

WHAT IS THE WOMAN'S DESIRE?

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THE current issue of feminism in the church has provoked the reexamination of the scriptural passages that deal with the relationship of the man and the woman. A proper understanding of Genesis 3:16 is crucial to this reconsideration of the Biblical view of the woman. In Genesis 3:16 God pronounces judgment on the woman. Two areas of the woman's life are specifically mentioned: childbearing and her relationship to her husband. The latter is the concern of this article; "yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16b, RSV)

A. Common Interpretations

The translation of תְּשׁוּקָה causes a large part of the difficulty in understanding Genesis 3.16. There are three typical interpretations. (1) תְּשׁוּקָה is frequently equated with sexual desire. The woman's craving for her husband will be so strong that to satisfy it she will be ready to face all the pains and sorrows of childbearing.¹ ". . . thy desire shall be to thy husband-- thou shalt not be able to shun great pain and peril for childbearing, for thy desire, thy appetite, shall be to thy husband. . ."² The woman still desires marital intercourse though the result, conceiving, and bearing children, brings pain. This interpretation closely links verse 16b with verse 16a (as does the RSV rendering of the waw as "yet," which could be translated "and"), and so fits the immediate context.

(2) תְּשׁוּקָה is viewed as "the desire that makes her the willing

1 David R. Mace, *Hebrew Marriage: a Sociological Study*, London, The Epworth Press, 1953. p. 196.

2 Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, Kansas City, Mo., Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1967, p. 22.

slave of man."³ It is that "immense, clinging, psychological dependence on man."⁴ Seeing no reason to limit the scope of "desire" to sexual appetite, Clarence J. Vos would not exclude from it the woman's desire for the man's protection.⁵ Keil and Delitzsch see "desire" as a morbid yearning; the woman ". . . was punished with a desire bordering upon disease (תשוקה from שוק to run, to have a violent craving for a thing) . . ."⁶

(3) Calvin states that Genesis 3:16b means that the woman will desire only what her husband desires and that she will have no command over herself.⁷ The woman's desires are wholly subservient to her husband's, as a result of God's judgment.⁸

Despite the differences in the interpretation of תשוקה, all of the commentators cited above agree that, through the woman's desire for her husband, he rules her. In other words, because the woman desires the husband in some way, he is able to rule over her.

B. Objections to the Preceding Interpretations

(1) The interpretation of תשוקה as sexual desire appears to be contradicted by etymology. Biblical scholars are well aware of the danger of confusing diachrony and synchrony in the use of this tool, but all sources of help must be weighed when there are only three occurrences of the word.⁹ The verbal root appears

3 John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (International Critical Commentary), Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1930, p.82.

4 Gini Andrews, *Your Half of the Apple; God and the Single Girl*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1972, p. 51.

5 Clarence J. Vos, *Woman in Old Testament Worship*, Delft, N. V. Verenigde Drukkerijen Judels & Brinkman, n.d., p. 24.

6 C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, V. 1: The Pentateuch*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., n.d., p. 103. Cf. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, Columbus, The Wartburg Press, 1942, p. 172.

7 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, v. 1, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1948, p. 172.

8 Cf. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Part 1, Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, 1961, p. 165, and Edward J. Young, *Genesis 3: A Devotional and Expository Study*, London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1966, p. 127.

9 As J. Barr also recognizes; "Etymology and the Old Testament,

to be קִשׁ for which BDB suggests three homographs. BDB would relate קִשׁ to the Arabic root saqa, to desire, excite desire.¹⁰ However, as they are aware, the phonemic equivalent of the Hebrew קִשׁ is קִשׁ in Arabic, a fact recognized by G. R. Driver¹¹ and Koehler-Baumgartner.¹² This suggests that the proper etymology in Arabic would be saqa, to urge, drive on, impel,¹³ a meaning consonant with the interpretation to be argued below.

(2) The rule of the husband, per se, is not a result of or punishment for sin. The headship of the husband over his wife is a part of the creation order. The commentators have dealt with this problem in two ways. The one ignores or misunderstands the New Testament interpretation of the creation order.¹⁴ It is suggested that before the fall, man and woman were equal and that neither ruled.

. . . and he shall rule over thee, though at their creation both were formed with equal rights, and the woman had probably as much right to rule as the man : but subjection to the will of her husband is one part of her curse.¹⁵

Language and Meaning (Oudtestamenische Studien, Deel 19), Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1974, p. 2.

10 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver & Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1907, p. 1003.

11 G. R. Driver, "Notes and Studies; Theological and Philological Problems in the Old Testament," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XLVII, 1946, p. 158.

12 Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1953. KB recognizes the derivation as from saqa by their distinguishing only two verbal roots, p. 957. One must suspect that the major influence which made BDB willing to contradict the usual phonemic equivalence and associate קִשׁ with the Arabic saqa was the notion that קִשׁ was a reference to sexual desire. The sounder lexicography may have been overruled by a commitment to the understanding of the passage.

