an attitude which would promote such practices, and may even be a prerequisite for them.

⁶⁷¹ Sarah Coakley gives a concise summary of the variety of Christological conclusions which result from New Testament interpretation of this passage – see 'Kenōsis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing' in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 11.

⁶⁷² As argued, for example, by Morna D. Hooker – see 'The Letter to the Philippians' in *The New Interpreter's Bible* vol. XI (Nashville TE: Abingdon Press, 2000), 504.

⁶⁷³ As put forward by Coakley, noting that this kind of 'straightforwardly ethical interpretation' has been proposed by a number of scholars, including J. Jeremias, J.A.T. Robinson and J.D.G. Dunn – see 'Kenōsis,' 7.

⁶⁷⁴ As Hooker points out in 'The Letter to the Philippians,' 509.

⁶⁷⁵ To speak of 'surrender of control' in connection with Christ's actions as described in Philippians might be held to give some theological problems. It implies vulnerability on the part of Christ, which if Christ is revelatory of God, might 'make God intrinsically powerless' as Coakley puts it in her critique of 'new kenoticists' such as John Robinson – see 'Kenōsis and Subversion,' 24. However, as Coakley goes on to point out, vulnerability is 'manifestly present in Jesus' passion' and has become part of more recent scholarly debates about kenosis – see 'Kenōsis and Subversion,' 25. Philippians gives Christ's human life 'to the point of death' as an example to emulate, which suggests that vulnerability may justifiably be seen as part of the behaviour encouraged.

5.3.5 ‘Measuring what is said by what is meant’

I have argued that ‘what is meant’ in Ephesians 5:21-33 concerns Christ’s self-giving and empowering love which carries risk for the giver and is aimed at enabling and pursuing the best interests of the person loved. I have found signs of this within the passage itself, more conclusive evidence for it in the letter leading up to the passage, and some support for it within the broader New Testament witness. Taken together, these features make it possible to suggest that this might be seen as the *Sache* of the passage. *Sachkritik*, however requires one more step – that of, as Bultmann put it, ‘measur[ing] what is said by what is meant.’⁶⁷⁶ This refers to the evaluation of the words and expressions of the passage against the *Sache* in order to conclude on how closely they reflect this ‘intended subject matter’. I have already indicated that the imprint of the *Sache* within the passage itself is blurred (see section 5.3.1 above), and that some verses seem to point in the opposite direction to love-as-empowerment. In this section, I will scrutinise in more detail the aspects of the passage which do not adequately reflect the *Sache*.

Incongruous implications for wives

The love asked of a husband in Ephesians 5:25 is to be modelled on the love of Christ. If this Christ-like love is defined as self-giving, empowering and aimed at the best interests of the person loved, then the text does not appear to conceive of the end result of a husband’s empowering love on a wife. Verse 5:22 (‘wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord’) seems to erode the mutual subjection of 5:21 (‘be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’): as Francis Watson notes, ‘an exhortation to mutual subjection...shows an unaccountable drift towards *unilateral* subjection.’⁶⁷⁷ This ‘unilateral subjection’ of a wife to a husband is underscored in verses 5:23-4, which justify the emerging hierarchy: ‘*for* [ὅτι here having causal force] the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church’ (my italics) and rule out exceptions: wives (in verse 24) are to be subject to their husbands ‘ἐν παντί’ – in everything. The particular justification provided in verse 23 – that the husband/wife relationship is to be compared with the Christ/church relationship – is at best opaque: it might be read as an attempt to qualify the

⁶⁷⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, ‘The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,’ in J. M. Robinson (ed.), *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 241

⁶⁷⁷ Watson, *Agape, Eros and Gender*, 230.

subjection asked of wives because a husband is to emulate Christ,⁶⁷⁸ or it might equally be taken as reinforcing the inferiority of a wife by locking it in to the unchanging dependence of the church upon Christ.⁶⁷⁹

These verses early in the passage do not, therefore, reflect the outworking of love-as-empowerment for wives. And these verses lend weight to arguments that verses 5:25 and following are also constraining for wives. These arguments often rest on taking the analogy between Christ/church and husband/wife as a full analogy, so that every aspect of Christ's love also applies directly to husbands. According to such a 'full analogy' reading, verses 5:25-30 give a husband responsibility for 'cleansing' (5:26) his wife, perfecting her so that she is 'without a spot or wrinkle' (5:27) and caring for her (5:29).⁶⁸⁰ Read in this way, these verses can imply that husbands are the ones in control, while wives are controlled. Although it is not necessary to take these verses in this way (as many of the readings surveyed earlier in this thesis make clear), the door for such interpretation is opened wider by verses 5:22-24 and by the final verse of the passage (verse 33), which seems to emphasise the disparity between the positions of husband and wife: while a husband is to love his wife, a wife is to 'respect' (or 'fear') her husband.

