

# IMAGES OF FAMILY LIFE IN THE SCRIPTURES

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**F**OR US, AS CHRISTIANS, THE SCRIPTURES serve as formative texts in which we seek models for every aspect of our human existence. In this article I should like to examine the picture of family life presented in these texts, both Hebrew and Christian. Do the biblical families still bear meaning for today's Christian family? Or is their experience simply to be relegated to the sphere of interesting, but no longer relevant history?

In the Hebrew scriptures information about the family comes to us in three different forms: laws governing family relations, such as those in Exodus and Deuteronomy, the moral precepts of the wisdom literature, and stories about families such as those of the patriarchs in Genesis. All three reflect the fact that, in the world which stands behind these texts, the family was the major social unit. Upon its stability and unity depended the stability of the wider community of the nation as a whole. Oppression of the family was seen as one sign of a nation headed for disaster, as we see in the prophet Micah's condemnation of those who 'oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance' (Mic 2,2).

The biblical family was an extended one, consisting not only of those who were united by blood, but all who lived under the same roof. The word used for the family was *beth* (house), and to establish a family was to 'build a house' (Neh 7,4). The patriarchal stories of Genesis, which reflect the early pastoral years of Israel's history, tell us of households comprising several generations, together with concubines, slaves, hired servants and alien sojourners (e.g. Jacob's family in Gen 46, 8-26). The eventual transition to an urban society, however, meant inevitably changes in the lifestyle of the family. Family groups ceased to be self-supporting, and houses in the towns had space for fewer people. For example, Job's sons are depicted as having their own houses, apart from that of their father (Job 1, 4.13.18).

The creation narrative of Genesis 2 presents the monogamous relationship as God's will for the human family. But we also find evidence of the acceptance of polygamy and concubinage within

Israelite society. Jacob, for instance, married the two sisters, Leah and Rachel, each of whom gave him her maid (Gen 29, 15-30; 30, 1-9), and Exodus and Deuteronomy preserve laws governing the correct treatment of first and second wives and their respective children (Exod 21, 10-11; Deut 21, 15-17). Marriage was important as a covenant between families, and was governed by a web of laws designed to safeguard both honour and property (e.g., Deut 22, 13-30; 24, 1-4).<sup>1</sup> Upon marriage a woman left her father's house and thence belonged, with her children, to her husband's clan. We are told of Rebekah leaving her parents to travel to Canaan to marry Isaac, Abraham having refused to accept as daughter-in-law any woman who would not do so (Gen 24).<sup>2</sup>

A wife was considered to constitute part of the wealth of her husband's family, as we see in the Decalogue. Here the coveting of one's neighbour's wife is placed in the context of theft, and she is listed together with other items of valuable family property (Exod 20, 17). In a society in which children were seen as the fulfilment of the command to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1, 28), as well as necessary for the continuing life and economic prosperity of the family, a wife was particularly valued for her child-bearing ability. And the texts record the pain and shame of the barren women (Gen 30,1; 1 Sam 1, 6-17). However, the wisdom literature provides evidence of the recognition of a wife as more than just a possession. Proverbs praises the capable wife, 'far more precious than jewels' (Prov 31, 10), and presents her as a source of joy and pride to her husband and children, deserving of love and respect. Ben Sira, writing in the second century B.C.E., warns husbands not to reject a wife who is 'wise and good' (Sir 7, 19), and counts her amongst God's gifts to the pious (Sir 26, 1-4). Unfortunately the Hebrew scriptures do not record any female opinion of husbands!

The biblical texts reflect a society that was firmly patriarchal, in which the father bore absolute authority over the household. He could sell his children into slavery (Exod 21, 7), or annul religious vows made by a wife or daughter (Num 30, 3-16). He chose marriage partners for his children, as we see in the story of Abraham sending his servant to choose a wife for Isaac (Gen 24), and originally his authority extended even to control over life and death. Jephthah's right to kill his daughter in fulfilment of his vow is unquestioned (Jg 11, 29-40), and Judah condemns to death his daughter-in-law, Tamar (Gen 38, 24). However by the eighth century the power of the father seems no longer to have been unlimited. The Book of

Deuteronomy sets the death penalty as punishment for a rebellious son, but judgement is passed by the elders at the gate, not his father (Deut 21, 18-21). Patriarchal authority carried with it responsibility for the well-being of the whole family and for the proper instruction of children. The wisdom literature is replete with instructions to parents regarding the proper training and discipline of their children (e.g., Prov 13, 24; Sir 30, 1-13), with their religious education being of particular importance (Exod 12, 26-27; 13, 8; Deut 4, 9; 6, 7. 20f; 32, 7.46; Ps 78, 5-7). The Israelite family functioned as a religious as well as a social unit.

