



# What Does the Bible Say About the Family?

by Aurelia T. and Zoltan J. Fule

Theologians Aurelia T. and Zoltan J. Fule studied references to the family in the Old and New Testaments. They have concluded that family life in the Bible must be seen in the perspective of historical development. In the ancient Middle East, as now, the family was shaped by cultural, economic, and environmental factors as well as by religion. Then, as now, people fell short of the ideal; we all live "after the fall."

The Fules also believe it is important to distinguish between that which is simply descriptive of what happened under varying historical circumstances and that which is a valid standard for us to follow.

**A**s Western society develops an amazing variety of lifestyles, it is time to look for a definition in keeping with divine will. But when we turn to the Scriptures expecting to find the ideal of family living, we are easily confused.

For the writers of the Old Testament every community, clan, and nation is assumed to be descended from a common ancestor; each unit is one extended family. The Israelites are all "the children of Abraham." The creation stories speak of a unity of all humanity as the offspring of Adam and Eve. No one, in the Old Testament view, is altogether solitary.

The Hebrew family system is thoroughly patriarchal, organized under the headship of the father. The family line passes through sons. The origin of the patriarchal system precedes recorded history, but there are indications of religious overtones in Old Testament patriarchy. The authority of the father does not rest on his own excellence; he continues the ancestor cult, handed down from father to son. The Old Testament patriarchs in their wanderings

also act as priests; they set up altars and offer sacrifices (Genesis 8:20, 12:7; Exodus 17:5).

In the Old Testament world, family survival, even the cult, is dependent on having a son to continue the name, safeguard property, and maintain immortality. On the other hand, in Hebrew patriarchal society there is no contempt for girl children, although preference for sons is obvious in the Old Testament texts.

Marriage for the Israelites is not simply a natural or legal matter but a divine ordinance basic for society, inescapable for the individual, and not optional. Furthermore, the Old Testament presents a very positive attitude toward sexuality. It is understood as a divine gift, not just a means for the procreation of children. Man and woman essentially belong to each other and are "one flesh" because they are created for each other. Many of the great heroes (Adam, Noah, Lot, Joseph, Job, and others) are men who have one wife.

Nevertheless, the importance of maintaining the family line through sons is primary to all other considerations. To secure a brother's line and the property belonging to him, a man must marry his brother's widow, and the son she bears will be counted as a child of her first husband (Genesis 38:8; Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

Again, it is the Hebrews' need for sons that normally—kings and rich men excepted—provides the main reason for the tolerance of polygamy. In the

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society of ancient Israel, where every male is expected to marry, polygamy cannot be very widespread. Most of the common people practice monogamy. Still obligated to maintain the family, a man must take a second wife or concubine if his wife cannot bear him sons. This avoids the harshness of divorce.

Since in the ancient Near East generally, polygamy was far more common than monogamy, the Israelites' view, which favors monogamy, is quite amazing. The prophets and other writings reaffirmed time and again a continuous and exclusive fellowship between husband and wife (e.g., Isaiah of Jerusalem; Ezekiel; Malachi; Proverbs). Moreover, the Hebrew marriage relationship symbolizes the union between God and Israel (Hosea; Isaiah 56:1-11).

Husband and wife are companions and partners (Genesis 2:20-23; Proverbs 31) in spite of patriarchy. The wife is a person, not a chattel. Wives and even concubines have rights. Marriage is often arranged by parents, especially by fathers, for their sons. Marriage is not a private decision; it is the most basic "family affair," assuring that the family line continues under the most favorable conditions. Romance is often present. It is said that Abraham loves Sarah; Isaac is comforted by Rebecca; Jacob proves his love for Rachel in years of service. The Song of Songs could only be written and preserved in an atmosphere congenial to love poetry.

Within the family, father and mother receive equal honor from their children. Yet a double standard remains concerning conjugal fidelity. There is no recognition of the husband's adultery unless he infringes on the rights of another man (i.e., another husband), and no concept of illegitimacy. Every child of his is part of his family. After all, flesh and blood determine one's family standing.

Faithfulness is demanded of the wife to insure that children she bears are the husband's. Divorce laws reflect this inequality: only the husband has power to divorce.

By the first century, divorce has become quite widespread. More commonly, however, intense family feeling and loyalty and a strong interrelation between family and religion are characteristic of Jewish families.

The New Testament strongly reaffirms monogamy together with permanency in marriage. Jesus speaks of an order of creation through which "the two shall become one flesh."

Patriarchal power is lessened in the New Testament by an elevation of womanhood. In the Old Testament, only the man carried in his body the symbol of God's covenant. In the New Testament, however, circumcision is replaced by baptism as the initiation into the covenant community. The New Covenant is open to and imposes equal requirements on women and men.

Jesus is amazingly free from the prejudices of his time and place. He disallows any idea of a husband's property rights to his wife. Jesus never commands a woman to be subject to her husband. His words on divorce place husband and wife on a similar level (Matthew 5:32, Mark 10:10-12), in contrast

with contemporary Jewish practice of a double standard.

The apostolic letters speak of reciprocity in marriage. The word subordination is used, but not only for wives: "Be subject to one another" (Ephesians 5:21). The model of the husband's attitude to his wife is Christ's love for the church (Ephesians 5:25-32). This implies *agape* (self-giving love), refuting the idea of autocratic male domination. Jewish teachings in the time of Jesus, abounding in "subordination" statements, may have influenced some post-Pauline writings. But these are regarded by scholars as a retrogression when compared to the Old Testament. In the New Testament children are valued for themselves, not as potential adults.

Even greater change awaits the new community: marriage is not "compulsory." Jesus speaks of those who renounce marriage (Matthew 19:12) and those who leave parents, wife, and children for the Kingdom's sake (Matthew 10:35-39, Luke 18:28-30). This does not deny marriage, but affirms both marriage and the single life as acceptable states for those who want to enter the Kingdom.

Though Jesus never married, ascetic ideas denying the goodness of marriage and family life are repudiated in the New Testament. On the other hand, some passages (1 Corinthians 7:1-9) expecting Christ's early return, emphasize the single state.

Clearly, kinship and unity in the Kingdom are not based on flesh and blood succession of sons. "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother," says Jesus (Matthew 12:50). This is not rejection of the family but a transformed extension: an expansion of the community experienced in the natural family. Christians, married or single, belong to the family of Christ.

There is every reason to speak of our church family. We are called to care for each other, to prefer others before ourselves, to will the other's good. Such love must not be practiced only in the nuclear or extended family; it must permeate all human relationships.

Marriage is affirmed, and so is singleness, as long as family affections are not bottled up. Particular loves are also affirmed if they do not exclude love for all in Christ's family.

It is the glory of the Christian family, natural or intentional, that its affections and loyalty, when stemming from self-giving love, reflect the mystery of Christ's relationship to his people, and the nature of the Kingdom.

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