All of this may seem to present a bleak picture for the argument that love-as-empowerment is the *Sache* of the passage. Read in the way I have just set out, the text seems to give little indication of such a theme. However, as I detailed in earlier sections of this chapter, it is possible to find signs of love-as-empowerment in the address to husbands, especially if its analogies are taken as limited in scope. Two factors in particular tip the balance in favour of this latter reading: the opening instruction to mutual subjection in verse 5:21, and the empowering connotations

⁶⁷⁸ As for example, Mollencott takes it – 'the wife is asked to submit *only* in the way the church submits to a Christ who lives within each of its members...' [My italics] see 'Emancipative Elements,' 48. Watson also takes it this way, remarking that the husband 'is head of the wife *as* and *only as* Christ is head of the church' [italics original] see Watson, *Agape, Eros and Gender*, 232.

⁶⁷⁹ As, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza takes it – see Chapter 2, section 2.2.4.

⁶⁸⁰ This interpretation finds support in Jill Marshall's argument that it is difficult to limit the reach of the passage's analogies (see chapter 2 section 2.2.5) – a conclusion supported by the many 'ordinary' readers who assumed that all aspects of Christ's action were attributable also to a husband. There is also the grammatical possibility that the all the actions outlined in verses 26-27 could apply to both Christ and husband – Francis Watson points out that the pronoun 'αὐτήν' at the start of verse 26 could be translated 'her' or 'it' and therefore could apply to a wife as well as to the church – see *Agape, Eros and Gender*, 246.

given to ‘love’ throughout the rest of the letter. It is this second factor in particular that makes it likely that when love is asked of husbands in Ephesians 5:25, it is not control to which it points.

The reasons for these failings

All of the difficulties highlighted by ‘measuring what is said by what is meant’ beg a question: why is the *Sache* so much less evident in the household code than in chapters preceding it? I do not wish to opt for the kind of solution suggested by Sarah Tanzer – that a different author was responsible for Ephesians 5:21 and following⁶⁸¹ – because breaking up the canon of scripture in this way will not aid the theologically fruitful reading I am seeking. However, any answer to the question is bound to be speculative. Some scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers suggested that it is expecting too much of an ancient author that he should think beyond the domestic social conventions of his time. One ‘ordinary’ reader said of the Bible, ‘it is a social and a cultural text...it was written by people in a particular time and I think it would be unrealistic to get them to think beyond the boundary...of what they were like’ [16].⁶⁸² I think that this is a justifiable explanation for the failure of the text to envisage the full implications of love-as-empowerment on the ancient patriarchal family. Wayne Meeks has put forward an argument (based on the many centuries it took to challenge effectively ancient practices of slavery, and equally applicable to practices of patriarchy) that ‘if the effects of the egalitarian gospel were so invisible for so many centuries, it cannot have had much force to begin with’.⁶⁸³ It is still possible to argue, however, that the force of the gospel is not invisible in Ephesians 5:21-33, just dimly discernable at a time when the patriarchal household underpinned social, political and economic life.

⁶⁸¹ See chapter 2, section 2.2.4.

⁶⁸² Morna Hooker makes a similar point: ‘we cannot blame [the author of Ephesians] for what the modern world regards as politically incorrect views, since these attitudes were part of ancient society’ – ‘Submit to one another,’ 187.

