

SHORT STUDY

***Children of Sarah:
Interpreting 1 Peter 3:6b***

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*Any translation of 1 Pet 3:6b that treats the expression ἀγαθοποιοῦσαι καὶ μὴ φοβούμεναι μηδεμίαν πτόησιν in a conditional sense, either directly or indirectly, cannot be sustained. The use of participles as imperatives elsewhere in the Household Code and the theology of 1 Peter more generally indicate that “doing good and not being terrified” are behavioral characteristics that the author wants to see in the readers as a result of their elect status.
Key Words: participles, 1 Peter, children of Sarah, household codes*

The purpose of this article is to question the common translation of 1 Pet 3:6 in the main English versions and to provide a better rendering that does justice not only to the author’s style but also to the theology of 1 Peter as a whole.

In the first six verses of chap. 3, the author is dealing with the appropriate response of believing wives to their (unbelieving) husbands. This forms part of a larger discussion that draws on the *Haustafeln*: codes of conduct for various facets of the household that can ultimately be traced back to Aristotle. The use of the *Haustafeln* is also apparent in the Pauline Epistles (Eph 5:21–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1) and appears to have been influenced not only by Christian tradition and ethics but also by Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism. 1
In line with his general conception of Christian mission as “distinctive presence,” Peter urges the Christian wife to adopt a submissive attitude to her husband so as to influence him positively for the gospel. She must not focus on outward adornment but on the internal virtues

1. See D. L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (SBLMS 26; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

of humility and gentleness of spirit. The OT matriarchs are then used as examples of such submissive attitudes, with Sarah singled out for special interest by her obedience to Abraham and deference to him as κύριος.

Peter then, in conformity with his previous teaching regarding identity and status of believers in 2:9–10, links the faithful of both covenant eras under the one umbrella, here using the familial metaphor of mother and children. The people of God in the new covenant era (specifically here Christian wives) are designated ἧς ἐγενήθητε τέκνα (“whose children you have become”), with the antecedent of the relative pronoun clearly being Sarah.

It is at this point in the argument that we encounter the problematic participles ἀγαθοποιοῦσαι καὶ μὴ φοβούμεναι μηδεμίαν πτόησιν, literally, “doing good and not fearing anything terrifying.” The following is an example of the rendering by the common English versions:

NRSV: You have become her children as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

NIV: You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

NASB: You have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.

NKJV: . . . whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror.

NEV: You are now her daughters if you do good and are not afraid of anything.

It is evident that the English versions universally understand the participles to have a conditional force. In other words, having the status of Sarah’s children is dependent upon good ethical conduct and not caving in to fear. But this understanding runs contrary to the general theological tenor of the epistle.

In voicing this objection, I must first validate my assumption that the ascription “daughters (children) of Sarah” is a salvific, or at least a covenantal, designation. This is not a common expression, but in encouraging the Babylonian exiles, Isaiah (51:2) reminds them of their covenantal parents, Abraham and Sarah, as the basis for showing that God can make something great of a very small minority. There is a further allusion in Isa 54:1 to Sarah, the “barren one,” who will be the mother of numerous descendants who will in turn inherit the nations (v. 3). Josephus also refers to Sarah as the mother of the Jewish nation.²

Of course, the concept of “children of Abraham” is certainly more common as a label of covenantal status (Ps 105:6; Luke 13:16), and that it embodies a feeling of (supposed) covenantal security is evident not only in the later Jewish (b. 'Erub. 19a; b. *Šabb.* 33b; *Gen. Rab.* 48.8; *Exod. Rab.* 19.4) but also early Christian literature (Matt 1:73; 3:8–9; Justin, *Dial.* 140). But the classic Christian expression of Sarah as the mother of Christian believers comes from Paul who, in a rather complex allegory, argues that all who are free from the law have become children of the promise with Sarah as their mother (Gal 4:21–31). In later rabbinic literature Sarah is viewed as the (nursing) mother of all Gentile proselytes.³

So, given the above evidence, it is extremely difficult to argue in 1 Pet 3:6 that ἦς ἐγενήθητε τέκνα indicates anything other than membership of the people of God. Indeed, the commentators are unanimous that the aorist tense points back in time to the conversion experience.