13 Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Bk. 1, Pt. 4, London, Williams and Norgate. 1872, p. 1470.

14 I Corinthians 11:8; I Timothy 2:13a. The source of and reason for the creation of the woman is significant. Man is created first; he is the source of the woman's existence: and she is created for the sake of the man. Therefore, the head of the woman is man,

15 Clarke, p. 22,

The other more frequent method of dealing with this problem is to differentiate between the husband's God-ordained headship and his "rule" in Genesis 3:16. The woman was subordinate to her husband from the beginning, but the "supremacy of the man was not intended to become a despotic rule, crushing the woman into a slave. . ." ¹⁶ as it does after the fall. Before the fall, man's rule was gentle; afterwards it is tyrannous. Rule (*משל*) in Genesis 3:16 is said to suggest suppressing or overcoming. ¹⁷ Not all agree that the post-fall rule of man is different in quality. Some have suggested it is different only in extent; after the fall, the woman is wholly subject to her husband (causing one to wonder what the pre-fall limits on the husband's authority were). This total subjection of the woman makes her liable to arbitrary treatment by her husband; so the complete rule of the husband can lead to a reign of tyranny. ¹⁸ Practically, then, there is no difference in the rule of worse quality and that of greater extent.

(3) The preceding solution satisfies the demands of the overall context, i.e., the tyrannous rule of the husband seems an appropriate punishment for the woman's sin. However, if the woman's desire makes her a willing slave of her husband (A.2) or if she has no desires except for husband's (A.3), the hardship of punishment in Genesis 3:16b is absent, because the woman willingly submits herself to her husband's rule. But willing submission contradicts the context of judgment and clashes with the New Testament commands to submit to the husband's authority (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; I Pet. 3:1), as well as experience.

C. Genesis 3:16b and Genesis 4:7b

תשוקה occurs only three times in the Old Testament (Gen. 3:16; 4:7; Song of Solomon 7:10). ¹⁹

A comparison of Genesis 3:16b and 4:7b reveals that the

¹⁶ Keil & Delitzsch, p. 103. Cf. Calvin, p. 172, and Young, p. 127.

¹⁷ Vos, p. 25.

¹⁸ Keil & Delitzsch, p. 83.

¹⁹ Because the context of Song of Solomon 7: 10 is ambiguous, it is not possible to determine the precise meaning of *תשוקה* in this case. We shall only suggest that the meaning of "desire" proposed in this article is credible in Song of Solomon 7:10. Note that the immediate context is that of possession: "I am my beloved's. . ."

Hebrew is the same, except for appropriate changes in person and gender; but the English translation (RSV, ASV) varies.²⁰

וְאֵל-אִשְׁךָ תִּשְׁקֶתְךָ וְהוּא יִמְשַׁלְּךָ 3:16b
וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשְׁקֶתוּ וְאִקְהָ תִּמְשַׁלְּבוּ 4:7b

RSV . . . Yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you"
. . . its [sin's]²¹ desire is for you,
but you [Cain] must master it.

ASV . . . and thy desire shall be to thy husband,
and he shall rule over thee.
. . . and unto thee shall be its desire;
but do thou rule over it.

In Genesis 4:7 sin's desire is to enslave Cain -- to possess or control him, but the Lord commands, urges Cain to overpower

20 KJV translated them the same: in Gen. 4:7, ". . . and thou shalt rule over him." The problem is that Cain does not in fact rule, whether the antecedent of "him" is sin or Abel. Therefore, the future indicative or predictive translation of Gen. 4:7 is incorrect.

21 The masculine pronouns refer to the feminine noun "sin" חַטָּאת
A. R. Hulst in *Old Testament Problems* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1960, p. 1) says: "The Hebr. active part. robes, 'beseiger', is often used of an animal that lies in wait for its prey. . . . It is quite possible then, that the writer's use of the masc. suffixes has been determined by this mental image of 'the croucher'." Cf. Robert S. Candlish, *The Book of Genesis*, v. 1, Edinburgh, Adam & Charles Black, 1868, p. 99; G. R. Driver, p. 158; Keil & Delitzsch, p. 112. The only other alternate antecedent for the masc. pronouns is Abel; then the rule of Cain as the first born is in view. This interpretation is unlikely because (1) "Abel" is distant from the pronouns and does not occur in God's words to Cain but only in the preceding narrative; (2) it is not conclusive that the first born ruled his younger siblings; for instance, rule over his brothers is given to the supposed first born only at the death-bed of Isaac, and it is given to the second born Jacob by mistake (Gen. 27:29); and (3) what is the meaning of "desire" in such a case? Calvin (p. 203-4) explains the desire of Abel for Cain as that of an inferior for the superior, in this case the first born Cain. "Moreover, this form of speech is common [?] among the Hebrews, that the desire of the inferior should be towards him to whose will he is subject; thus Moses speaks of the woman (iii. 16) that her desire should be to her husband." Calvin's interpretation of "desire" in Gen. 3: 16 and Gen 4:7 is consistent, but it is not appropriate in Song of Solomon 7:10, where the man's desire is to his beloved. According to Calvin's theory, the man would then be the inferior.

sin, to master it. An active struggle between Cain and sin is implied; the victor of the struggle is not determined by the words God speaks to Cain.