⁶⁸³ Meeks, ‘The “Haustafeln”’, 250

5.4 Conclusion

5.4.1 Summary of my reading approach

This thesis has examined the contemporary reception of a highly contested biblical passage in search of ways of reading which are theologically fruitful and ethically responsible towards women. Many interpretative possibilities have been suggested by both scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers – thoroughly historical readings which view the text as the defensive response of early Christians to a threat to their community, readings highlighting the harm to women today which the text can be seen as legitimising and readings which take the text as helpful guidance for marriage – whether by according leadership to husbands or indicating the parity of marriage partners. Different ways of framing the text have drawn attention to its uncertainties and yet also to its possibilities, particularly theological and Christological. They have shown that there are diverse interpretative options, many of which meet my criteria for theological fruitfulness and for ethical responsibility within the lived settings of the women involved. I am, however, looking for ways of reading which are transferable between settings, which can have a general application, and this led towards a strategy for reading which allows for some criticism or judgement of the text – on the grounds of the harm to women which it can appear to condone. Although for many women surveyed here the passage provided valuable guidance for married life, there were also many who pointed to its risks when taken as limiting career options for women or even encouraging their abuse.

The strategy I identified as meeting my interpretative criteria is the theological approach known as *Sachkritik*. From its inception by Rudolf Bultmann through to the broader ways in which it has been used – as traced by Robert Morgan – this interpretative method allows the biblical texts to function as Scripture, while admitting that some function in this way far more obviously than others. I took the underlying theological subject matter (or *Sache*) of Ephesians 5:21-33 to be Christologically defined, and to centre on Christ’s love for the church as elaborated in the passage. Guided by both ‘ordinary’ readers and scholars who had identified thematics other than marriage for the passage, I followed one particular suggestion made by an ‘ordinary’ reader – that the description of Christ’s love showed it to be aimed at enabling the church to fulfil her potential. This linked up with other

possibilities put forward by ‘ordinary’ readers: for example, that the self-surrender connected (in verse 5:25) with Christ’s love might be understood in the light of Christ’s self-emptying as described in Philippians 2. It also seemed to build on proposals by the scholar Elna Mouton: first, that the Ephesian household code is influenced (though its language does not make this completely clear) by the radical change brought by Christ, and second that Ephesians as a whole indicates a reinterpretation of power in terms of Christ’s self-sacrifice and love. Perhaps my suggested subject matter for Ephesians 5 is in some ways the other side of Mouton’s: whereas she sees the exercise of power redefined in terms of sacrifice and love, I see love redefined as empowering of those to whom it is directed.

In identifying the theological subject matter in this way, I am asserting that Ephesians 5 is no longer most fruitfully used as a passage ‘about’ marriage or as a guide for gender relationships more generally. I am aware that many will disagree with this suggestion, and probably also be nonplussed by it – because it departs from what might be seen as a face-value reading of the text. My reading results from wanting to avoid the risks this passage can present to women but at the same time not wanting to let go of it entirely as theologically valuable: something like Michael Lakey’s observation about a similarly contentious biblical text, that ‘by regarding the passage as Scripture, Christians imply that they ought to make something of it, since this is “analytic” to the concept of Scripture’.⁶⁸⁴ Perhaps this kind of reasoning also underlay interpretative suggestions made by scholars and ‘ordinary’ readers surveyed in this thesis, especially those who proposed alternative themes for the text aside from marriage. An ‘ordinary’ reader who suggested one such alternative theme said of reading the Bible generally, ‘I still think it’s still a good thing to do it...I think if I give it up I’m going to miss out one day on nuggets that mean a lot’ [523]. My reading relies on one possible theological ‘nugget’ which might be drawn from Ephesians 5.

5.4.2 Evaluating my reading

As with all the other readings I have considered in this thesis, I will now evaluate how successfully my particular reading meets my twin aims of theological

⁶⁸⁴ Michael Lakey, *Image and Glory of God: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 as a Case Study in Bible, Gender and Hermeneutics* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 181

fruitfulness and ethical responsibility towards women. My way of reading, as noted above, takes the focus of the passage away from marriage. It identifies an idea – of Christ’s love as empowering – that can be applied to marriage (as the text shows signs of doing in its address to husbands), but is capable of broader application. If my reading is followed, Ephesians 5:21-33 would no longer operate primarily as a theological justification for the institution of marriage, nor as a signal of God’s blessing on the marriage relationship.⁶⁸⁵ For many, this will be a theological impoverishment, perhaps for those within church traditions which regard marriage as a sacrament on the basis of this passage, and others who see in this passage a pattern for how a marriage is to be conducted. I am also aware that for some, my reading will be theologically unacceptable because it engages in some critique of the biblical text. I acknowledge these possible points of view but would still want to aim for a different kind of theological fruitfulness than these other approaches, because of the capacity of this text to be read in ways harmful or limiting for wives (and women more generally). As I noted in chapter 1 of this thesis, underpinning my aims is the idea that theology and ethics are linked: readings that are harmful for women are also harmful for Christian theology.

