

TRANSLATION WITHOUT MEANING?
AN EXEGESIS OF COLOSSIANS 3:21

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will present our exegesis of Col. 3:21. This Pauline text has simple grammar and its challenge thus lies somewhere else. The paper will focus on two aspects, namely the role of the paraenesis within the letter to the Colossians and the significance and meaning of the vocabulary in the verse within the socio-cultural setting of this letter. The former includes an exegesis of the verse within the structure and the purpose of the letter. The latter would require both a lexicological and a sociological study, but the extent of this paper will reach no further than the lexicological study.

STRUCTURE

The letter to the Colossians can roughly be divided in three parts—next to the introduction (1:1-2) and the conclusion of the letter (4:7-18)—; an extended thanksgiving (1:3-23), a personal statement (1:24-2:5), and the theme of the letter (2:6-4:6).¹ The theme can be split in two major passages: an address of the threat to the community (2:6-23) and the exhortations (3:1-4:6).² There are other approaches to the structure, but this debate is not the object of this paper.³

HAUSTAFELN

Within the exhortation, Col. 3:18-4:1 is defined as a “household code.” Next to this one Paul has one other explicit household code—or *Haustafel* as it is often called—; in Ephesians (5:21-6:9). Both contain three dyads: wives-husbands, children-fathers, and slaves-masters. In Colossians emphasis is put on the master-slave relationship. In Ephesians the emphasis is on the husband-wife relationship,⁴ although the slaves-masters dyad is as extensive as in Colossians. In both cases the children-fathers dyad is short.

The household of the Ancient World is not to be compared with the current Western family. It includes the immediate bloodline family, but also slaves, freedmen, servants, labourers and “sometimes even business associates and tenants.

¹ James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 41-2. See also: Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians*, AB 34b, trans. Astrid B. Beck (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995): vi-vii; F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 35-6. About all commentaries roughly have the same division. Some vary on the beginning and the conclusion of the parts, but the household rules of 3:18-4:1 are treated as a whole in all consulted commentaries.

² Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, vii.

³ Jean-Noël Aletti (*Saint Paul: Épître aux Colossiens*, Études Bibliques 20 [Paris: J. Gabalda, 1993]: 33-42) offers a comprehensive overview of different approaches to the structural issue in Colossians.

⁴ Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 86.

In principle, the householder . . . had full authority over the members of the household. He also had obligations and some legal responsibilities to them.”⁵

Origin

The origin of the *Haustafeln* is a heavily debated subject. Suggested as the sources are Aristotle, the Stoic duty codes, and Hellenistic Judaism.⁶ On the one hand, no “exact formal parallels have been unearthed.”⁷ On the other hand, in saying this Philip Towner neglects the strong connection with Aristotle’s writings. Aristotle already described the household as the foundation of the political system, mentioning paterfamilias, wife, children and slaves (*Politica* 1.1253b). Moreover, the philosophical discussion of the household management as such does not occur in the Hebrew Bible, in Plato, nor among the Stoics.⁸ Thomas Olbricht thus concludes that while one “cannot argue that the *Haustafeln* . . . are directly dependent upon a reading of Aristotle, the structure may ultimately be traced to an Aristotelian source.”⁹ Unless proven different with other sources the *Haustafeln* is most clearly Aristotelian.

However, what is often neglected is the interaction between different sources. For example, the question whether the *Haustafeln* is Aristotelian or Judaic, seems to overlook that the first century Judaism was to a great degree influenced by Aristotelian thinking, since Hellenism originated under Alexander the Great, who was instructed in philosophy by Aristotle.

Function

At first sight the household code seems to stand disconnected from the rest of the text.¹⁰ But a close examination shows the role of the *Haustafeln* in Colossians. Petr Pokorný offers five possible functions for this code in Colossians.¹¹

First, *Haustafeln* are intended for daily life. They should be viewed in light of the new life in Christ—a central theme in Colossians (“in the Lord” is repeated several times in the *Haustafeln*). In 3:1-17 the author has given a more general exhortation. It was about how Christians should conduct their lives and submit to

⁵ Philip H. Towner, “Household and Household Codes,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993): 417.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 418-9.

