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THE HAUSTAFEL IN EPHESIANS (EPH. 5.22-6.9)

Professor E. Best

There is no intention in this paper of exploring in detail the moral teaching of the Ephesian Haustafel. By and large its ethic does not differ greatly from Jewish and pagan contemporary teaching where Jewish and pagan husbands expected obedience from their wives, from their children and from their slaves; we find the same in the Haustafel in Ephesians. The main difference from pagan and Jewish teaching lies in the Christian motivation. We shall not then be examining the ethical teaching in detail but instead looking at the place of the Haustafel in the whole argument of the letter, at the relevance of its teaching to the Christian households of the ancient world and at whether it existed prior to its use in Ephesians. In recent years the Haustafel form has been the object of considerable attention and listed at the end of the paper are some of the more important books and articles on the subject.

The Haustafel in Ephesians consists of three sections referring respectively to the relationships between wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. A normal ancient household would have contained at least all these three sets of relationships; the husband, the father and the master would have been normally the same person. Even what we would describe today as middle-class households probably contained at least one slave; small businesses would have had one or more who would have lived in the household of the owner. In each section of the Haustafel the duty of the 'inferior' in the relationship is put first. Sometimes commentators describe the relationships as mutual or reciprocal, but this is incorrect. A mutual or reciprocal relationship is one in which each side has exactly the same relation to the other as the other has to it. A typical mutual or reciprocal relationship lies in the summons to 'love one another'. There is an example of it in 5.21. But the relationship of husband to wife in the Haustafel is not the same as that of wife to husband. What we have are three paired relationships. Before proceeding further it is necessary to say

something about Ephesians itself. As the textual evidence in relation to 1.1 shows it was not written to the church in Ephesus and probably not indeed to any particular congregation. It was originally sent to a group of congregations in Asia Minor or to Christians generally who lived in that area.

Colossians has a similar *Haustafel* (3.18-4.1) and, more generally, most scholars accept the existence of some kind of relation between this letter and Ephesians. There are five possible solutions to the nature of this relationship: both letters were written by Paul, both letters were written by someone other than Paul, Paul wrote Colossians and the author of Ephesians used it, Paul wrote Ephesians and the author of Colossians used it, Paul wrote neither letter and the two letters were written by two different people. It is unnecessary at this point to decide between these though later it may be possible to suggest which are less probable.

While the *Haustafel* in Ephesians is similar to that in Colossians there are also considerable differences between them, most noticeably in respect of the amount of attention given to each of the paired relationships. Ephesians devotes twelve verses to the wife-husband relation and develops it into a discussion of Christ and the church; Colossians has only two verses, one relating to the husband and one to the wife and does not mention the church. Ephesians has four verses on the child-parent relation, three given over to the conduct of children and one to that of the parent; Colossians has again just one verse for each group in the pair. Both letters take five verses to cover the slave-master relation with four going in each case to the conduct of the slave and only one to that of the owner or master.

The most significant feature about the *Haustafel* in each letter is that it covers only households where all of the members are believers. We should not be misled by the word children; nothing is said about their age; in both the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds children were expected to be obedient to their parents into adulthood; thus believing children, young adults, as distinct from babes in arms are included. Neither *Haustafel* then covers the situation of mixed households where some believe and others do not. This, that the households which are considered consist only of believers, is

surprising and requires fuller examination. Had the author of Ephesians been considering mixed household he would not have been able to parallel the relation of husbands and wives with that of Christ and the church as he does in 5.22-33.

1 Peter also contains a Haustafel (2.13-3.7). Some doubt exists as to whether 1 Pet 2.13-3.7 should be termed a Haustafel since it contains a section (2.13-17) on the relation of believers to the state, and the state is of course, outside the household. It has however been customary to apply the term also to it, though it might be better to describe as a 'social code' what we find in Colossians, Ephesians and 1 Peter; however since it has become customary to apply the word Haustafel (the term goes back to Martin Luther) to the equivalent sections in these three letters and to material also in some of the other New Testament letters, we shall, for simplicity's sake, continue to use it, though recognising its inadequacy. The Haustafel in 1 Peter again covers three areas of conduct but they are not the same as those of Colossians and Ephesians.