Although my reading would take the focus of the text to be other than gender relationships, I believe it can be theologically fruitful in other ways. It is suggestive of a God whose creative interaction with our world was not only an historical event, but is on-going – supplying resources to, and enabling of, all God has made. Sarah Coakley’s exploration of ‘kenōsis’ results in a particular illustration of how ‘true divine “empowerment”’⁶⁸⁶ can occur in the practice of contemplative prayer, which, she argues can lead to ‘personal empowerment, prophetic resistance, courage in the face of oppression, and the destruction of false idolatry’.⁶⁸⁷ My argument might connect results such as these with God’s love – making that love an active force available to be drawn upon, not only a predisposition on the part of God towards creation.

⁶⁸⁵ There is, I would argue, plenty of other biblical support for marriage – not least in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ teaching on the subject: reconceiving this particular passage need not substantially undermine the biblical underpinnings of the institution of marriage.

⁶⁸⁶ Coakley, ‘*Kenōsis*,’ 32.

⁶⁸⁷ Coakley, ‘*Kenōsis*,’ 38.

Seeing Christ's love as empowering the church could have welcome and positive consequences for how all Christian relationships (marriage among them) are conceived in imitation of Christ's love. In terms of the church, it might draw attention to long-term hierarchies of control which are incompatible with the principle of love-as-empowerment. It might thus challenge some churches and church institutions about who exercises power and for how long. In the context of the Church of England today, it might raise particular questions about the unexplained exclusion of minority ethnic groups from positions such as dean, archdeacon and bishop:⁶⁸⁸ a failure to empower minority ethnic clergy starts to look like a failure to love them.

Finally, the kind of reading strategy I propose here might also have relevance for the missional activity of Christian churches in the UK today, many of which are diminishing numerically. Although the reading does not claim that the biblical text is entirely blameless for the ways in which it has been used, it does suggest ways in which the churches can break with past traditions (of abuse and discrimination against women) without breaking with (rejecting) the text itself. This kind of reading therefore sits alongside others that allow churches to demonstrate their own capacity for repentance and change, without compromising a commitment to the biblical text. When this is supplemented with on-going practices of empowerment so that power is not the fixed prerogative of one individual or group, churches show themselves to be both self-reflective and flexible. Communities with these qualities are attractive to join. Such characteristics might, applying the words of the author of Ephesians quantitatively, 'promote...the body's growth in building itself up in love' (Ephesians 4:16).

5.4.3 Contextualising my reading: one route through a map

My suggested reading strategy and example represent just one path through the map of readings put together in this thesis. The map itself demonstrates considerable variety in terms of readings of the text, and although this variety could potentially be widened by consulting other groups – not least men – it offers a sufficiently diverse

⁶⁸⁸ This issue was highlighted in an article on the BBC website in 2016 in which 'the Reverend Rose Hudson-Wilkin, the chaplain to the speaker of the House of Commons, blamed institutional racism' for the low numbers of ethnic minority clergy who achieve senior leadership positions in the Church of England. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-38387302> accessed on 8 July 2018 at 16.55

range to suggest theologically and ethically fruitful ways of reading. Thus, while there are plenty of further research possibilities, the aims of the thesis have been met, and I am especially grateful to all the women who have enabled this to happen. I have particularly appreciated the involvement of all those women who participated in the fieldwork for this study, and who, in so doing, shared their own life experiences with me. The many group discussions and individual interviews will long remain in my memory and they have deepened and enriched my understanding of how this passage can be read. They have underscored the value, so often demonstrated in CBS projects, of attending to ‘ordinary’ readers of biblical texts. Several participants asked me how I would read the text: I hope this thesis provides an answer, whether or not they would agree with the kind of reading I have proposed. I also hope that all the readings which together make up the map might give further interpretative options to the curate from Kent with whose sermon I started chapter 1, and to the women who cancelled their giving to the church as a result of hearing that sermon.