If this be the case, then in what sense is membership of God’s family conditional on good conduct? To be sure, Peter exhorts his readers to imitate the holiness of God (1:15–16), but this is a requirement for those who are already children of God (1:14). Furthermore, in the opening chapter it is abundantly clear that the status enjoyed by believers is a result of God’s action. The new birth to a living hope is a merciful act of God (1:3); redemption was achieved by the precious blood of Christ (1:18–19). In fact, the main ethical injunctions that begin in 2:11ff. are only given once firm theological and soteriological foundations have been laid. It is instructive that this ethical section comes hot on the heels of the covenantal terminology used to paint a very lofty picture of the status of those who follow Jesus Christ (2:9–10).

In addition, the appeal in 2:11 to abstain from fleshly desires is made on the basis of the status of the believers as “aliens and exiles” (παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμους). Despite John Elliott’s insistence that this terminology is primarily political and sociological, signifying displacement and estrangement from a hostile society,⁴ M. Chin has advanced forceful arguments showing that this is inherently theological/eschatological language.⁵ In fact, it is not a case of “either/or” but of “both/and.” It is because believers are exiled from their heavenly home that they must not live as though their true home were in the world. This

3. *Pesiq. Rab.* 18a; *Tan* 32a, 54b, cited in C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1938), 573–74.

4. J. H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 21–49.

5. M. Chin, “A Heavenly Home for the Homeless: Aliens and Strangers in 1 Peter,” *TynB* 42 (1991): 96–112.

will mean distinctive conduct, conduct that is sure to win much abuse and rejection from their pagan neighbors.

So there are few if any grounds on which to understand covenant entry and identity, now described as being “children of Sarah,” as the result of any form of human conduct or merit. Indeed, as we have seen, the equation works in the other direction. As a result of covenant status, a certain lifestyle is demanded. So why not treat the participles in question as having a resultative force?⁶ This, in effect, leads to two options.

The first is to take the resultative idea as an indicative: that is, “you have become Sarah’s children and so you do what is right and do not give way to fear.” But a better option is to allow the resultative force to work out as an imperative: that is, “you have become Sarah’s children, so do good and do not give way to fear!” This not only allows the imperative to grow out of the indicative (as it does elsewhere in 1 Peter), but the participles then align with the other present participles that are used in the *Haustafel* as imperatives (2:17, 18; 3:1, 7).⁷

What of the commentators? Of the major commentators in English who discuss the participles in this context, only J. R. Michaels unambiguously believes that the imperatival force is “the better alternative.”⁸ Earlier, F. W. Beare argued against the conditional sense but then opted for the translation “in that you do good,”⁹ which is at best vague and apparently still has some conditional force. L. Goppelt argues that Christian wives do not become Sarah’s children on the basis of good behavior. He states, “The participles express not the *ground but a demonstration of this relationship to Sarah*” (*italics his*).¹⁰ But unfortunately he then translates the text against his own advice with, “You have become her children if you conduct yourself properly and fear no intimidation.” P. J. Achtemeier contends that it is “highly unlikely” that the participles are conditional but then seemingly falls on his own sword by proposing either an instrumental of means (“by”), or more likely, attendant circumstances (“when”).¹¹ But with both these options the conditional force is still brightly shining through. J. H. Elliott believes that the participles “describe the present conduct and confidence consequent upon becoming Sarah’s spiritual children through conversion.”¹² But he opts for the in-

6. See D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 637–39 for a discussion of the participle of result.

7. So J. R. Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC 49; Dallas: Word, 1988), 166–67.

8. *Ibid.*, 166.

9. F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 157.

10. L. Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 224.

11. P. J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 216.

12. J. H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (AB 37B; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 573.

dicative sense in translating as: “You became her children now doing what is right and not fearing any terror.” This is for sure a better proposal than most of the others on offer, but Michaels is closer to the mark in his insistence on the imperatival sense.

So, in conclusion, any interpretation of 1 Pet 3:6b that gives the participles conditional force, either directly or indirectly, cannot be sustained. It departs from the surrounding participles used as imperatives in the *Haustafel*, and more importantly, is foreign to the theology of 1 Peter. A more viable alternative is to take them as imperatives: a command to action in light of new covenant status as Sarah’s children.