In 1 Peter the first area, 2.13-17, relates to the behaviour of citizens towards the state. No possibility existed then of a paired relation in this area. While today church leaders may address governments and tell them how to behave the first Christians were in no position to do so and even if they did no government would have listened.

The second area in 1 Peter, 2.18-25, that of slaves and masters, is again different from the equivalent sections in Ephesians and Colossians for in 1 Peter it is only slaves who are addressed, nothing being said to masters. Thus again there is no paired relationship. Peter does not address the masters because he was toadying up to the wealthy in the congregations to which he was writing but because the masters being unbelievers were not present in the congregation to be addressed. The content of what is said to the slaves indicates that they were slaves who had domineering masters. There may have been masters who were Christians but since they would naturally treat their Christian slaves as brothers in Christ they are not in special need of counsel. Thus so far as slaves are concerned 1 Peter treats only those in mixed households. There must have been many such households and slaves in them were often in

difficult situations and much more in need of advice than those in Christian households.

In the section, 3.1-7, in 1 Peter relating to husbands and wives only one verse touches on the behaviour of husbands but six are given over to the conduct of wives. It is at once clear that the husband is envisaged as an unbeliever for the wife is instructed to win him to the faith through her quiet and submissive conduct. Thus again mixed households are principally in mind.

There is no section in 1 Peter on the behaviour of children, though young men are addressed in 5.5.

It is not surprising that 1 Peter should deal with the situation of Christians in mixed households for their position when they were the 'inferiors' must have been very difficult. Plutarch in his advice to the married and those about to marry writes 'Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals and outlandish superstitions' (*Coniugelia Praecepta*, Mor 140D; ET as in LCL.) To many honourable men in the ancient world Christianity would have seemed an outlandish superstition and to include queer rituals. From the Christian side the strain which could arise within a mixed household is seen in Justin Martyr's *Second Apology* 2. The position of a believing wife with an unbelieving husband must therefore at times have been intolerable. Not less would be the position of a believing slave who might be required to make preparations for and to take part in the worship of the household gods.

It is impossible to make any estimate of the proportion of unmixed and mixed households in the early church but other parts of the New Testament provide evidence as to the existence of the latter. 1 Cor. 7.12-16 refers to unbelieving spouses; if the believing spouse encounters trouble he or she is advised not to break up the marriage but to continue in the marital home so that the unbeliever may eventually be won for Christ. In 1 Cor. 7.39 Paul counsels widows to marry 'in the Lord', i.e. within the church; this instruction would have been unnecessary if some widows had not been marrying outside it. In 1 Tim. 3.1ff those eligible to be chosen as bishops should be those who manage their households properly, which seems

to mean those who have believing households; but if this has to be set down as a condition in the selection of bishops there must have been many households which were mixed (cf 1 Tim. 3.12). In 1 Tim. 6.1f slaves are told to be obedient to their masters, especially to non-believing masters. Even if it is impossible to estimate the number of mixed households it is inherently probable that there were many. Although Acts records a number of baptisms of whole households where the (male) head was converted there is no reason to suppose this always happened, and it was unlikely to have done so where the wife was converted and the husband was not. The Gospels show Jesus as teaching that individuals responding to the gospel might be forced to leave their homes and families (Mark 8.34-6; 10.21,29); the result would be the break up of homes. Even if passages like these do not go back to Jesus but are church formations they represent the experience of the church; mixed households were a normal result of Christian evangelisation.

If we accept that there were many mixed households in the early church and if Ephesians deals only with unmixed household what consequences follow?

1. In the light of the evidence from 1 Cor. chap 7 and Paul's knowledge of the lives of converts it is hardly likely that he compiled the *Haustafel* in Ephesians. If he received it in the tradition, whether that was Christian, Jewish or pagan in origin, it is also hardly likely that he would have used it. He had a more realistic view of the kind of people the church contained. The presence then of this *Haustafel* in Ephesians is a strong argument against Pauline authorship. /2. It appears that the author of Ephesians, whoever he was, did not know very much about the membership of the churches to which he was writing. If he had been intending to write only to believers living in unmixed households he would surely have made this clear somewhere in the letter.