Appendices

Appendix A: Biographical details for women scholars

	Name	Biographical details
1	Gillian Beattie	Received her PhD from the University of Manchester. <i>Women and Marriage in Paul and his Early Interpreters</i> is based on her PhD thesis. [Source: Preface and Introduction to the book]
2	Jennifer G. Bird	An independent scholar based in Portland Oregon. She was previously Associate Professor of Religion in the Department of Religion at Greensboro College. [Sources: List of contributors to <i>Fortress Press Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament</i> (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014) and Bloomsbury Publishers website at https://www.bloomsbury.com/author/jennifer-g-bird/ , accessed on 28/05/18 at 23.15.]
3	Klara Butting	Pastor of the Hannoversche Landeskirche and heads the Center for Biblical Spirituality and Social Responsibility at the Woltersburger Mühle. She is a former Professor of Old Testament at the University of Bochum [Source: http://www.klarabutting.de/ (translated) accessed on 28/05/18 at 23.15]
4	Eileen R. Campbell-Reed	Associate Professor, Practical Theology, Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Tennessee. She studied for her PhD at Vanderbilt University.[Sources: https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=phozZn4AAAAJ&hl=en accessed on 29/05/18 at 08.47 and a note on page 263 of ‘Should Wives “Submit Graciously”? A Feminist Approach to interpreting Ephesians 5:21-33’ in <i>Review & Expositor</i> , 98 no.2 (2001)
5	Lynn H. Cohick	Professor of New Testament Studies at Wheaton College in Wheaton, IL. She received her Ph.D. in New Testament and Christian Origins from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, PA. [Source http://lynncohick.com/about.html accessed on 29/05/18 at 08.54]
6	Karen De Vos	Has written on women in Christianity, including <i>A Woman's Worth & Work: a Christian Perspective</i> (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976) [Source http://www.worldcat.org/title/womans-worth-work-a-christian-perspective/oclc/2428769&referer=brief_results accessed on 29/05/18 at 09.20]
7	Morna Hooker	Lady Margaret’s Professor of Divinity Emerita at the University of Cambridge [Source http://www.robinson.cam.ac.uk/people/professor-morna-d-hooker accessed on 20/05/18 at 09.25]
8	Gretchen Gaebelein Hull	A lecturer at evangelical seminaries and colleges and a plenary presenter for church and parachurch organisations [Source biographical detail from <i>Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the</i>

		<i>Church and Home</i> (London: Scripture Union, 1987)]
9	Angela E. Hunt	A novelist and writer of more than 140 books. She completed a doctorate in biblical studies in 2008 and a Th.D. in 2015. [Source: http://www.angelahuntbooks.com/bio/ accessed on 29/05/18 at 09.41]
10	E. Elizabeth Johnson	J. Davison Philips Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia [Source: Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley eds., <i>The Women's Bible Commentary</i> 3 rd edn. (Louisville/Westminster: John Knox Press, 2012), xvii
11	Lisa Lickona	Holds a Licentiate in Sacred Theology from the Pope John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family [Source: a note on 'A Commentary on Ephesians 5 and Headship' in <i>Ave Maria Law Review</i> 8 (2010), 393]
12	Margaret Y. MacDonald	Professor of Religious Studies at St Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia [Source: Newsom et al. (eds.) <i>The Women's Bible Commentary</i> , xvii]
13	Jill E. Marshall	A scholar of the New Testament and Early Christianity She received a PhD from Emory University in Atlanta GA in 2015 [Source http://emory.academia.edu/JillMarshall accessed on 29/05/18 at 10.24]
14	Sheila E. McGinn	Professor and Department Chair of Theology and Religious Studies at John Carroll University, Ohio [Source: http://sites.jcu.edu/trs/professor/sheila-e-mcginn-ph-d/ accessed on 29/05/18 at 10.33
15	Clarice J. Martin	Jean Picker Chair and Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Colgate University, Hamilton, New York [Source: http://www.colgate.edu/facultysearch/facultydirectory/cjmartin accessed on 29/05/18 at 11.01
16	Helga Melzer-Keller	Pastoral Officer at St Johannes Catholic Parish in Oberasbach, Germany. She has a PhD from the University of Würzburg and also worked as academic associate in the department of New Testament Studies at the University of Bamberg [Sources: Schottroff and Wacker (eds.) <i>Feminist Biblical Interpretation</i> , 1008 and http://st-johannes-oberasbach.de/wir-fuer-sie/gemeindereferentin-dr-helga-melzer-keller/ accessed on 29/05/18 at 11.27
17	Annette Merz	Professor of Culture and Literature of Earliest Christianity at the Department of Theology, University of Utrecht [Source: http://www.phil.uu.nl/hsfl/members/Merz/index.html accessed on 29/05/18 at 11.32
18	Carrie A. Miles	Has a PhD in Social and Organizational Psychology from the University of Chicago. She is currently Senior Scholar in Residence at the Argyros School of Business and Economics at Chapman University, California and non-resident scholar at the Institute for the Studies of Religion at Baylor University, Texas