⁸ Thomas H. Olbricht, “Aristotle, Aristotelianism,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000): 120.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Dunn, *Colossians*, 242.

¹¹ Petr Pokorný, *Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 177-80.

the Lord. The radical nature of Paul's exhortation is made more tangible in 3:18-4:1.¹² Paul here uses the "primary unit of community" as an example of how the Christian life takes form.¹³ The Greek model is a way of making clear such characteristics as compassion, kindness and humility (3:12).¹⁴ These are attributes due to the renewed likeness of the Creator's image (3:10). Thus, the connection with the Greco-Roman household codes is a concrete application of this image. The reader already knows the household code and Paul uses it as an application. It is an application close to the heart of both home and church, since the early church often gathered in houses for worship—as was the case in Colossae (see 4:15).¹⁵ They often have similar leadership; it appears that the paterfamilias in several cases in the early church became the church leader (see Rom. 16:4-23; 1 Cor. 1:11; 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2).¹⁶ Thus, in presenting the household codes to the church, Paul is not merely offering rules of conduct for Christian families, but also for the Church itself. It seems that Paul adopted Aristotle's ideas of the household as the basic unit of the state and used it as a model for this church.¹⁷

Second, based on 4:5 one can say that the codes in Colossians are apologetic. The *Haustafeln* are known to non-Christians and can show quite easily how Christianity reshapes human structures. F.F. Bruce states that it is "in the closest and most familiar relationships of daily living that the reality of one's Christian profession will normally be manifested."¹⁸ The application of the *Haustafel* shows this to the non-Christian environment.

Third, the *Haustafeln* show that a confession of Jesus Christ as Lord makes coexistence in the world possible. Paul uses a familiar example and "redeems" it, and shows that—if one sees Christ as the base for it—the ethics of the world can be applied to Christianity.

Fourth, it is used as an accommodation of Christian values to the environment. This is the opposite order of the third function. So it is primarily to demonstrate that the new life in the old world is not threatening for the non-Christians. In the writings of Aristotle the household is seen as "the basic unit of the state" (*Pol.* 1.1252b) and Christianity could have been considered as a dangerous threat if Paul overthrew this unit.¹⁹ James Dunn speaks of a "more conformist ethic."²⁰ Nevertheless, one could

¹² Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC 44 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982): 218.

¹³ Dunn, *Colossians*, 243-4.

¹⁴ Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 474.

¹⁵ Towner, "Household Codes," 417.

¹⁶ Derek J. Tidball, "Social Setting of Mission Churches," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993): 888.

¹⁷ Ibid. Tidball's argumentation for this is very limited.

¹⁸ Bruce, *Colossians*, 163.

¹⁹ Ibid., 243.

question whether this is a mere conformist ethic. Though Paul uses some of the main focal points (wives-husbands, children-parents, slaves-masters), he adds revolutionary aspects as well. The formal similarity does not mean that its content is just as similar.

Fifth, it helps to prevent the Gospel from a “spiritualistic misinterpretation” in which ascetism and superiority are proclaimed. In light of Col 2:18,21 this seems a very plausible suggestion.²¹

All five suggestions make sense in the light of the letter. They need not exclude one another, but can probably coexist. There is a degree of conformism present, but the household code is not merely a conformist strategy. We see the practical application as the primary function, because this gives most attention to the internal structure of Colossians.

Paterfamilias

The structure and the addressee(s) of the *Haustafel* are also important for understanding the meaning. The parallelism within the household code is significant. The addressees ἄνδρες (3:19), πατέρες (3:21) and κύριοι (4:1) parallel each other, as do γυναῖκες (3:18), τέκνα (3:20) and δοῦλοι (3:22). At first these may seem heterogeneous groups, but in light of the important distinction Aristotle makes between the paterfamilias and the other members of the household, and the parallelism in the *Haustafel*; we suggest that there are two groups; one with power and one without. Wives, children and slaves are connected by their subordinate position²²; and husbands, fathers and masters by their dominance. In Greek culture this is attributed to the paterfamilias.