3. It is probable then that the author of Ephesians did not himself compile the *Haustafel* but received it as tradition and incorporated it into his writing.

4. If he did encounter it as a piece of tradition, and took it over, this does not say much for his pastoral insight. Its use shows a singular lack of imagination and contrasts strongly with the *Haustafel* in 1

Peter which deals with the more difficult cases of wives married to non-Christian husbands and slaves owned by non-Christian masters. That is not to say that the author of Ephesians gives bad advice but that his advice applies only to a fraction of those to whom he writes; many would have been left untouched by his counselling.

5. The content of the Haustafel shows the danger of mirror reading the text; mirror reading consists in the deduction of information about the recipients of a letter from its content. If applied to the Haustafel it would imply that all the intended recipients of Ephesians lived in unmixed households and this is extremely unlikely. That is not to say that the technique of mirror reading cannot be used, but that it must be practised with great care. Using it, it is fair to deduce from Ephesians that Greek was understood by at least some of those to whom the letter was sent, though we cannot deduce that all of them knew Greek for those who did might have translated it into the native tongue of those who did not. The nature of the injunctions in the second part of the letter make it reasonable to assume that there were some who were thieves (4.28), some who were not always truthful (4.25), some who lost their tempers (4.26f), some men who resorted for their sexual pleasure to others than their wives (5.3). Those kind of deductions from the text are admissible.

6. A close relationship exists between Colossians and Ephesians and the Haustafel in Ephesians is in many respects similar to that in Colossians in covering the same three paired relationships, wife-husband, child-parent, slave-master. Did then the author of Ephesians derive his Haustafel from Colossians and expand it in the case of the first two pairs? Since of the three sets of relationships we find the greatest similarity in that of slaves and masters it is useful to compare them to see if, in effect, the author of Ephesians used Colossians in the section about masters and slaves. The two sections are almost the same in their first verses (Eph. 6.5; Col. 3.22) and thereafter contain a great many of the same words and phrases, e.g. ἐν ἀπλότητι (τῆς) καρδίας, ὀφθαλμοδουλία, ἀνθρωπάρεσκοι, ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώποις, yet these words and phrases do not always appear in the same contexts and with the same connections; for example, προσωποληψία which is in the section on masters in Eph. 6.9 is in that on slaves in Col. 3.25, and κομίζεται is applied

differently in the two letters. Although the author of Ephesians is interested in 'inheritance' (1.14,18; 3.6) he does not pick up the reference to it in Col. 3.24. More significantly in Col. 3.22 slaves are to fear the Lord but in Eph. 6.5 the fear is to be directed towards their masters; it is hardly likely that Ephesians, if copying Colossians, would have downgraded the fear in that way. If the author of Colossians had been copying Ephesians it is also hardly likely that he would have omitted the 'as to Christ' of Eph. 6.5. In the section on children it is difficult to see why the author of Ephesians should change the εὐάρεστον of Col. 3.22 to δίκαιον or that the author of Colossians should carry out the reverse process. It is therefore improbable that either author copied the letter of the other in respect of this section of the Haustafel. These changes between the letters also make it unlikely that both letters had a common author. Presumably the Haustafel existed as a piece of tradition which each used independently. Confirming this is the easy manner in which the Haustafel of Colossians can be detached from its context. The beginning of the Haustafel of Ephesians is grafted into its context through 5.21 but though this verse promises a mutual relation between members of the household this is not the way in which the Haustafel is developed; 5.21 is therefore a verse constructed to permit the transition from what preceded to the section of tradition.