		[Source: https://carriemiles.wordpress.com/portfolio/my-resume/ , accessed on 29/05/18 at 11.46]
19	Virginia Ramey Mollencott	Professor of English Emeritus, William Paterson University, Wayne, New Jersey [Source: List of Contributors to Amy-Jill Levine (ed.), <i>A Feminist Companion to the Deutero-Pauline Epistles</i> (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2003)]
20	Elna Mouton	Professor in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa [Source: https://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/theology/Pages/ProfEMouton.aspx accessed on 29/05/18 at 10.55]
21	Rachel Muers	Senior Lecturer in Christian Studies at the University of Leeds
22	Carolyn Osiek	Charles Fischer Professor Emerita of New Testament, Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas [Source: Newsom et al. (eds.) <i>The Women's Bible Commentary</i> , xviii]
23	PHEME PERKINS	Professor of Theology (New Testament), Boston College [Source: <i>Fortress Press Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament</i> , viii]
24	Claire M. Powell	Former Lecturer in New Testament at All Nations Christian College, Ware, England [Source: Kroeger and Evans (eds.), <i>The Women's Study Bible</i> , xxvi]
25	Randi Rashkover	Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Judaic Studies Program at George Mason University, Fairfax, VA [Source: https://religious.gmu.edu/people/rrashkov , accessed on 29/05/18 at 12.36]
26	Ann Holmes Redding	At the time she was interviewed for the article considered in this thesis, Ann Holmes Redding was Assistant Professor of New Testament at Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta GA [Source: 'The Christian Family and the Household Codes' in <i>The Living Pulpit</i> 8 no.3 (1999), 36]
27	Mary Shivanandan	Former Professor of Theology at The Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America, Washington DC [Source: https://www.johnpaulii.edu/academics/faculty/mary-shivanandan accessed on 29/05/18 at 12.20]
28	Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza	Krister Stendahl Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge MA [Source: https://hds.harvard.edu/people/elisabeth-sch%C3%BCssler-fiorenza accessed on 29/05/18 at 12.10]
29	Turid Karlsen Seim	Former Professor of New Testament exegesis at the University of Oslo [Source: https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/tribute-professor-turid-karlsen-seim-1945-2016 accessed on 29/05/18 at 12.06]
30	Minna Shkul	Teaching Fellow in New Testament Studies at the University of Sheffield [Source:

		https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/religion/people/shkul accessed on 29/05/18 at 12.01
31	Mitzi J. Smith	Associate Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity, Ashland Theological Seminary, Detroit, Southfield, Michigan [Source: Newsom et al. (eds.) <i>The Women's Bible Commentary</i> , xix]
32	Sarah Sumner	Professor at Right On Mission, Redding, CA. PhD in Systematic Theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. [Source: https://www.rightonmission.org/faculty accessed on 29/05/18 at 12.59]
33	Eva Šuvarská	At the time of writing the article considered in this thesis, Eva Šuvarská was a member of The Orthodox Church in Czechoslovakia, and delegate to The Conference of Christian Women of European Socialist Countries [Source: 'Women's Christian service in the modern world' in <i>The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate</i> , no.4 (1984), 65-68]
34	Sarah J. Tanzer	Professor of New Testament and Early Judaism, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois [Source: Newsom et al. (eds.) <i>The Women's Bible Commentary</i> , xix]
35	Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite	Professor of Theology and former President of Chicago Theological Seminary, IL [Source: https://www.ctschicago.edu/people/susan-b-thistlethwaite/ accessed on 29/05/18 at 12.15]
36	Joyce Tzabedze	An African biblical scholar who participated in the Convocation of African Women Theologians held in Legon-Accra, Ghana, in 1989
37	Cindy Weber-Han	Works as a therapist. She earned a Master's degree in Divinity from Bethany Theological Seminary, Richmond, IN. with a major in counselling. [Source: http://www.tricityfamilyservices.org/therapists/cindy-weber-han-m-div-cradc/ , accessed on 29/05/18 at 14.25]
38	Carol J. Westphal	At the time she wrote the article considered in this thesis, Carol Westphal was a minister at Williston Park Reformed Church in New York [Source: 'Coming home' in <i>Reformed Review</i> 42 no.3 (1989), 188]
39	Kathleen O'Brien Wicker	Professor of Religious Studies Emerita at Scripps College, Claremont, CA [Source: http://www.scrippscollege.edu/faculty/emeriti-faculty accessed on 29/05/18 at 14.32]