		3:18	γυναῖκες	Powerless	
Paterfamilias		ἄνδρες	3:19		
			3:20		τέκνα
		πατέρες	3:21		
			3:22		δοῦλοι
		κύριοι	4:1		

Paul addresses the powerless: wives, children and slaves. Aristotle may have a similar say about the family structure, but he instructs only the paterfamilias in his works. He is the one who needs to organize the family through his authority. Paul here addresses the weak; he thus seems to empower them to make a substantial

²⁰ Dunn, *Colossians*, 243.

²¹ See also L. Theo Witkamp, *Kolossenzen: Een praktische bijbelverklaring*, T&T (Kampen: Kok, 1994), 104.

²² Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 246-7, 249, 252-3.

contribution to the wellbeing of the community. Moreover, he *first* addresses the weak and in doing so, he changes the typical structure of the dyads.²³ The dyad husband-wife becomes wife-husband, father-child becomes child-father and master-slave slave-master.²⁴

The question however is whether Paul really is addressing the weak, or whether this is a mere rhetorical construction in which he formally addresses the weak in order to really get through to the paterfamilias. It is his responsibility to facilitate this social structure. In this sense, Paul would be closer to Aristotle than most commentators suggest. This thesis would require rhetorical research beyond the scope of this paper, but it is definitely an interesting track to pursue. For now we suggest that Paul is primarily addressing one group—the paterfamilias—and maybe a second—the powerless.

This similarity with Aristotle however does not exclude the transformational aspect of Christianity: the Christian church chooses a transformation from within, and not a revolution from without.²⁵ This is very significant. It is not a revolution, but a golden rule to find a path in between two extremes; a “responsible participation” in the dominant culture in between power and equality.²⁶ Thus Paul here shows a very culture-sensitive treatment of the “old” socio-political structures and the “new” life in Christ. Both Greek and Roman sources after Plato and Aristotle affirmed the importance of peace in the household.²⁷

COLOSSIANS 3:21

Two central person groups—πατέρες and τέκνα—and two central verbs—ἐρεθίζω and ἄθυμέω—give the meaning to this verse. We will discuss all four words.

ΠΑΤΕΡΕΣ

In Col. 3:21 Paul addresses the paterfamilias a second time; this time in his role as father.²⁸ In the Greek πατέρες may include both fathers and mothers.²⁹ In this case it could refer to the parents (γονεῦσιν) in 3:20, thus forming a chiasm. The chiasm we find in the other household verses (wives – husbands – wives, and slaves –

²³ Cf. Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 462.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 473.

²⁵ Dunn, *Colossians*, 246.

²⁶ Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 471.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 472.

²⁸ Dunn, *Colossians*, 251.

²⁹ Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 443.

masters – slaves) seems to invite to translate *πατέρες* by “parents”³⁰, as it is used in Heb. 11:23.³¹

Τὰ τέκνα ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν κατὰ πάντα, τοῦτο γὰρ εὐάρεστόν ἐστιν ἐν κυρίῳ.
Οἱ πατέρες, μὴ ἐρεθίζετε τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν, ἵνα μὴ ἀθυμῶσιν.

One could make a completely different argument based on this parallelism, i.e. that in choosing this word, the author deliberately wants to make a distinction between *γονεῦσιν* and *πατέρες*.³² Our suggestion that Paul is addressing one group—the paterfamilias—seems to be enforced by this distinction. This is also supported by Aristotle’s view on the paterfamilias as having the “royal rule” over the household. In *Pol.* 1.1252b he cites Homer’s *Odyssey* in saying that each man gives laws to his children and his spouses.³³ Further, Gaius states that mothers did not have paternal authority over their children (*Institutiones* 1.104).³⁴ The paterfamilias is the central authority giver in the family.³⁵ This points to *πατέρες* referring to fathers and not including mothers, as the father has the authority in the Roman the *patria potestas* society.³⁶

τέκνα

On the word *τέκνα* we can be brief. A specific age is not taken into account with the use of this word.³⁷ Thus it can include every child living under the supervision of the paterfamilias until his death. This reflects the OT commandment to honour one’s father and mother.³⁸ From his proper existence being indebted to his father, the child is already under the *natural* authority of his father (Aristotle, *Ethica*

³⁰ Aletti, *Colossians*, 246.

