

*Alternative Families: From the Hebrew Bible to Early Judaisms*¹

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Abstract

It has become a convention to define the *bēt 'āb*, “house of the father,” as a social unit in which the members are blood kin and social others of two to three vertical generations. Together such individuals are believed to function, usually within a limited territorial location (“homestead”), under a dominant male figure—usually the father—as not only the smallest but also the most common so-called FAMILY unit in the Hebrew bible. Such FAMILY units are often defined as organized around two basic principles: production, for subsistence and further economical ends; and reproduction, for human perpetuation. This conception is undoubtedly influenced by biblical presentations of humanity as emanating from a single couple and developing into clearly delineated patriarchal genealogies. However, it is also much influenced by post-industrial revolution, Eurocentric views of antiquity.

Furthermore, whereas the “patriarchal” generalization may be valid, it does not cover all the structural or actual social formations that, in modern and post-modern terms, qualify as “families.” In this presentation I will explore several other formations, taking into account differences in ideologies, interest and aim that influence biblical and early Judaic descriptions of social relations, as well as differences of text chronology, class and geography. Among these formations, the *bēt 'ēm* (“House of the Mother”) will be explored anew, for the biblical periods and especially the late ones. Other social units to be examined are same-sex, non-heterosexual and non-productive formations, such as the Essenes and early Jewish and rabbinic arrangements in the late Hellenistic and early Roman times. Throughout, interpreters' ideologies will be examined for their impact on understanding, or constructing, the past in terms that perhaps suit the myths advanced by the interpreters themselves more than realia so many years ago.

Disclaimer: Preliminary General Considerations

It seems advisable to start by advancing a disclaimer, especially when the topic discussed is as loaded, emotionally as well as academically, as is the topic of “the family” or “families.”

First. Every so often a return to basics seems in order. By that I mean,

¹ This essay is based on a much shorter paper delivered at a conference in UNISA, Pretoria, South Africa in September 2009 and repeated with modifications at the ISBL in Tartu, Estonia, July 2010.

within the context of this contribution, a reconsideration of a basic concept, taking into account possible academic biases and interpreters' personal tendencies and needs, even when their opinions have progressed from hypothesis to dogma. This is necessary for every reflection on past scholarship, even when disrespect to previous chains of knowledge is not intended. And indeed, disrespect is not my intention when I criticize earlier scholarship. On the contrary: a "post" position, as in "post"-modern and the like, strongly implies a debt to predecessors.

Second. To those readers who will wonder what my general framework of reference is. In my view, the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (hereafter: HB) is part of the classical world, and should be studied alongside the New Testament (NT) if it is to be used for understanding itself as well as the Judaisms—and Christianities—that grew out and after it. As is almost a consensus among scholars nowadays, most parts of the HB acquired their final or near-final form, the form in which the HB has been reproduced from just before the beginning of the Common Era (CE) and is known until today, not earlier than the late 6th-early 5th centuries Before the Common Era (BCE) and centuries later. For many texts processes of compilation, editing, and literary reproduction continued well into the Greco-Roman period and were ultimately accomplished concurrently with the creation of the NT, if not till the advent of printing. Granted, events and ideologies depicted in the HB chronologically antedate those in the NT and later Judaic texts; hence, it is customary to illustrate biblical texts by reference to older, Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) sources from Mesopotamia, Egypt, "classical" Greece and the like. However, in view of the HB's complex history of editorial activity and transmission, and its newer, later positioning in later times by especially European scholars, another view is perhaps timely. Furthermore, I would

claim below that HB interpreters were influenced by notions gleaned from classical texts of the last centuries BCE and especially the first two centuries CE, projecting those notions onto the HB “myth screen,” so to speak—a practice much less admitted or weighted than the outspoken search for ANE cognates.

And last. This paper represents preliminary reflections on an ancient topic. Undoubtedly more work than undertaken here is necessary. And if the discussion will be reopened, then perhaps the confessed superficiality of this paper can be forgiven.