The educative role of the mother is also acknowledged (Prov 1, 8; 6, 20; 31, 1), and she is accorded equal recognition in the best-known biblical law governing relationships within the family: 'Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord is giving you' (Exod 20, 12. See also Deut 5, 16). This commandment is, like the rest of the Decalogue, addressed to adults, not to young children and obviously more is intended by 'honour' than just benevolent feelings towards parents.<sup>3</sup> As Walter Harrelson has pointed out, one is actually not commanded to love them.<sup>4</sup> These laws have to do with actions, not feelings, and this is a call to live out the relationship with the preceding generation in a manner which will preserve the unity and good order of the family and society. It is given a pivotal position between those commandments which govern behaviour towards God and those governing behaviour towards others in the community. The recognition of its social importance is strengthened by the addition of a promise of blessing for obedience. (It is the only commandment to carry such a blessing). Care for those who have given life will ensure life, and through the harmonious maintenance of this central family relationship, the correct balance is preserved in relationships with God and society.

The importance of maintaining the bonds between the generations was one of the major components of Israel's ethos of family life as we find it in the Hebrew scriptures. Reverence for one's parents was clearly placed within the context of Israel's call to holiness. In Leviticus 19, 1-3 God says to Moses:

Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God.

And it forms a dominant theme in the wisdom literature. In Ben Sira, for example:

Those who honor their father atone for sins,  
and those who respect their mother are like  
those who lay up treasure.

Those who honor their father will have joy  
in their own children,  
and when they pray they will be heard.

Those who respect their father will have long life,  
and those who honor their mother obey the Lord. (Sir 3, 3-6)<sup>5</sup>

Its importance was recognized by Israel's legal codes, where the penalty for striking or cursing a parent was death (Exod 21, 15.17), and in Deuteronomy the curse of God and of all Israel was placed on 'anyone who dishonors father or mother' (Deut 27, 16). Indeed the prophet Micah saw the breakdown of this family relationship as leading to national disaster:

For the son treats the father with contempt,  
the daughter rises up against her mother,  
the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
your enemies are members of your own household. (Mic 7, 6)

The ethos of family unity was strengthened by the Israelite code of loyalty to one's own family group and corporate responsibility. Each family member was responsible equally for the sins of the family (Exod 20, 5; 34, 7; Sir 41, 6-7)<sup>6</sup> and for the protection and well-being of its members (2 Sam 3, 27; 16, 8; 2 Kings 9, 26; Neh 4, 14). Leviticus forbade the Israelite to 'hate in your heart anyone of your kin' (Lev 19, 17), and laid upon each person the duty of supporting family members in need, placing this command in the context of God's loving care for Israel:

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them . . . Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. . . . I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God.  
(Lev 25, 35-38)

Survival outside the family was almost inconceivable, making Abraham's obedience to God's command to leave his country, his kindred and his father's house (Gen 12,1) even more noteworthy. Cain cries out in agony upon hearing that his punishment for the murder of Abel is to be cast out from his family (Gen 4, 10-14). This

fate meant not only disinheritance (Gen 21, 10; Jg 11, 1-3), but also social degradation. It meant also that he could no longer rely upon the family group for protection, but was vulnerable to robbery, injury or death with no one to avenge him.

Is the ethos of family unity and loyalty portrayed in the Hebrew scriptures maintained in the writings of the New Testament? Of Jesus's own human family we learn very little. Matthew and Luke tell of Jesus's birth to a woman called Mary, betrothed to a man named Joseph, and there are several references to Jesus's brothers and sisters (Mk 3,31-32;6,3; Mt 12,46-47;13,55; Lk 8, 19-20; Jn 2,12;7,3.5.10).<sup>7</sup> There is no evidence in the New Testament of the later church tradition of the perpetual virginity of Mary.<sup>8</sup> The Synoptic Gospels tell of the rejection of Jesus's power by the residents of his home town on the grounds that 'everyone knows his family' (Mk 6, 1-6; Mt 13, 54-58; Lk 4, 16-30). John's Gospel contains a story of the bond between mother and son at a wedding feast (Jn 2, 1-11) and places her at the site of his death (Jn 19,23-27). On the other hand Mark's Gospel preserves a tradition of tension between Jesus and his family with regard to his mission:

Then he went home: and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying 'He has gone out of his mind'. (Mk 3, 20-21)

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you'. And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.' (Mk 3.31-35)<sup>9</sup>

Matthew and Luke repeat this story (Mt 12, 46-50; Lk 8, 19-21), but Luke removes the tension by including Jesus's family in the circle of those 'who hear the word of God and do it'.