7. We conclude then that an existing Haustafel was incorporated independently into the two letters. It is fairly easy to make a guess as to its content. Since Ephesians has developed the first couple of pairs (wife-husband, children-parents) much more than Colossians we base our reconstruction on the form in that letter:

αἱ γυναῖκες, ὑποτάσσεσθε τοῖς ἀνδράσιν ὡς ἀνήκεν [ἐν κυρίῳ]
οἱ ἄνδρες, ἀγαπᾶτε τὰς γυναῖκας
τὰ τέκνα, ὑπακούετε τοῖς γυνεῦσιν
οἱ πατέρες, μὴ ἐρεθίζετε (παρορίζετε) τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν
οἱ δούλοι, ὑπακούετε τοῖς [κατὰ σάρκα] κυρίοις
οἱ κύριοι, τὸ δίκαιον τοῖς δούλοις παρέχεσθε,

Wives, be subject to your husbands as is proper [in the Lord];

Husbands, love your wives.

Children, obey your parents;

Fathers, do not annoy your children.

Slaves, obey your [human] masters;

Masters treat your slaves justly.

As we have seen the third pair (slaves-owners) has been expanded in both letters using the same words but not always in the same way. Since the injunctions in the first two pairs reduce to two couplets it is probable that the third pair originally consisted also in a couplet, though it may have been expanded prior to its use in the two letters. The words in square brackets represent Christian additions, if the form was originally pre-Christian.

Two factors suggest a non-Christian origin for this brief form of the Haustafel. The first is the addition in line 5 of *κατὰ σάρκα. κύριος* has a special significance for Christians and the injunction to slaves required this qualification so that they should not think that they were simply told to obey Christ; it needed to be made clear that their Christian duty required obedience to their earthly owners. Though *κύριος* is used at times in Greek to indicate the owner or master of slaves it is not the normal word. This is *δεσπότης* which is found in Luke 2.29; 1 Tim. 6.1; Tit. 2.9; 1 Pet. 2.18. It is true that *κύριος* is used frequently in the Gospel parables of the owner or master of slaves but in each case the owner or master, whatever may have been intended in the original parable, is taken to represent God (so for the same reason in John 13.16; 15.15,20; Matt. 20.24f; Rom. 1.1,4; 1 Cor. 7.22; Jas. 1.1); moreover *δεσπότης* was not a usual term for God among Christians (only twice of Jesus in the NT, Jude 4; 2 Pet. 2.1. On the use of the words see H. Rengstorf, *TDNT* II pp.43-8; W. Foerster, *TDNT* III pp.1041-6). Had Christians composed the Haustafel they would almost certainly have used *δεσπότης* and so avoided the ambiguity of *κύριος*.

A more important indication of the non-Christian origin of the Haustafel is its irrelevance to mixed households. The situation of believing wives married to pagan husbands and Christian slaves belonging to pagan owners could be acute because the wife and the slave were unable as Christians to participate in the pagan worship of their husbands and owners. Pagan husbands and slave owners would have had no objection to their wives and slaves adding another god or goddess to those already worshipped in the household so long as no claim to exclusiveness was made; this was a claim Christians

could not escape making (see the quotation above from Plutarch and the reference to Justin Martyr). Probably the writers of Colossians and Ephesians (they may not have been the same) incorporated the **Haustafel** without realising that it applied only to a limited group of wholly Christian households. None of the sections in the **Haustafel** would have been out of accord with Hellenistic ethical thinking. Although no similarly structured **Haustafel** can be found in the Greco-Roman world, from the time of Aristotle household management was divided into the three areas of master and slave, parent and child, husband and wife (*Politics* 1259A). We find this division continued and developed in Hellenism (Seneca, *Ep.* 94.1-3; Stobaeus [Hense] IV 27.20); Epictetus stresses the second and third areas (e.g. 2.17.3; 3.7.26; he may have omitted the reference to slavery because he had once been a slave.

We also find the same three areas of ethical conduct being treated in Hellenistic Judaism; the clearest example is Pseudo-Phocylides 195-227 who deals with each area (see also Josephus, *c. Apionem* 2.189-214; Philo, *Posteritate Caini* 181).

