Family in the Bible: A Brief Survey
by Brenda B. Colijn[*]

There is no word in Hebrew or Greek that precisely corresponds to the English word "family." In both languages, the closest word could be translated "house" or "household": *bayit* in Hebrew and *oikos* or *oikia* in Greek. The same word can be used for the building or for the people who live in it. This term focuses on the household as a social and economic unit.[1]

The ancient Hebrew family included husband and wife, their children (and if their sons were married, their wives and children), the husband's parents, the husband's brothers and their families, the husband's unmarried sisters, and other relatives. It might also include multiple wives and concubines, with their children and their children's families. Besides those related by blood or marriage, the household would include servants and slaves, guests (who were bound to the family by the obligations of hospitality), and sojourners (aliens resident in the household and under its ongoing protection, often employees of the household). In a Greco-Roman context, the household would include the extended family, servants or slaves, clients, and guests.[2] Families might include children by adoption, although that practice was much more rare in the Old Testament period than in the New Testament period.[3]

This summary helps to explain the large size of the biblical family. The average American family today consists of 2.63 people; the average Israelite household would have consisted of 50 to 100 people.[4] For example, Jacob's household included about 70 people (Gen. 46:5-27). The modern American notion of family is more narrow, individualistic, privatistic, and exclusive than the biblical one.[5]

For ancient Mediterranean people, personal identity was not primarily individual, as it is in modern American culture. Instead, people derived their identity primarily from being members of particular groups, such as tribes, clans, and families.[6] In this cultural context, the family had an importance that would be difficult for many modern Americans to imagine.

The Old Testament affirms the biological family, which is assumed to be the basic unit of society. Israelite society was structured along kinship lines.[7] Much of Old Testament law regulates and protects family life.[8] But more than this basic affirmation and pragmatic regulation, the family is regarded as a

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source of divine blessing. This perspective begins in Genesis, when God creates and blesses the first family and gives them the command to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:27-28). Children are a blessing from the Lord (Ps. 127:3-5; 128). The gift of children to barren women is a particular blessing, since God contravenes nature to show his grace (1 Sam. 2:5; Ps. 113:9).

Old Testament faith had a strong corporate dimension. People did not participate in the covenant as isolated individuals, but as members of families, clans, and tribes. Religious commitments made by the head of the household involved the whole family. For example, Joshua spoke for his whole family when he said that he and his house would serve the Lord (Josh. 24:15). In early Old Testament times, the family was the center of worship. The father, as head of the household, was the priest for the household (Gen. 22:1-14; 26:23-25; Ex. 12:3-11).[9] Later the center of worship shifted to the tabernacle and the Temple, and an official priesthood was established. Even after the Temple was built, however, families continued to observe Passover; perform circumcisions, marriages, and funerals; observe the dietary laws; and engage in religious instruction.[10] Teaching the law to one's children was one of the obligations of the covenant.

The biological family plays an important role in Old Testament salvation history. God's promise to Abraham was a promise of many descendants, land, and blessing—the very things any ancient family would want. The purpose of this promise was to bless Abraham's family, through him to bless the whole of Israel, and through Israel to bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3). God's promise to David to put a son on his throne who would have an everlasting kingdom was finally fulfilled in the Messiah, who was both David's son and God's. God built David a house, and through that house, he offered a blessing to all households (2 Sam. 7:11-16).

However, God works through families in surprising ways, overturning conventional social expectations to show his sovereignty and his grace. For example, although his promise of blessing descended through family lines, God ignored the customary privilege of the firstborn son to give the blessing to Isaac (Gen. 21:9-13), Jacob (Gen. 25:23; 27:1-29), and Judah (Gen. 49:3-4, 8-12). God granted children to barren women, Sarah and Rebekah, so that the promise might continue (Gen. 21:1-7; 25:21). Despite having chosen the nation of Israel, God also passed the blessing through non-Israelites, including Ruth, a Moabite woman (Ruth 4:13-22), and Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute (Josh. 2:8-14; Mt. 1:5). When the Messiah came, he was born to an unmarried Israelite girl (Mt. 1:18-25; Lk. 2:4-7).