³¹ Johan Murre, *Lexicon Nieuwe Testament* (Vught: Skandalon, 2009): 613.

³² See Bruce, *Colossians*, 165 n. 186.

³³ Consulted at Perseus Digital Library, accessed April 13, 2010, at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D1252b>

³⁴ Consulted at The Latin Library, accessed April 13, 2010, at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/gaius1.html#104>; Craig S. Keener, “Family and Household,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000): 353, 357.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ O’Brien, *Colossians*, 225.

³⁷ Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 439. When Philo (*De Officiis Mundi* 105) gives an overview of the stages of manhood, but the vocabulary, based on Solon and Hippocrates, does not view *τέκνα* as a separate stage. In the Pauline writings *τέκνα* is used only once explicitly for young children (1 Thess. 2:7).

³⁸ Ibid.

Nicomachea 8.11.2).³⁹ That Paul only speaks of obedience in 3:20 does not exclude love as an aspect of the father-child relationship.⁴⁰ On the contrary, in light of 3:12 love is already implied in these verses.

ἐρεθίζω

There is an alternative reading of the verb ἐρεθίζω in Col. 3:21, but J.B. Lightfoot already in the nineteenth century pointed out that, though the verb παροργίζω has quite some support, it is an unlikely original reading since it “is doubtless taken from the parallel passage” in Eph. 6:4.⁴¹

The verb occurs twice in the NT (Col. 3:21; 2 Cor. 9:2, where it is used in a positive manner).⁴² In Col. 3:21, it is often translated as “to embitter.” Other suggestions are “to arouse” or “to provoke.”⁴³ Henry Liddell and Robert Scott even suggest the meaning “rouse to anger, rouse to fight.”⁴⁴ Anatole Bailly supports this strong translation, but also leaves room for a mere “provoke.”⁴⁵ Lightfoot suggests that the irritation or the provocation is caused by being too exacting of children.⁴⁶ In the LXX the verb is used six times (Deut. 21:20; Prov. 19:7; 25:23; Dan.^{LXX} 11:10,25). However, the use of the verb here does not provide a clear parallel with the passage in Col. 3:21. Thus, it is difficult to determine whether Paul bases his use of the verb on a Septuagint passage or on a non-biblical parallel.

The exhortation—to not embitter—seems at first less harsh than the conduct of the *patria potestas*, as described by Dionysius of Haliacarnassus—who suggest a very severe education.⁴⁷ It is however not univocally “more Christian” to consider a more humane treatment of children. Both Plato (*Legislationes* VII. 793E-794A⁴⁸) and Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* 8.1160b.23-1161a.10) contrast the education of children with the rule over slaves.⁴⁹ Because of the natural relationship between parents and children, parents love their children (*Eth. Nic.* 8.12.2). Cicero also saw the bond between

³⁹ John van Eck, *Kolossenzen en Filemon*, CNT (Kampen: Kok, 2007): 200.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴¹ J.B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 2nd repr. (Lynn, MA: Hendrickson, 1982), 227.

⁴² Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 443.

⁴³ Michael H. Burer and Jeffery E. Miller, *A New Reader's Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008): 384.

⁴⁴ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996): 684.

⁴⁵ Anatole Bailly, *Le Grand Bailly: Dictionnaire Grec Française* (Paris: Hachette, 2000): 800.

⁴⁶ Lightfoot, *Colossians*, 227.

⁴⁷ Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 443-4.

⁴⁸ Consulted at The Latin Library, accessed June 3, 2010, at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0166%3Abook%3D7%3Apage%3D794>.