In this story the traditional family boundaries are redrawn. For Jesus's followers the ties of blood are no longer all-important. They no longer confer special privilege, even for Jesus's own family. This is clear also in Luke's report of Jesus's reply to the woman in the crowd who calls a blessing on his mother: 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it' (Lk 11,28). Membership of the new community, and union with Jesus, depend on one criterion

alone—obedience to the will of God. At first sight this would appear to be a complete rejection of the traditional Jewish ethos of the unity and loyalty of the family group. But the Hebrew scriptures also recognized the priority of obedience to God. In Deuteronomy we find a forceful rejection of the seduction of family ties:

If anyone secretly entices you—even if it is your brother, your father's son or your mother's son, or your own son or daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your most intimate friend—saying, 'Let us go worship other gods' . . . you must not yield to or heed any such persons . . . Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the Lord your God. (Deut 13, 6–10)

An understanding that the new life in union with Jesus might lead to the breaking down of family bonds emerges even more clearly in Matthew's account of the commissioning of the twelve. Using the prophet Micah's words about family conflict (Mic 7,6), a warning is issued to the Christian community that Jesus's call may bring a similar upheaval (Mt 10,35–36). Then comes the harsh statement:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Mt 10,37)

In Luke's Gospel the call to renunciation of family is even more radical:

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. (Lk 14,26)

Must following Jesus, therefore, mean turning one's back on the family? Did Jesus completely reject all that Judaism had taught of the importance of the family unit, and one's responsibilities within it? I do not believe so. We need only call to mind the number of times he responded with compassion to the call of a parent to heal their child to be aware of his recognition of the strength and importance of family love. (See, for example, the story of the widow of Nain, Lk 7,11–15.) The Synoptic Gospels also report Jesus as giving full weight to the command to honour father and mother. He includes it in the list of commandments necessary for eternal life, in answering the question of the rich young man (Mk 10,19; Mt 19,19; Lk 18, 10). He quotes it

again when reproaching a group of Pharisees for using their ostensibly religious commitments as an excuse to avoid supporting their parents (Mk 7,10; Mt 15,4). His teaching on the subjects of adultery and divorce also demonstrate his interest in the well-being of the family unit and, in particular, his concern for the protection and dignity of its women members in a society in which their lack of power increased the danger of their sexual exploitation. (See Mk 10,2-12; Mt 5,27-32; 19,3-9; Lk 16,18).

It is important to note that Jesus's seeming rejection of the family occurs in the context of his teachings about the demands of discipleship. In both Matthew and Luke they are followed by the warning that the disciple is called to tread the same path to the cross: 'Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple' (Lk 14,27; cf Mt 10,38). They are words spoken to communities experiencing the conflicting demands of the choice they have made, often suffering alienation from those they have loved. They constitute a warning that the Kingdom of God might require a radical willingness to reject all previous loyalties and even lead to the loss of all that is most dear: friends, family, even life itself.

A similar recognition that loyalty to family might be superseded by obedience to God's will is found in the Hebrew scriptures. Moses, blessing the tribe of Levi, speaks of the all-embracing nature of their zeal for the Lord:

who said of his father and mother,  
 'I regard them not';  
 he ignored his kin,  
 and did not acknowledge his children.  
 For they observed your word,  
 and kept your covenant. (Deut 33,9)

The gospels, however, also stress that such loss will lead to a wholeness of life beyond anything they have known:

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. (Matt 19,29; cf Mk 10,28-30; Lk 18,28-29)

In fact the family unit was of considerable importance for the spread of the gospel during the early missionary years. The first centres of Christian worship were private households, such as that of

Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16,3-5; 1 Cor 16,19), and very often the conversion of its head meant baptism for all its members. The Book of Acts tells of the baptism of the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10,1-11.18), and of that of Lydia of Thyatira (Acts 16,14-15), and Paul speaks of baptizing the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 1,16). The Jewish ethic of family solidarity and communal responsibility was now applied to the Church community, as we see in the accounts of the common life in Acts (Acts 2,44-45; 4,32). Believers understood their union with Christ in terms of family membership (1 Cor 8,12). They were now members of the household of God (Eph 2,19) and, as such, called to holiness (Eph 2,21-22).

