

# Genesis 3:16 and God's Pattern for the Family

Van Parunak  
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After the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden, God curses the serpent, the woman, and the man. The curse on the woman is:

Gen 3:16 Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and **thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.**

Some people understand the last two clauses as defining how families should operate. The woman is to be emotionally dependent on her husband, and he is to rule over her. The verse is understood as *instruction* for families, and is sometimes quoted as the foundation for NT passages on the different responsibilities of the husband and the wife such as Eph 5:22-33; Col 3:18-19; and 1 Pet 3:1-7.

The NT does describe a number of asymmetrical relations involving believers, including not only wives and husbands, but also believers and the government (Rom 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13, 14, 17), servants and masters (Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-25; 1 Tim 6:1-2; Tit 2:9-10; 1 Pet 2:18), children and parents (Eph 6:1-4; Col 3:20), and younger believers toward elders in the church (1 Thes 5:12-13; Heb 13:7, 17, 24; 1 Pet 5:1-5). Remarkably, none of these passages draws on the vocabulary of Gen 3:16. In fact, the NT forbids one believer to “rule” another in the manner that Gen 3:16 describes.

We begin by studying the phrases in Gen 3:16 in their OT context. Then we look at how the NT uses the verb “rule” in Gen 3:16, and finally discuss very different language that describes Christian leadership. We will see that Gen 3:16 does not *instruct* husbands and wives how to relate to each other, but *describes* sinful tendencies of fallen people that the NT corrects with very different instructions.

## Gen 3:16 in the OT

What does it mean for the woman's desire to be to her husband, and for him to rule over her?

The noun “desire” (תְּשׁוּקָה *teshuqah* H8669) appears only three times in the Hebrew Bible. In Gen 3:16, it describes an attitude of a woman toward a man. In Song 7:10 (Hebrew v. 11), it describes a man's desire toward a woman:

Song 7:10 I am my beloved's, and his **desire** is toward me.

Since the word can describe both the man's desire for the woman and the woman's desire for the man, it would be a mistake in Gen 3:16 to understand it of a gender-specific role that is part of the submission that the NT exhorts wives to show to their husbands.

The third instance is in Genesis 4, where the Lord is encouraging Cain after rejecting his sacrifice:

Gen 4:6 And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wrath? and why is thy countenance fallen? 7 If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his **desire**, and thou shalt rule over him.

In Genesis 4, sin is pictured as a wild beast, crouching at Cain's door. The desire in 4:7 is its hungry desire to dominate and devour him. The common semantic theme in Gen 3:16, 4:7, and Song 7:10 is not any form of submission or dependence, but a desire of one party to possess and control the other.

What does Gen 3:16 mean in saying that the man will “rule over her”? This Hebrew verb (מָשַׁל *marshal* H4910) describes control. It was exercised in Abraham's house, not by Abraham, but by his steward:

Gen. 24:2 And Abraham said unto his eldest servant of his house, that **ruled over** all that he had, ...

It describes Joseph's role in Egypt after he interpreted Pharaoh's dream:

Gen. 45:8 So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a **ruler** throughout all the land of Egypt.

It is the standard verb to describe a king's control over his territory, such as Sihon king of the Amorites (Josh 12:2), or the Philistines over Israel before the monarchy (Judg 14:4), or Solomon over Israel (1 Ki 4:21). The children of Israel tried to recruit Gideon into this role, but he resisted taking a position that belongs to God alone:

Judg. 8:22 Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, **Rule** thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian. 23 And Gideon said unto them, I will not **rule** over you, neither shall my son **rule** over you: the LORD shall **rule** over you.

When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the translators translated *mashal* mostly with ἀρχῶ *archō* G757 (to begin, to rule) or κυριεύω *kurieuō* G2961 (to be a lord or *kurios*), and less often with ἡγέομαι *hēgeomai* G2233 (to exercise dominion), or δεσπόζω *despozō* (a word that does not appear in the New Testament, but describes totalitarian rule). In Gen 3:16 they used *kurieuō*, and in 4:7, *archō*.

If Gen 3:16 is giving instructions, the statement "he shall rule over her" would authorize very strong behavior indeed. But then we would need to insist that the woman's beast-like desire for her husband is also appropriate. If the statements are descriptive, they describe the age-long battle of the sexes, certainly a realistic account of husband-wife relations through the years, but hardly something we want to encourage either the husband or the wife to imitate.

Perhaps the New Testament itself can give us some insight into the correct understanding of Gen 3:16.

## The "Rule" of Gen 3:16 and 4:7 in the NT

The New Testament quotes God's original intent for marriage from Gen 2:24, but nowhere quotes Gen 3:16. However, it does say a good deal about ruling. How does it use the Greek words *kurieuō* and *archō* that Gen 3:16 and 4:7 use to translate *mashal*?

*Kurieuō*, the translation used in 3:16, appears in the NT in three contexts.