The family also serves as a vehicle of revelation, as the Old Testament writers express God's character and relationship to Israel in family terms. For example, God is often described as the Father of Israel (Is. 64:8; Jer. 31:9) and Israel as his firstborn son (Ex. 4:22; Is. 1:2). He carries Israel like a child during their wilderness wanderings (Deut. 1:31). He remains their Father even when their own families forsake them (Is. 63:16; cf. Ps. 27:10). Sometimes God is pictured in maternal images, giving birth to Israel and nurturing them: "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, you forgot the God who gave you birth. The Lord saw it, and was jealous, he spurned his sons and daughters" (Deut. 32:19). Isaiah promises divine comfort to Israel in maternal images: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. . . . As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" (Is. 49:15; 66:13).

The Old Testament also describes God as the divine husband of Israel, his sole wife.[11] The image often occurs when the prophets are criticizing Israel for unfaithfulness. God's wife has committed adultery by violating their covenant and forming relationships with other gods—"a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord" (Jer. 31:32; see also Ezek. 16). The most extensive use of this image is in Hosea. God is also described as the *go'el*, or kinsman-redeemer, who will ransom Israel from exile and free them from their enemies (Jer. 50:33-34).

In the New Testament, the most common concept for family is still the household. The New Testament continues to affirm the biological family. Jesus' teaching against divorce (Mt. 19:3-12) and his broadening of the adultery prohibition to include inner lust (Mt. 5:27-28) support the marriage relationship and strengthen its commitments. Paul teaches that marriage is good and exhorts the Corinthians to marital fidelity and to a remarkable sensitivity and mutuality in their sexual relations in marriage (1 Cor. 6:12-20; 7:1-5, 36-38).

Jesus also affirms parents and children. He heals the children of Jairus, the widow of Nain, and the Syrophoenician woman (Mk. 5:22-24, 35-43; 7:24-30; Lk. 7:11-17). He blesses children and welcomes the parents who bring them to him (Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17). He criticizes the Pharisees for abusing the *corban* regulations in order to avoid providing for their parents (Mk. 7:9-13). He even uses children to teach his disciples about the qualities necessary for entering the kingdom of God (Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17).

The New Testament writers continue to support the family as the foundational unit of society. For example, Paul teaches that believers who do not provide for their families have "denied the faith" and are "worse than an

unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:4, 8, 16). The household codes of Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, Titus, and 1 Peter serve to defend the faith against the typical Greco-Roman accusation that Christianity would corrupt households and thereby undermine the foundation of society.[12] In his introduction to the household code, Peter urges his readers: "For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution" (1 Pet. 2:13).

The role of the family in salvation history is fulfilled and brought to completion in Jesus. The genealogies in Matthew and Luke illustrate that he is the promised son of David who will receive the everlasting kingdom (Mt. 1:1-17; Lk. 3:23-38). He is the seed of Abraham, who receives the promised blessing (Gal. 3:16). He is the Beloved, the Elect One of God, in whom all God's promises are fulfilled (Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Cor. 1:20). He initiates the promised new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, but he opens it to everyone who responds to him in faith (Jer. 31:31; Heb. 8-10).

The revelation of God in family terms is continued and deepened in the New Testament. For example, the expression "adulterous generation" in the Gospels carries on the Old Testament idea of God as the husband of his unfaithful people (Mt. 12:39; Mk. 8:38).[13] In the New Testament, however, the marriage image is transferred to Christ and the church. Jesus is the bridegroom, and the church is the bride of Christ, united with him in a spiritual union as intimate as the physical union between husband and wife (Mk. 2:18-20; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:31-32; Rev. 21:2).