The “House of the Father” in the HB: An Introduction

Most scholars agree that the normative, minimal, nuclear as we now say, family unit in the HB is the *bēt ’āb*, בֵּית אָב, “house of the father.” This is a cornerstone, rarely questioned, and a prerequisite for defining the social order in HB times as “patriarchal.” Therefore, it would seem appropriate to investigate the semantics of this freely used idiom before problematizing the extra-linguistic concept it presumably designates. But first, the accepted theory.

The range of the basic Hebrew term *bayit*, בַּיִת is quite wide: from the physical, architectural and spatial, to the conceptual and abstract. When *bayit* is used in the HB, it may serve as the semantic equivalent of the English “house,” that is, a geographical site secular (domicile, living quarters) or religious (place of worship); or “household,” both for location and human unit; or “kin unit” and also “social unit, community,” variously identified as smaller or bigger—from our “family” to our “clan” to our “tribe” to specific “houses” of descent and interests, that is, dynasties or even communities. It so happens that the Greek οἶκος and οἰκία may seem to cover the same semantic ground, roughly speaking. In Latin, though, the situation is a little different, with much less interchange between *domus* and *familia*---the latter term, as

many people agree today, indicating more “household” as a socio-legal term than our “family.” That the semantic range seems to be different between Hebrew and Latin—a target language used to transmit the HB for centuries, thus coloring the meaning of the source term for worshippers, clergymen and also scholars—seems inescapable in a Western world where Latin, in its various developing forms, has served as a *Lingua Franca* and where much scholarship emanated from study of the so-called Classics.

The Israeli scholar Shunia Bendor published his monograph *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel: The Institution of the Family (bēt ’āb) from the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy* in 1986 (English translation 1996). Since then, it has been customary in HB studies to define the basic/smallest structure of Israelite society as governed by the father, and to call it *bēt ’āb*, “house of the father.” We are told that, much like the Roman *paterfamilias*, the alpha male dominated “his” group, so named. The group’s typical members were father, mother, children and perhaps a third generation vertically, and other blood kin and additional non-agnatic members horizontally. The alpha male had powers and responsibilities regarding survival and economy but also of worship, ethics and social responsibility. His household group, the equivalent of our “family,” combined with others of its sort and size to create “families,” Hebrew *mīšpāhā*, מִשְׁפָּחָה, “clan” for us now, which in turn combined into a “tribe,” *šēbet*, שבט and so on. According to Bendor and as accepted by most scholars, this hierarchical structure persisted from more agrarian times and places into more complex social organizations and into urbanity, in various metamorphoses, from the entry into Canaan in the second half of the 2nd millennium BCE and into the end of the Monarchy (6th century BCE) and beyond. It is worth noting that, in Bendor’s description, there is no space for our “nuclear family” (two vertical generations, parents and children, mostly kin-related), and our term “family” is applied to the

entity known for most of us as “extended family” or “clan.”

When reflecting anew upon this description of a social construction, widely accepted by scholars today, I do so in order to assess its usefulness, to try and trace the origins of several ideological biases that appear to have motivated it, and to offer some pointers for future discussion.

*The Term *bēt ’āb* and What It Actually Signifies*

The noun phrase *bēt ’āb* appears in the HB many times: with suffixes, as a grammatical singular and, as time goes by, also in the plural or double plural (“house/s of the fathers”). A representative list from many types of biblical genres and texts, from the First Temple period to the Second Temple period and getting down to the Hellenistic periods, is to be found on Bendor’s first introductory page. However, if we look at his examples, a simple survey from Genesis 12:1 [Abraham] beyond the HB to John 14:2 in the NT, to the Many Mansions of the Father’s House (and this can be extended beyond still to Elvis Presley in Heaven, one may assume), we find that, more often than not, the designation *bēt ’āb* mostly points to either a location or else a male list compiled for some “male” purpose, such as the military list of Numbers 1:2, which reads:

Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its *ancestral houses*, listing the names, every male, head by head.”
(JPS; and similarly in other translations).