Christians would have been the more inclined to adopt the type of teaching contained in the **Haustafel** if it had reached them through Judaism and not directly from the pagan world; it is indeed even possible that the form of the **Haustafel** in Ephesians and Colossians originated in Judaism. But if its origin lay in Hellenism there would have been no difficulty in its being transmitted through Judaism. Jews were expected to marry Jews (see below) so that unmixed households were the normal situation among them. The problems raised by mixed marriages would not then have been as serious for them as they became for Christians. Apart from the emphasis in Jewish teaching on Jews marrying Jews, Jews in the Diaspora tended to live in Jewish communities and would marry within their communities. Christianity however was something new and the Christian groups were small; there was no natural pool of Christian women already in existence from which Christian men could choose their wives or women their husbands. There always had to be a first to be converted out of any existing pagan household and, unless it was the husband who might be able to insist on his family and slaves being baptised, the one who had been converted

might remain for a lengthy period, if not for ever, the only Christian in the household.

The emphasis on unmixed households in Judaism goes back at least as far as Ezra who forbade mixed marriages and instructed those who had already entered into them to break them off (9.10ff; 10.1ff; 10.18ff; cf. Tob. 4.12; *T. Levi* 9.9f; Pseudo-Philo, *LAB* 9.5, where incest is regarded as preferable to sexual intercourse with a non-Jew). There were of course Jewish wives, like Esther, who married non-Jews. But in the additions made to her story in the LXX it is said that she had not eaten at Haman's table and had not honoured the king's feast or drunk his wine (4.17 ; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* xviii.81-84; xx.139); in that way her purity in terms of the law was preserved. In the story of Joseph and Aseneth, Joseph does not have sexual intercourse with Aseneth while she is non-Jewish (8.5) and it is only after her conversion to Judaism that he marries her (18.1ff). Thus attempts were made to preserve the totally Jewish nature of Jewish households and to account for those that were seemingly not so. The Mishnah (*Kidd.* 4.3) carries on the ideal of no mixed marriages; yet at times they must have occurred and *Yeb* 2.5; 7.5; 8.3 attempt to say what should happen in these rare cases.

Clearly the case of children would cause no difficulty since children born in a Jewish home would be brought up as Jews. But what of slaves in a Jewish household? In the Old Testament a distinction is drawn between slaves who were Jewish and those who were not. Only the former could expect to have their freedom granted as of right. Naturally their presence in the household would cause no problems for they would automatically accept Jewish law. But what of non-Jewish slaves? Gen. 17.12f implies they were, if male, to be circumcised; if they refused, then owners were expected to sell them within the year. Such non-Jewish slaves were also bound to keep certain Jewish religious customs, though like women and children they were exempt from others. Through their fulfilment of some of the Jewish law they did not render the household unclean

and therefore they could be retained in it and Jewish members of the household could eat the food they prepared.¹

There would thus be no objection to the origin of the Ephesian and Colossian form of the *Haustafel* within Judaism, and still less, if its origin lay in the Greco-Roman world, for it to have reached Christianity through Judaism. In favour of the former is the qualification to κόριοι in 6.5; Jews like Christians would probably have avoided this word with its ambiguity.

As we have seen the *Haustafel* in 1 Pet 2.13-3.7 differs considerably from those of Ephesians and Colossians. It adds a section on the attitude of the citizen to the state, omits the section on children and parents and treats the mixed household rather than the unmixed; it is therefore unlikely that it is either a development of the form in Ephesians and Colossians or that the form in the two latter epistles was developed from it. Its additional section on the Christian and the civil authorities continues earlier Christian teaching on this subject in Mark 12.13-17 and Rom. 13.1-7, and is in line with the concern that prayers should be offered for rulers (1 Tim. 2.1f). As a whole the Petrine *Haustafel* resembles Tit. 2.1-10; 3.1,² though not strictly parallel in all its sections to the latter. Because the Petrine form treats the mixed household rather than the unmixed it makes a more realistic approach to actual living. The existence of the Petrine form means that two forms of the *Haustafel* were current in early Christianity and implies its importance in post-baptismal catechetical instruction (none of the conversion stories in Acts shows any sign of pre-baptismal instruction). Traces of the influence of the *Haustafel* form of instruction are to be found in the Apostolic Fathers, where there may be a mingling of the two forms: 1 Clem. 1.3; 21.6-9; *Didache* 4.9-11; Ignatius, *Polycarp* 4.1-6.1; Polycarp, *Philippians*