Appendix B: List of questions for group discussions

- 1 How should the relationship between a wife and her husband work?
 - 2 How does the relationship between wife and husband work in practice?
- After reading Ephesians 5:21-33:**
- 3 What jumps off the page at you?
 - 4 What instructions does this passage give, and to whom?
 - 5 What do you understand by ‘be subject to’?
 - 6 How does the first sentence fit with the rest of the passage?
 - 7 What do you understand by these words: ‘the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is head of the Church’?
 - 8 What do you imagine marriage might have been like at the time this passage was written? Does this make any difference to how we understand this passage today?
 - 9 What, if anything, does this passage have to say to us today?
 - 10 Where else in the Bible would you look for help about how women and men should relate to one another?

Appendix C: List of questions for individual interviews

- 1 Which church denominations have you attended?
- 2 [For Church of England attendees only] In terms of Church of England labels, would you describe yourself as Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical or Broad Church (neither Anglo-Catholic or Evangelical)?
- 3 Have you ever completed the Myers-Briggs personality preference assessment (or similar)? If you have, would you be willing to share your personality type?
- 4 In the group discussion we talked about a particular passage from the Bible – Ephesians 5:21-33. Had you come across this particular passage before the group discussion?
- 5 How would you describe your reaction to this passage?
- 6 Could you summarise what you understand this passage to mean?
- 7 What, if anything, does this passage have to say to us today?
- 8 What is your view of the Bible?
- 9 Could you say why you have this view of the Bible?
- 10 Is there anywhere else in the Bible you would look when thinking about the relationship between men and women?
- 11 Do you feel that Ephesians 5:21-33 puts women at a disadvantage compared with men? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?
- 12 In what ways do you think women are equal with men? How do you see these ways working out in your own life?
- 13 What do you understand by the term ‘feminist’?
- 14 Would you describe yourself as feminist?

Appendix D: Demographic information form



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Marriage made in Heaven? How women today read Ephesians 5:21-33

Demographic Information Form

Participant ID:

1. Age _____

2. What is your ethnic group? (Please tick one of the options below).

White: British	<input type="checkbox"/>	Bangladeshi	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any other White background	<input type="checkbox"/>	Any other Asian background	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mixed: White & Black African	<input type="checkbox"/>	Black or Black British	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mixed: White and Black Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/>	Black: Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mixed: White and Asian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Black: African	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any Other Mixed background	<input type="checkbox"/>	Any other black background	<input type="checkbox"/>
Asian or Asian British	<input type="checkbox"/>	Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/>
Indian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other – please write:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pakistani	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>

3. To what religion or spiritual tradition, do you currently belong? (Please tick one of the options below)

None	<input type="checkbox"/>	Judaism	<input type="checkbox"/>
Buddhism	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sikhism	<input type="checkbox"/>
Christianity	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other – please write:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hinduism	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Islam	<input type="checkbox"/>	Prefer not to say	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. What is the denomination of the church you have attended or currently attend?

5. Which best describes your educational qualifications? (Please circle)

No qualifications GCE O levels/ NVQ levels 1 or 2 A levels
Degree
CSEs/GCSEs

Prefer not to say

6. Do you have any educational qualifications in Theology? Yes /No /Prefer
not to say

If yes, please describe:

7. What is your occupation?

Prefer not to say

8. How would you describe your social class?

Prefer not to say

9. What is your relationship status? (please circle)

Single Married Civil partnership Divorced Separated
Widowed

Prefer not to say

Would you be willing to be interviewed individually as part of this project? Yes/No

If yes, please would you give a phone number and/or an email address for contact:

Appendix E: Project information sheet

Marriage....



...made in heaven?

In the New Testament, the letter to the Ephesians contains the words ‘wives be subject to your husbands.’ What do you make of this?

