

Do wives have to call their husbands lord?

Abraham married Sarai (Ge 11:29). She called him Lord (1 Pe 3:6)—clearly having great respect for him.

Regarding 1 Peter 3:6, J. H. Elliott wrote:

The word “lord” (kyrios) also occurs earlier in this story (Gen 18:3) as a term of respect in Abraham’s address to his visitor: “My lord (i.e., “worthy sir”), if indeed I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant” (Gen 18:3; cf. also 19:2 and T. Ab. 5:12; 6:2, 5, 8). According to 1 Sam (1 Kgdms) 1:8, Hannah, the mother of Samuel, also addresses her husband Elkanah as “lord,” or “sir” (kyrie; cf. also Ps 44[45]:11 and 1Qap Genar II 8–9, 13, 24; XX 12, 14, 15, 25, where a wife also employs “my lord” as a respectful form of address for her husband). The Petrine author, interested not in the Genesis episode in general but only in Sarah’s remark, takes it as an indication of her subordination and obedience to (hypēkousen) Abraham as her husband. In common Greek usage, a kyrios is a man of importance and high position, such as an owner of property (Matt 20:8; 21:40; Mark 12:9; Luke 20:13) or a master or householder with full control of something (Matt 9:38; Luke 10:2), including slaves (Matt 6:24; 13:27; Luke 12:46; John 13:16), children (Matt 21:29), and wife (Plutarch, Mulier. virt. 15; Mor. 252B; SIG3 1189.7; 1190.5).

In the Hellenistic world, as in ancient Israel, the female was always under the tutelage and authority of some male known as kyrios (“owner, lord”), be it her father (or closest male relative) or her husband. In Roman society, the female was under the so-called potestas patria within different types of marriage (ius matrimonium, a legally valid marriage; iniustum matrimonium, cohabitation without a legal marriage). The traditional form of Roman marriage in manum involved either usus, life together for one year; confarreatio, a religious ceremony restricted to patricians and priests; or coemptio, a fictitious purchase of a wife by her husband (cf. Gaius, Inst. 1.108–13). A marriage with manus involved the legal transfer of a woman from the authority of her father to that of her husband, with each inheriting from the other at the other’s death. In a marriage without manus, the woman’s family retained control over her property during her lifetime and after her death. Because families with property (mostly elites) wanted to retain control of property within the family, marriages without manus became common as wealth increased from Republican times onward. The Emperor Augustus, concerned about the laxity of marriage customs in his day, passed specific legislation regulating adultery, divorce, and favoring the bearing of children (Lex Julia de adulteriis [18 BCE]; Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus [18 BCE]; and Lex Papia Poppaea [9 BCE]).¹

Biblical submission between a man and wife is mutual (Eph 5:21). Jesus had love and respect for women.

Woman was to be a help meet (Ge 2:18, 20). She is the glory of man (1 Co 11:7–9). Women are the weaker vessel (1 Pe 3:7).

Husbands should: love (Eph 5:25–33), honor (1 Pe 3:7) and care for their wives (1 Ti 5:8).

¹ Elliott, J. H. (2008). 1 Peter: a new translation with introduction and commentary (Vol. 37B, pp. 571–572). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Wives should: be homemakers (Tt 2:5) and chaste (Tt 2:4), have reverence for their husbands (Eph 5:33), love them (Tt 2:4) and be trustworthy (Pr 31:11, 12).