Perhaps the most significant development comes in the deeper revelation of the Fatherhood of God. Jesus reveals God as his Father in a special sense and addresses God as "Abba," an Aramaic term of intimate family relationship, similar to "Papa." Jesus invited his disciples to have the same intimacy with God that he had—and that only he could bestow: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Mt. 11:27). In the parable of the prodigal son, he pictured God as a loving father reaching out in grace and forgiveness even to a younger son who had dishonored him (Lk. 15:11-32).

In the New Testament, the family again becomes a center of religious life. Jesus announces to the woman of Samaria that worship of God is no longer to be centralized in any particular place, but is now to be conducted anywhere in spirit and in truth (John 4:19-24). Acts and the Epistles record instances of household conversions and baptisms (Cornelius in Acts 10; Lydia in Acts 16; the Philippian jailer in Acts 16; Crispus in Acts 18; Stephanas in 1 Cor. 1:16).

The structure of the early church (house churches) was based on the household (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 1:2).[14] In this context, it was essential that the boundaries of the household be permeable, to admit outsiders into the fellowship.[15] Much of the life of the church took place in households, including evangelism (Acts 5:42), baptism (Acts 16:15), teaching (Acts 20:20), the Lord's Supper (Acts. 2:46), and Christian education (1 Cor. 14:35; Eph. 6:4).[16]

Leadership structures were adapted from family settings.[17] Judging from the requirements in the Pastorals, elders may well have been the heads of households.[18] One difference from the Old Testament experience of household worship is that in the New Testament, the father of the family is not the priest for the family. Now all believers are priests, and Jesus is their high priest, seated at the right hand of God and welcoming them into God's presence (Heb. 10:11-25; 13:10-16; 1 Pet. 2:9-10).

Even more striking changes take place in family and faith because of the breaking in of the kingdom of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For believers, the old group identity of family, clan, tribe, and nation has been superseded by a new primary group identity—that of the kingdom of God. Jesus teaches that allegiance to him and to his kingdom takes precedence over everything else. He declares that the claims of the gospel will disrupt even family loyalties:

> Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be the members of one's own household. 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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Mt. 10:34-38; cf. Mic. 7:6)[19]

The Lukan version expresses the radical demand of the gospel in even stronger terms: "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).

If the new citizenship of the believer is in the kingdom of God, the new family of the believer is the family of faith. Jesus tells his disciples to expect discord in their former relationships because they have joined a new household, with a new master: "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the

master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!" (Mt. 10:24-25).[20]

Family images create one of the major New Testament pictures of the church.[21] This is a significant development from the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God has a house but no household. The term "house of God" (*bet Yahweh*) is used almost exclusively for the Temple (e.g., 1 Kings 8:13, 27; Is. 66:1), not for God's people. God's house is his dwelling place, the place where he can be found.[22] In the New Testament, the Temple is still the house of God (Mt. 12:4), although that house is due to be demolished (Mt. 24:1-2). More importantly, the people of God are now the "house(hold) of God" (*oikos tou theou*) or the "household of faith" (*oikos tes pisteos*).[23] Believers are the house of God in both senses of the word "house": they are the spiritual building or temple in which God dwells (1 Pet. 2:5; cf. 1 Cor. 3:9-17), and they are members of God's household (1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:17; Eph. 2:19, using *oikeioi*). Sometimes believers are thought of as servants of God's household (Luke 17:10, using *doulos*, slave, and Romans 14:4, using *oiketes*, house servant). More often believers are God's children, either by rebirth (in John) or by adoption (in Paul).

As God's children, believers are brothers and sisters to Christ and to one another (Heb. 2:11; Mt. 23:8). This was the most common way for early Christians to refer to one another. There was precedent for this practice in Judaism (see Deut. 3:18; 24:7; Ps. 22:22; Rom. 9:3).[24] However, Gentile believers are now brothers and sisters, too, as the letter from the Jerusalem Council makes clear (Acts 15:23). This is what anthropologists like to call fictive kinship—except that the New Testament writers seem not to think that it is fictive at all. A real bond has been created between believers in Christ which is at least as strong as the bonds of blood and marriage. The family of faith is to provide for one another as the surrogate of the biological family (Gal. 6:10; Jas. 2:14-16). The ideal is for the biological family and the family of faith to overlap as much as possible. For this to happen, the biological family must come together around a common allegiance to Jesus.