And yet, despite the contention that a *bēt ’āb* is the “father’s house,” there is a tendency in contemporary translation to neutralize it into an “ancestral house” or “family” (whereas older translations, such as the Dutch *Statenvertaling* or the King James Version [KJV] or the American Standard Version of 1901 [ASV], just as examples, retain the “father's house”). I am not here fully denying the presumed

basically patriarchal nature of Israelite and Judahite societies over the ages, as those societies recorded themselves in their writings. All that I am trying to say is that as a minimal social organization the *bēt 'āb* is neither inclusively valid nor as precisely definable as Bendor and his many followers claim, unproblematically. Things are not as tidy as that. The term's semantic range is much too broad; it may refer to a nuclear agnatic social group as well as to a bigger one; and the translations, their modern and postmodern gender-inclusive tendencies notwithstanding, perhaps reflect this better than biblical scholars by modifying a linguistically “wrong” rendering of *bēt 'āb* into a more socially correct understanding of “homestead” instead of “father's house.”

Alternative Structures, Variations and Variety: The “Mother’s House”

Moreover, the biblical texts themselves contain more than just traces evidencing social structures other than those governed by “fathers.” Such structures, as they appear in the biblical texts, seem to be minority structures quantitatively. However, what seems a minority structure in hindsight might have been more common or greater in quantity once upon a time; as is well recognized nowadays, memory may be real but it also might be manufactured, ideologically biased, and streamlined to conform with the writers’ wishes. This hardly needs exemplifying, in general as in relation to social situations.² In other words, both the biblical insistence on the dominance of the Father in his house and in the wider social structure, as well as the interpreters' acceptance of this picture as totally valid for biblical times and beyond, might be a combination of propaganda and wishful thinking.

And so, we have four HB references to the *בֵּית אִמּוֹ*, *bēt 'ēm*, “the mother’s

² For example see the articles in Bal, Crewe and Spitzer (eds.) 1998.

house” (Genesis 24:28; Ruth 1:8; Song of Songs 3:4, 8:2). Reading these texts in their contexts, in each instance and as compared with the “father’s house,” the *bēt ’āb*, the “mothers’ houses” might indeed be designations of a location, for instance of female living quarters, a circle within the circle of the physical *bēt ’āb* space; but, in the absence of the father/Father figure, an absence which is common to all four texts, a competing and contemporaneous institution might be indicated here.

Carol Meyers discusses this term, *bēt ’ēm*—including in her discussion also passages for instance from Proverbs, where it is clear that whereas no “mother’s house” is per se mentioned, but where women and woman figures such as the Wisdom figure, the “Other Woman” (both in various passages, Proverbs 1—9), or the Woman of Valor (chap. 31) do have “houses” of some description, spatial and/or social. Part of her conclusion is:

To consider once more our term ‘mother’s house’, we may say that its appearance may be startling in an androcentric document such as the Bible, but its existence as a meaningful term in Israelite society should not be unexpected. It may be rare and surprising in a male-dominated written word, but would not have been so in life as lived at the time. As anthropologists have discovered, the male-oriented, formal record of a society does not map onto ‘informal reality’, in which women are also powerful actors in daily affairs and family decisions (Meyers 1993, 113).

I would like to press Meyers’ line of reasoning forward and argue as follows. For me it is beyond doubt that, at certain times and places at least, and perhaps more often than we know, female households did exist not only as “informal” arrangements, as Meyers claims, but also as self-standing regular social units. This was so even if the arrangement was far from satisfactory for its participants, or presented as such, and even if “they,” those participants in such households, do not receive generous Press. Rahab, a “whore” from Jericho, owns a house and successfully looks after her relatives (Joshua 2 and 6) and saves them from extermination; who would deny that this is the behavior of a responsible family head?