First, it describes the authority of earthly kings, in a passage in which our Lord directly forbids his followers to rule in this way:

Luke 22:25 And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles **exercise lordship** over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. 26 But **ye shall not be so**: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve.

Paul specifically denies that he has the right to exercise this function over the churches (2 Cor 1:24).

Second, it describes the cruel rule of death (Rom 6:9), sin (Rom 6:14), or the law (Rom 7:1) over those without Christ.

Third, it describes the coming rule of the Lord Jesus:

Rom. 14:9 For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might **be Lord** both of the dead and living.

1Tim. 6:15 Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of **lords [ptc those who have dominion]**;

The pattern here recalls Gideon's protest to those who wanted to make him king. Ruling (Hebrew *masal*, Greek *kurieuō*) is God's right, and it is wrong for anybody else to seek to exercise it.

The translation *archō* used in Gen 4:7 is mostly used in the NT in its primitive sense of starting something (e.g., Matt 4:17 "from that time Jesus **began** to preach ..."). I've been able to find only two instances where it has the sense "rule" that we find in the OT. One is Mark's account of the Lord's instructions we saw in Luke 22:

Mark 10:42 But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to **rule** over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. 43 But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: 44 And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all.

Here, as in Luke, the Lord forbids his followers to imitate the kind of rule exercised by secular kings.

Rom. 15:12 And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he [the Messiah] that shall rise to **reign** over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust.

Like *kurieuō* in Rom 14:9 and 1 Tim 6:15, this verse reserves this kind of rule to the Lord Jesus.

These passages show that Gen 3:16 does not tell husbands how to manager their wives. The rule described there is a domineering, commanding approach popular with secular kings, but our Lord forbids his people to exercise it toward one another. He is the only one entitled to rule in this way.

## Patterns of Christian Leadership in the NT

Gen 3:16 *describes* how many marriages operate, but does not *instruct* us how they should work. The New Testament does, however, see an asymmetry in the marriage relation. It repeatedly tells wives to "submit" to their husbands, using the Greek verb ὑποτάσσω *hypotassō* G5293 (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; Tit 2:5; 1 Pet 3:1). What action by the husband corresponds to this submission?

We have two lines of evidence. First, some of the passages that tell wives to "submit" also describe the husband's behavior. Second, the NT describes other asymmetric relations besides marriage that describe the behavior that is appropriate for the party to whom submission is offered.

## The Semantic Contrast in the Marriage Relation

When the NT tells wives to submit, what behavior does it require from the husband, who receives this submission?

Eph 5:22 Wives, **submit** yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. ... 25 Husbands, **love** your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

Col 3:18 Wives, **submit** yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. 19 Husbands, **love** your wives, and **be not bitter** against them.

1Pe 3:1 Likewise, ye wives, be **in subjection** to your own husbands; ... 7 Likewise, ye husbands, **dwel with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife**, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.

These passages say nothing about the husband's authority to rule. They emphasize his Christ-like love and care for his wife. Husbands are to lead as the Lord instructed in Luke 22 and Mark 10, when after forbidding believers to rule over one another, he exhorts them,

Mark 10:43 but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your **minister**: 44 And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be **servant** of all.

The wife submits to her husband. The husband loves and serves her. There is not a word of his giving orders and her dutifully carrying them out. What a contrast this is from the battle of the sexes that results from the curse of Gen 3:16.

## The Example of Church Leadership

The NT prescribes an asymmetrical relation not only between wives and husbands, but also between younger believers to the elders in the assembly. There is a close relationship between family leadership and church leadership. Paul sets forth as one of the requirements for an overseer in a local church,

1Ti 3:4 One that **ruleth** well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; 5 (For if a man know not how to **rule** his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)

The same requirement applies to deacons, who support the elders or bishops in their work:

1Ti 3:12 Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, **ruling** their children and their own houses well.

The Greek verb translated “rule” in these verses (προΐστημι *prohistēmi* G4291) is regularly used in describing the role of church leaders. It originally described someone who represented a group by standing at their head. The standard Greek lexicon BDAG offers two meanings: “to exercise a position of leadership (rule, direct, be at the head),” and “to have an interest in (show concern for, care for, give aid.” It appears five times in the Greek translation of the OT. It never translates *mashal*, and sometimes is exercised by a servant. In the sad story of Amnon’s rape of Tamar, we read,

2Sam. 13:17 Then he [Amnon] called his servant that **ministered** unto him, and said, Put now this woman out from me, and bolt the door after her.

The servant “stood before” Amnon, but was hardly in a position of authority over him.

This word commonly describes the asymmetry between church leaders and other believers.

1Th 5:12 And we beseech you, brethren, to **know** them which **labour** among you, and **are over** you in the Lord, and **admonish** you; 13 And to **esteem** them very highly in love for their work's sake. And **be at peace** among yourselves.