Paul reinterprets the Old Testament familial understanding of election in terms of the family of faith. He argues that God has always worked through the son of the promise rather than through the biological firstborn. Since Christ is the Son of the promise, all those who belong to Christ are also children of Abraham, "heirs according to the promise" (Rom. 9:6-18; Gal. 3:15-18, 29). The family of Abraham now transcends ethnic boundaries, as its Jewish core has been opened up to include Gentiles. According to Ephesians 2, Gentiles are no

longer "strangers and aliens" but "members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:12-13, 19-20).

The new family of faith lives by new social norms. For instance, it turns the societal hierarchy of shame and honor on its head. Jesus teaches that leadership means servanthood, and those who want to be great must be the slaves of all (Mk. 10:42-45).[25] Paul describes the church not as a hierarchy but as a body with interdependent members. This body gives more honor to those members who lack it, so that all members will have the same care for one another (1 Cor. 12:12-26).

In the new family, the traditional domination of the head of the household in human society has been displaced. Jesus warns his disciples not to give themselves lofty titles and attempt to set themselves above one another: "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven" (Mt. 23:8; NASB). In the family of faith, there are mothers, brothers, and sisters, but no fathers, except for God.[26]

The new social norms are expressed most sweepingly in Galatians 3:28. Paul announces that the most basic divisions of the ancient world have been overcome in Christ: those between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. All three pairs have far-reaching implications for the household of faith. The last two pairs have implications for the biological household, as well. The incorporation of Gentiles indicates that the household of God transcends ethnic divisions. It also opens new opportunities for women and slaves. Perhaps most striking of all, in a culture in which marriage was an unquestioned norm, is the affirmation the NT writers give to single people in the household of faith. Singleness can now be a valid choice for the sake of the kingdom (Matt. 12:25; 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:7-8, 32-35).

What can we conclude from this brief survey? I will venture four suggestions. First, let us uphold the biological family as a place to experience divine blessing. Let us work to build relationships and social structures that will support and strengthen family life. However, let us find ways to do this without stigmatizing those families that do not fit our ideal.

Second, let us recover hospitality. In response to cultural pressures, some parts of the American church have promoted the nuclear family as a haven or fortress that keeps out the values and stresses of the world. However, this means that it also keeps out other people—not only other members of the household of God, but guests and sojourners who might want to join that household. We have not fulfilled God's purpose of blessing until we allow God

to work through our families to bless other families.

Third, let us take the family of faith seriously as our primary family. This does not mean that every program of the church takes priority over family life. But it does mean that God's call on the family and its members comes first and orders all of life. It also means that should take seriously our responsibility to those without intact families—or those whose biological families were a source of pain rather than blessing. The church could be a healing family to those who don't know what a healthy family is.

Fourth, let us enlarge our idea of the family of faith. In the first century, some of the people of God learned that the family of God was bigger than they thought. To persuade them to let the Gentiles into the family, God had to give Peter a personal vision and strike Paul blind. Where are our blind spots today? Who are our Gentiles? Can we yet say with Paul that the divisions of race, class, and gender he mentions in Galatians 3:28 have been overcome in the household of God?

If we can figure out how to be a truly redemptive family, we will have something very important to share with a fragmented society. May it be so.

Endnotes

[1] For the definition of "house(hold)," see G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-), s.v. *"bayith,"* by Harry A. Hoffner; and Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), s.v. *"oikos,"* by O. Michel. Hereafter cited as *TDOT* and *TDNT*.

[2] *TDOT*, s.v. *"bayith"*; *TDNT*, s.v. *"oikos"*; *ABD*, s.v. "Family"; and *ISBE*, s.v. "Relationships, Family," by N. Isaacs and E. D. Isaacs. On sojourners, see Exodus 23:9; Judges 17:12.