But their original family ties remained, and there was always the risk of conflict, especially if the first converts in a house were wives, children or slaves; that is, those who came under the authority of the head of the household. In this regard it is interesting to read Paul's advice to the Corinthians regarding the conversion of only one partner in a marriage. We might have expected him to advocate separation from the unbeliever, but find, instead, that he reserves the right of choice to the non-Christian partner, and recommends continuation of the marriage bond if at all possible (1 Cor 7,12-16). His seeming rejection of marriage and family life in the same letter (1 Cor 7,8-9.25-40) must be read in the context of his belief that the imminence of the Lord's coming necessitated the subordination of all affairs of the world to a prayerful waiting. In this context even family love might prove a distraction.<sup>10</sup>

Towards the end of the first century C.E., as the Christian community became more established, the earlier Pauline vision of radical equality, as expressed in Galatians (Gal 3,27-28), was replaced by more formal instructions for behaviour within the Christian family. These 'household codes' found only in the Deutero-Pauline correspondence and 1 Peter (Eph 5,21-6,9; Col 3,18-4,1; 1 Pet 2,13-3,7), were adapted from popular Graeco-Roman philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Affirming an hierarchically ordered, patriarchal household, they reflect the Christian communities' struggle for acceptance within a Graeco-Roman society which saw such a family order as the paradigm of the well-governed state. The weaker members of the household (wives, children, slaves) were enjoined to be submissive to the stronger members (husbands, fathers, masters). The codes were given a Christian colouring, using Christ's lordship over the Church as the model for behaviour, and the earlier Christian ethic of communal responsibility may perhaps be seen in their



instructions to husbands, fathers and masters to demonstrate the love of Christ to those over whom they have authority.

What conclusions might we draw from this exploration of family life in the scriptures? Firstly we must remember that these texts provide us with descriptive material about the communities which produced them. To deny the historical and sociological context of the biblical texts is to falsify them. Not everything to be found there is intended to be normative and prescriptive for all people at all times. We would no longer wish to endorse the former patriarchal right to condemn a child to death, for instance. And our developing understanding of the value of mutuality in marriage has led to a more critical reading of the hierarchical Graeco-Roman household codes. On the other hand, in the experience of these families of the past, and the codes they used to structure their lives, we can still find meaning. Within our society the family, in some form, continues to be the basic social unit, and harmonious relationships between the generations are still a valuable ideal for which to strive. Like the biblical communities we too are at times called upon to accord priority to the demands of God over those of family. But perhaps the most valuable paradigm can be found in the biblical writers' use of the metaphor of family in order to describe the relationship between themselves and God. It is most clearly expressed in God's words to the prophet Hosea:

When Israel was a child I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
. . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms . . .  
I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.  
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them. (Hos 11, 1.3-4. See also Exod  
4, 22-23; Deut 8, 5; 14, 1.)

This understanding of God is continued in Jesus's use of the term 'Abba' (Father) for the one who sent him. It provides the continually relevant model for relationships within our human families. Not a fierce patriarch, ruling the household through anger and fear, but a loving parent who nurtures and rescues. Not a lord and master demanding submission, but the one who lovingly leads us into freedom and maturity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also the interesting story of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27,1-11;36,1-12).

<sup>2</sup> In general the biblical documents reflect this type of patrifocal society. Earlier matrifocal customs may be reflected in the statement in Genesis 2,24 that a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife.

<sup>3</sup> Note Walter Kaiser's conclusions based on an examination of other uses of this verb: Kaiser, Walter: *Toward Old Testament ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1983), p 89.

<sup>4</sup> Harrelson, Walter: *The ten commandments and human rights* (Philadelphia, 1980), p 102.

<sup>5</sup> See also Prov 19,26;20,20;23,22;30,17;Sir 7,27-28.

<sup>6</sup> But see the limits set on this in Deut 24, 16.

<sup>7</sup> There are also references to Jesus's brothers in Acts 1,14; 1 Cor 9,5; Gal 1,19.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the possibility of other meanings for the Greek *adelphos* ('brother') see Fitzmyer, Joseph A: *The Gospel according to Luke Vol.1* (New York, 1981), pp 723-24. For further discussion of the brothers of Jesus see Brown, Raymond E. and others: *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1978), pp 68-72.

<sup>9</sup> The introduction of 'sister' here may well indicate a recognition of the equality of women in the early Christian community.

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting discussion of Paul's own family life see Byrne, Brendan J.: *Paul and the Christian woman* (Homebush, N.S.W., 1988), pp 175-80.

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of the origins of the household codes see Balch, David L.: 'Household codes' in David E. Aune (ed): *Greco-Roman literature and the New Testament: selected forms and genres* (Atlanta, GA, 1988), pp 25-50; and Balch, David L.: *Let wives be submissive: the domestic code in 1 Peter* (Chico, CA, 1981). See also Fiorenza, Elisabeth S.: *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins* (New York, 1983), pp 243-284.