E. J. Young notes the similarity of language in Genesis 3:16 and 4:7 but fails to account for it.

As we examine the language of the Lord, we note that it is capable of two interpretations. First of all, however, it is well to compare it with the similar language in Genesis 4:7. In that verse we read, 'and his desire is unto thee.' The meaning in this context of the fourth chapter is that what sin desires is what Cain will carry out. His desire is unto Cain in the sense that Cain is a slave thereto, and must perform whatever sin's desire may be. In the present verse Gen. 3:16 we may render, 'and unto thy husband is thy desire.' It is obvious that the meaning here is the reverse of what it was in the fourth chapter. Is it not clear that in this third chapter the meaning cannot be that the desire of the woman is unto the husband so that he must do what she wishes? Is it not clear that the woman is not here pictured as a despot who compels the man to do the thing she desires? Plainly this is not the meaning of the text.²²

The above argument relies on certain presuppositions about the nature of the husband/wife relationship and about what the passage means. Young neglects the primary exegetical consideration -- context.

The passage, he continues, has two possible meanings, which we have considered before:

- (1) The desire of the woman will be subject to her husband (A.3).
- (2) The wife has a yearning for her husband, as a disease (A.2).

Young prefers the first alternative.²³

What Young considers an obviously impossible meaning for "desire," the meaning which "desire" has in the same syntactical setting only 15 verses away, is not impossible. The woman has the same sort of desire for her husband that sin has for Cain, a desire to possess or control him. This desire disputes the headship of the husband. As the Lord tells Cain what he should do, i.e., master or rule sin, the Lord also states what the husband

²² Young, p. 126-7.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

should do, rule over his wife. The words of the Lord in Genesis 3:16b, as in the case of the battle between sin and Cain, do not determine the victor of the conflict between husband and wife. These words mark the beginning of the battle of the sexes. As a result of the fall, man no longer rules easily; he must fight for his headship. Sin has corrupted both the willing submission of the wife and the loving headship of the husband. The woman's desire is to control her husband (to usurp his divinely appointed headship, and he must master her, if he can. So the rule of love founded in paradise is replaced by struggle, tyranny and domination.

Experience corroborates this interpretation of God's judgment on the woman. If the words "and he shall rule over you" in Genesis 3:16b are understood in the indicative, then they are not true. As Cain did not rule over sin (Genesis 4: 7b), so not every husband rules his wife, and wives have desires contrary to their husbands' and often have no desire (sexual or psychological) for their husbands.

As we have stated earlier on the basis of context, the woman's desire does not contribute to the husband's rule; the opposite is the case. The two clauses, "and your desire to control shall be to your husband" and "*but* he should master you," are antithetical. The presence of the personal pronoun אָהוּא (הָאָהוּא in Gen. 4:7) supports this understanding of the relationship of the two clauses.

The participants of two parallel but in some ways different activities are brought into prominence by realizing them as grammatically similar items in preverbal positions. A common way of doing this is to refer to the two participants by means of explicit pronoun subjects.²⁴

The use of the personal pronoun in preverbal position (אָהוּא) is unusual and redundant and brings the participants into contrast.²⁵

²⁴ Francis I. Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew*, The Hague, Mouton, 1974. p. 150.

²⁵ Ibid.; cf. Takamitsu Muraoka, *Emphasis in Biblical Hebrew*, thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Senate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1969, p. 42.

D. Summary

Contrary to the usual interpretations of commentators, the desire of the woman in Genesis 3:16b does not make the wife (more) submissive to her husband so that he may rule over her. Her desire is to contend with him for leadership in their relationship. This desire is a result of and a just punishment for sin, but it is not God's decretive will for the woman. Consequently, the man must actively seek to rule his wife.

The reasons for preferring this interpretation are:

(1) It is consistent with the context, i.e., it is judgment for sin that the relation between man and woman is made difficult. God's words in Genesis 3:16b destroy the harmony of marriage, for the rule of the husband, part of God's original intent for marriage, is not made more tolerable by the wife's desire for her husband, but less tolerable, because she rebels against his leadership and tries to usurp it.

(2) It permits a consistent understanding of תְּשׁוּקָה in the Old Testament also consistent with its etymology.

(3) It recognizes the parallel between Genesis 3:16b and 4:7b. The interpretation of 4:7b is clearer; we know from the context that sin's desire to Cain involves mastery or enslavement and that Cain did not win the battle to rule sin.

(4) It explains the fact that husbands do not rule their wives as a result of God's proclamation in Genesis 3:16b. (Further support is implied by the New Testament commands for wives to be submissive to their husbands and the requirements for elders to rule their families.) וְהָאֵלֹהִים יִמְשַׁלׁ בָּךְ is not an indicative statement, for if God states that something will come to pass, it will.

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