[3] *ISBE*, s.v. "Relationships, Family"; and "Adoption," by T. Rees.

[4] Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 35; *ABD*, s.v. "Family."

[5] Clapp gives evidence for this conclusion in his survey of the family from biblical times to the postmodern world.

[6]Carol Meyers, "The Family in Early Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel*, by Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 21; and Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 63-73.

[7]Christopher J. H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 37.

[8]Wright, 154-55, 168, 185.

[9]*ISBE*, s.v. "Family"; Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975-1978), s.v. "Father," by O. Hofius. Hereafter cited as *NIDNTT*.

[10]Arland D. Jacobson, "Divided Families and Christian Origins," in *The Gospel Behind the Gospels: Current Studies on Q*, ed. Ronald A Piper (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 378.

[11]This implies that monogamy is the ideal, even in the Old Testament, although polygamy is allowed in the law. *ABD*, s.v. "Family."

[12]Meeks, 106.

[13]*NIDNTT*, s.v. "Marriage," by W. Günther.
[14]Meeks argues that the household was the basic model for the early Christian communities. To build on this foundation, they borrowed ideas from the synagogue, the religious association, and the philosophical school as they needed to solve particular problems (84).

[15]John Driver, *Images of the Church in Mission* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), 150.

[16]*ABD*, s.v. "Family."

[17]*NIDNTT*, s.v. "Bishop," by L. Coenen.

[18]Elders would normally be male. C. J. H. Wright suggests, however, that female heads of households, like Lydia and Nympha, may have served as elders for the churches that met in their homes. *ABD*, s.v. "Family."

[19]Ieuan Ellis observes that the apocalyptic tradition speaks of division within families as one of the "messianic woes" that will signal the end. "Jesus and the Subversive Family," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985): 176.

[20]A number of scholars over the years have accused Jesus of being anti-family—for example, Ernst Renan, David Strauss, Ferdinand Mount, and Gerd Theissen. See Ellis, 173; and Jacobson, 361. This seems to me to be an over-simplification. Jesus did not reject the biological family, but he placed loyalty to himself and to his kingdom above it. According to Clapp, "Jesus did not expect biological family to be denied or eliminated. He did, however, decenter and relativize it" (78).

[21]Driver, 139.

[22]Wright argues that the term "house of God" is occasionally used in the Old Testament to refer to Israel as the people of God. He cites Numbers 12:7; Jeremiah 12:7; Hosea 8:1; and Micah 4:2 (Wright, 193). Although Michel states that "in the OT, 'my house' refers to Israel itself," he cites only Numbers 12:7, and observes, "The obvious ref. [sic] is to Israel as the possession of God." *TDNT*, s.v. *"oikos."* Since "house" could refer to both the building and its contents, it was used to mean someone's property or possessions. Both Numbers 12:7 and Jeremiah 12:7 refer to Israel as a whole as God's possession; Hosea 8:1 and 9:15 refer to the land of Israel; and Micah 4:2 uses "house" to refer to the mountain of the Lord's Temple. None of these passages uses "house of God" with its New Testament sense of God's household or family. Goetzmann argues that the only Old Testament verse that lies behind the New Testament understanding of "house of God" as "people of God" is Numbers 12:7 (quoted in Hebrews 3:2, 5), but even this verse refers to the land as a whole, not to the people as the household of God. "All the statements about the house of God remain firmly attached to the earthly sanctuary." *NIDNTT*, s.v. "House," by J. Goetzmann.

[23]This understanding of the house of God in Old and New Testaments is confirmed by *ISBE*, s.v. "House of God" and "Household," by E. H. Palmer.
[24]Meeks, 87; *NIDNTT*, s.v. "Brother," by W. Günther.

[25]Driver, 145.

[26]Driver, 144. Meeks observes that the egalitarian tendencies of the Christian movement would have created tensions within households because they challenged the traditional authority of the head of the household (76).

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