¹ See G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, Cambridge Mas, 1932, II, pp. 18f, 135f; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, London, 1961, pp. 85f; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, (2nd edn, ed G. Vermes, F. Müller, M. Black), vol II, Edinburgh, 1979, pp., 420f, 452, 482.

² See H. Von Lips, 'Die *Haustafel* als "Topos" im Rahmen der urchristlichen Paränese: Beobachtungen anhand des 1. Petrusbriefes und des Titusbriefes', *NTS* 40 (1994) 261-280.

4.2-6.1. Other areas of living are introduced in these post New Testament writings, e.g. widows, bishops. Ministers, though not specifically bishops, had been referred to earlier in 1 Pet. 5.1-5 and this section may originally have been part of the *Haustafel* used there.

We return finally to the *Haustafel* of Ephesians in order to draw some conclusions as to its adequacy for Christian instruction. It fulfils its purpose in giving reliable and truthful advice for those who live in wholly Christian households, provided we realise its regulations apply to its own period and not ours. It cannot be seen as other than inadequate, even in its own time, for the pastoral counselling of believers who do not live in wholly Christian homes; these would include those who had obeyed the call of Jesus and left home and kinsfolk to follow him, widows (the care of whom features prominently in other parts of the NT, Acts 6.1-6; 1 Cor. 7.39f; 1 Tim. 5.3-16; Jas. 1.27), divorced people (probably women expelled from their homes because they had adopted the silly superstition of Christianity). It is not a sufficient response to the inadequacy of its counselling to say that the *Haustafel* in Ephesians presents an ideal for it has not advice to give on how to move from the ideal to the real situation nor does it even suggest that it is necessary so to move. It has moreover no advice for slaves who have been freed and, in accordance with the custom of the time, remained in some kind of relation with their original owner; it must also have left slave wives in the awkward position of not knowing when they should obey their husbands and when their owners if a clash of direction should arise.

All these objections to the adequacy of the *Haustafel* in Ephesians apply equally to that in Colossians. The Ephesian form has however one important feature lacking in Colossians: the author of Ephesians receiving it in the tradition realised that he could use it to good effect not only in his moral instruction of believers but also in his other main subject, his teaching about the church. Taking up a theme of the Old Testament, the marriage of Yahweh and Israel, and perhaps also the pagan myth of the holy marriage, he uses his marital instruction to develop his ideas on the church. In doing so he replaces Yahweh with Christ and Israel with the church. It is unnecessary to follow out the details of his teaching but in essence he

shows that the church would not have come into being but for the self-sacrificing love of Christ and that its continued existence depends on the care and affection he bestows on it as well as the nurture he provides for it. As far as believers go this enables him to argue for the obedience of the church to Christ. In an odd way this all follows from the fact of the Haustafel's restriction to wholly Christian households. If the husband had been an unbeliever he could not have represented Christ; if the wife had been an unbeliever she could not have represented the church. Generally in the Old Testament the marital imagery is used in respect of a disbelieving and disobedient Israel whom God has wooed and continues to woo. The author of Ephesians seized the opportunity which the picture of the believing household offered him and used it to develop his teaching on the church to which he had earlier devoted a large portion of his letter. Whether he actually realised the ethical inadequacy of the Haustafel is another matter; it looks as if he did not, otherwise he would have modified its two other sections. Those who had earlier introduced the Haustafel into Christian teaching from Judaism, or from paganism, clearly did not see its limitations nor did the author of Colossians. But the author of Ephesians succeeded in turning to good account its restrictive nature in a way he could never have done with the Petrine form of the Haustafel.

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