⁴⁹ Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 444.

parents and children as very important (*De Officiis* 1.53-54). Craig Keener suggests that the verb does not imply a *laissez-faire* attitude as found in the twentieth century anti-authoritarian education. Though physical punishment was regarded as necessary for a good development of the child, in both Greco-Roman and Jewish literature firm discipline needs to be combined with a loving gentleness.⁵⁰

There are very few commentators who try to explain what Paul means exactly with ἐρεθίζω. How are children provoked (to anger)? How are they irritated? Most commentators do not even say that it would be speculation to try to find out. They just give a translation, but do not attempt to conceptualize that translation. One of the few consulted that tries to do this, is William Hendriksen. His view is that fathers in this verse are called not to be “unjust or overly severe.”⁵¹ His argumentation however is not convincing. He does not give any internal evidence for this opinion. He merely sums up some Scripture references that happen to fit his opinion, but there is no clear argumentation for his choice of reference. Jean-Noël Aletti similarly thinks that Paul wants his readers to act differently than their contemporaries, because at that time education was frightful with its rigidity and harshness.⁵² The texts of Greco-Roman authors above however suggest that this view of love being absent in ancient days is not entirely accurate.

John van Eck contrasts ἐρεθίζω with the patience and forgiveness in Col. 3:12-13.⁵³ In doing so, he is the only consulted commentator who tries to provide internal evidence. However, the internal evidence is not very elaborate and additional external evidence is absent.

ἀθυμέω

The verb ἀθυμέω is only used here in the NT. It is used a few times in the LXX (e.g., Deut. 28:65; 1 Sam. 1:6,7).⁵⁴ However, in each passage the link with a household code of Colossians is not clear. Once more, it is the question whether Paul’s usage of the verb is based on the LXX usage or on a non-biblical source. The verb is translated by “being discouraged” or “despond.”⁵⁵ Anatole Bailly adds “être occupé” and “être inquiet” to these translations.⁵⁶ Again, very few authors try to find meaning behind a mere translation of the verb.

According to Eck, the focus of Paul’s exhortation is on this verb. He does not suspect fathers to “provoke” their children constantly. What he encourages them, is

⁵⁰ Keener, “Family,” 358.

⁵¹ William Hendriksen, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), 172.

⁵² Aletti, *Colossiens*, 254.

⁵³ Eck, *Kolossenzen*, 202.

⁵⁴ O’Brien, *Colossians*, 226; Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 445.

⁵⁵ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 33.

⁵⁶ Bailly, *Dictionnaire Grec Française*, 37.

to engage in a conscious education. He wants fathers to be aware of the possible consequence of their behaviour.⁵⁷ As said before, we appreciate Eck's attempt to provide an internal explanation for the verbs in this verse, but his argumentation however is rather poor.

Dunn argues that the two verbs in this verse should be viewed in light of the attraction of the "heretics" on the one hand and the embarrassment that their parents belonged to a Christian Judaic sect on the other hand.⁵⁸ An overreacting towards the children could drive them away from Christ.⁵⁹ Thus, to despond would mean that the children—because of the actions of their fathers—would turn to the heretics. Dunn's suggestion seems interesting, but again it lacks sufficient argumentation. Further, he translates ἐρεθίζω with "to overreact", but fails to explain *how* the fathers overreacted exactly. Pokorný formulates it similarly: "The author feared that inconsiderate treatment of the children might dissuade them from the faith."⁶⁰ Again, the same remark as before can be made: this interpretation stays speculative and lacks thorough argumentation.

CONCLUSION: TRANSLATION WITHOUT MEANING?

Though at first Col. 3:21 seems an evident verse, it turns out that few commentators really try to explain what the verse means. The problem lies not with the persons in the verse: the paterfamilias is addressed and his child—regardless of age—is the object of the exhortation. The verbs however present more difficulties. Most of the commentators content in a mere translating the verbs without giving meaning to them. Those who attempt to do so, offer interesting suggestions, but fail to give sufficient evidence for their interpretation. Thus, in order to really understand this passage, a more thorough lexicological study combined with a socio-historical study is in order. Unfortunately that exceeds the extent of this paper.

⁵⁷ Eck, *Kolossenzen*, 202.

⁵⁸ Dunn, *Colossians*, 252.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Pokorný, *Colossians*, 182.