This leaflet contains information to help you decide whether you would be willing to participate in a research project.

The project will look at how women today read a particular passage from the bible (Ephesians 5:21-33). If you are a woman and willing to take part, it will involve attending one session of a maximum of 2 hours to discuss the biblical passage within a small group of women.

If you would like to consider this further, please read the information given inside this leaflet.

Purpose of project and working title

The research project will look at what women make of a passage from the bible about marriage (Ephesians chapter 5, verses 21 to 33): what women say the passage means and how they assess its relevance to life today. There has been very little research into how women in particular read this passage. The working title of the project is ‘Marriage made in heaven? How women today read and understand Ephesians 5:21-33.’

The project as a whole will also look at what women scholars say about the passage in books and articles they have published.

The project forms part of a PhD undertaken through the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Research methods

The research will focus on churches in the Hertford and Stevenage area. In each church or group women are being invited to attend a small group meeting (maximum 12 women) to discuss the Ephesians passage. The groups will be kept small to allow all

those who wish to make comments to be heard. The researcher will guide the discussion by asking the group questions about the passage. As the passage is about married life, there will also be some discussion about marriage in general. The groups are open to **all** women aged 18 or over – whether or not you are, or have been, married.

Each woman who participates in a group discussion will be invited to be individually interviewed on a convenient date after the group discussion. These interviews are entirely voluntary: you may choose to participate in the group discussion but not have an individual interview. The purpose of these interviews is to explore the participant's views in more depth.

Benefits and costs of research

I hope that the main benefits of the research will be for women to hear and share with one another their reactions to this passage, and for me to become a better researcher as a result of this process.

As this passage involves thinking about marriage, it is possible that it may bring back some difficult memories or experiences for participants. While it is not the aim of the research to intrude into people's personal experiences unless participants are fully happy to discuss these, please do consider whether participating in this research would cause you emotional stress which you would rather avoid.

Consent

At the start of the group session, you will be asked to complete a consent form to indicate that the project has been explained to you and that you are happy to go ahead as a participant. There will be a further consent form for those who volunteer to be interviewed individually.

Anonymity and data protection

Although each group session and each individual interview will be digitally recorded (to help me remember what is said), every effort will be made to ensure that your comments remain anonymous. At the end of the session I will give you the option of completing an additional form to give me some information about you as an individual (such as your age, ethnic group etc.). On this form you will be identified by participant number rather than your name. If you volunteer for an individual interview, your consent form will identify you by name, but this will not be published.

The audio recordings, the optional information forms, and your consent forms will be kept securely until the end of the project (expected to be in 2017), in a locked cabinet. They will only be used by those working on this particular project (my supervisory team and me). When the project is complete, they will be destroyed.

Your choice

You are entirely free to opt out of the research, without any need to give a reason, at any stage in the process up until the end of 2014 (after which the collected data may be published in some form – see below).

The results of the research

The results of the research will form part of my PhD dissertation, which will be available online as part of the Durham University e-theses collection. In addition, the results of the research may be published in academic journals or in a book. In order to give participants (and others locally) an idea of the overall research results, I plan to present a summary of them at a meeting in Hertford once my research is complete.

Timing of group session

The session will take place

At [location]

On [date]

From [time]

If you would then be willing to attend this small group session, please could you let me know by email (address below) or by phone (numbers below). If you would like to take part, but cannot make the session above, please do get in touch with me.

Contact details

If you would like to discuss this further, please do call/text/email me.

Jo Logan

[] (landline)

[] (mobile)

[] (email address)

Appendix F: Consent form



Department of
Theology and Religion

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: **Marriage made in heaven? How women today read Ephesians 5:21-33**

Name of Researcher: **Joanne Logan**

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 19 March 2013 (version 3) for the above project	
2. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask any questions	
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time up until the end of 2014 without giving any reason	
4. I understand that the group discussion (and individual interview, if I agree to take part in one) will be digitally recorded and that the recordings will be stored securely and destroyed on completion	
5. I understand that my data will only be accessed by those working on the project	
6. I understand that my data will be anonymised prior to publication (i.e. my name will not appear in any published data). I understand that while every effort will be made to ensure that I cannot be identified through published data, this cannot be guaranteed.	
7. I agree to the publication of verbatim quotes	
8. I am willing to be contacted in the future regarding this project	
9. I agree to take part in the above project	

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

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