The church leaders are expect to labor, to “be over” (*proistēmi*) and to admonish the believers, who are to respond by knowing them, esteeming them, and maintaining peaceful relations with one another.

1Ti 5:17 Let the elders that **rule** well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.

We see it also in exhortations to believers concerning their spiritual leaders in Hebrews 13,

Heb 13:7 Remember them which **have the rule** over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.

Heb 13:17 Obey them that **have the rule** over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

Heb 13:24 Salute all them that **have the rule** over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you.

The elders rule by speaking the word of God and watching for the souls of the other believers. Those believers are to remember their example, obey and submit to them, and greet them. Again, we have an asymmetric relation. The elders stand at the front, leading the congregation. Because of their example, the people follow them.

Peter describes the relation between elders and the congregation, and uses the word for “submit,” *hupotassō*, that Paul uses to describe the relation of the wife to the husband.

1Pe 5:1 The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 2 **Feed** the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; 3 **Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples** to the flock. ... 5 Likewise, ye younger, **submit *hupotassō* yourselves** unto the elder.

The verb “being lords over” (κατακυριεύω *katakurieuō* G2634) is a strengthened version of the Greek translation of “rule” (*kurieuō*) in Gen 3:16, the kind of rule that our Lord forbids his followers to exercise in Luke 22:25-26. Their rule is not by giving orders, but by being examples.

Peter’s use of the metaphor of a shepherd and sheep in v. 2 is important. The word “pastor” literally describes a shepherd of sheep. To this day, shepherds in the middle east lead their sheep from the front, rather than driving them from the back. Our Lord describes a shepherd and his flock:

Jhn 10:4 And when he putteth forth his own sheep, **he goeth before them**, and the sheep **follow** him: for they know his voice.

They know the one who cares for them. They follow his example. This is the servant leadership that our Lord sets forth in Matt 20:25-28, Mark 10:42-45, and Luke 22:25-26. This is the leadership that God expects of those who shepherd his sheep, whether in leading the local church, or in leading a household.

## Conclusion

Gen 3:16 envisions two people striving for control of the family, the woman like a cunning beast trying to dominate her husband, the husband seeking to command her as a king over his court. This pattern is the result of the fall, and our Lord forbids such rule among his people. He instructs those in positions of leadership to exercise that leadership by serving and being an example, not by issuing commands.

Interestingly, though both in the family and in the church the Scriptures describe one party being subject to the other, in both cases they recognize this as part of a mutual subjection of them to one another.

Peter, after distinguishing the leadership of the elders from the submission of the younger believers, writes,

1Pe 5:5 ... Yea, all of you be subject *hupotassō* one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

And Paul’s exhortation to wives and husbands follows a similarly symmetrical statement,

Eph 5:21 Submitting *hupotassō* yourselves one to another in the fear of God.

The NT pattern for Christian marriage is not Gen 3:16, which it never quotes. It is Gen 2:24, two people who together form one flesh to serve God in mutual submission to him and to each other.

# Notes

## Rule 2-לַשָּׁרָה *mashal* H4910

	לַשָּׁרָה			
ἄρχω G757	16			81
κυριεύω G2961	13			50
ἡγέομαι G2233	5			160
δεσπόζω	5			17
προΐστημι G4291	0			8
Total	81			

### NT use of κυριεύω (word used in Gen 3:16)

Luke 22:25 And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles **exercise lordship** over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. 26 But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve.

Rom. 6:9 Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death **hath** no more **dominion** over him.

Rom. 6:14 For sin shall not **have dominion** over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.

Rom. 7:1 Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law **hath dominion** over a man as long as he liveth?

Rom. 14:9 For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might **be Lord** both of the dead and living.

2Cor. 1:24 Not for that we **have dominion** over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand.

1Tim. 6:15 Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of **lords [ptc those who have dominion]**;

### NT use of ἄρχω (word used in Gen 4:7)

Mostly in sense “begin”

Mark 10:42 But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to **rule** over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. 43 But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: 44 And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all.

Rom. 15:12 And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to **reign** over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust.

## NT “rule (well)” προϊστημι G4291

2Sam. 13:17 Then he [Amon] called his servant that **ministered** unto him, and said, Put now this woman out from me, and bolt the door after her.

Prov. 23:5 Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? for riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven [LXX the house of his **master**]

Prov. 26:17 ¶ He that passeth by, and meddleth with strife belonging not to him [LXX makes himself the **champion** of another's cause], is like one that taketh a dog by the ears.

Is. 43:24 Thou hast bought me no sweet cane with money, neither hast thou filled me with the fat of thy sacrifices: but thou hast made me to serve with thy sins, thou hast wearied me with thine iniquities [LXX thou didst **stand before me** in thy sins, and in thine iniquities]

Amos 6:10 And a man's uncle shall take him up, and he that burneth him, to bring out the bones out of the house, and shall say unto him that is by the sides of the house [LXX one shall say to the **heads** of the house], Is there yet any with thee?