Two women share a household, spatially and otherwise, and give birth to sons, then come to King Solomon for judgment (1 Kings 3): even if the biblical writers label them—here too—as “whores,” we may stop and inquire what the two women have done, apart from having no protective males in their lives, to deserve that label; and what makes their respective establishment less than a “household” or a “family,” where the next generation is nurtured, in a better or worse manner, depending on the mother’s attitude? Good or bad, both women are mothers; why not call their house, where they live according to their witness on their own, with no man in the house, a “mother’s house?” The same applies to households run by widows: they are seen as poor and in need of protection, but does this negate the fact that they run a “household,” as in the Elijah and Elisha stories (1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4, for instance)? Or in the case of Naomi, who turns out—in spite of her presentation and self-presentation as a poor and helpless widow—as a land owner whose land is sold, or “redeemed”, without adequate reason given (Ruth 4:3), much to the interpreters’ consternation? In these stories widows care for their children as well as for themselves. They undergo hardships, they are depicted as stereotypes of the needy in the absence of male breadwinners. Several of them are narrated as poor and lacking food. They may not be brilliant as kin sustainers. They may have preferred to be married, as Naomi prefers for Ruth (Ruth 3:1-3) and as Ruth herself seems to prefer (v. 9). But does this mean that widows are not family heads? Is Naomi not a family head until she chooses to relinquish the role in favor of Boaz?

“Alternative” Structures, Variations and Variety: Other Groups

In the books of Samuel and at the beginning of 2 Kings “sons of the prophets” are mentioned as primarily male groups. Although females are recorded as their wives

(2 Kings 4), it is clear that the “sons” constitute a social entity that only our bias prevents us from calling a “family,” that is, a socially amalgamated group with a self-authored identity and purpose, sharing a location and/or organization, whether it includes kin connections or not. Once it is admitted that kin relations are not the only members of a “family’, or “house,” or “household,” there is no reason to exclude the “sons of the prophets” from being defined as a family of sorts. True enough, the designation itself assumes a parental hierarchy from father/Father to son; but this hierarchy is best viewed not only as an imitation or metaphor of a real kin “father’s house” but, rather, as an alternative that does not necessarily exclude marital and productive heterosexual relations.

And what about a fraternity-governed social unit, as seems to be the case in Genesis 24 as well as the Song of Songs 1 and 8? Is it accidental that a female’s blood brothers are mentioned in three out of the four occurrences of “mother’s house” in the HB? Furthermore, in the fourth occurrence, in the book of Ruth, although Boaz is not a brother, he still is presented as a male kin-in-law! In spite of available anthropological material from the Mediterranean basin, where it is customary for brothers to uphold the honor/shame matrix linked with the sexual behavior of their female relatives, especially their sisters, and even violently so, fraternal family organizations in the HB are usually waived aside as a meager minority as against the usual patriarchal order or as a default situation after the father's death.

Indeed, on further inquiry we find that the situation in the HB is in fact quite complex. On the one hand, there are descriptions of heterosexual cells focused on reproduction and economical survival, ostensibly lead by a father or father figure. On the other hand, if we stick to the “house” (Heb. *bayit*) definition for the nuclear or minimal social unit, and take seriously designations of individuals as “sons” or the

like, not remaining content with viewing those designation as “just a metaphor” (which is never a clever interpretive move), then female-dominated reproductive as well as same-sex non-reproductive households emerge from the textual shadows. And ultimately, even Bendor limits his observations to the first temple period, that is, not beyond the beginning of the 6th century BCE.

And now, let us move on to have a look at another literary source, that is, in legal prescription or the so-called biblical laws.

Legal Prescriptions vs. “Reality”

In matters of reconstructing the sociology of ancient times according to the scriptures of the interested parties that wrote them, care should always be exercised not only about nascent ideologies, but also because we often read so-called “legal” or “juridical” texts as evidence of praxis. This is not always the case: privileging such “legal” texts as more trustworthy over and above narrative texts, regarding them as factual and the narrative as more fictive or as imaginative, disregards the often wishful or authoritative nature of “juridical texts.” “Juridical” texts, be they biblical or Mesopotamian or Egyptian or Greek or Roman or whatever, are neither innocent nor necessarily reflective of “reality” at any time and at any place. Moreover, the need to legalize patriarchy in emphatic terms, much like the need to outlaw human killing and similar sociopathic modes of behavior, may stem out of anxiety in as much as out of actuality. The veracity of near-total patriarchy is suspect at best, even if—in ancient Mediterranean cultures—it is presented not only as the norm, but also as, by far, the major basic social arrangement.

Influence of [Re]constructed Roman Law and Post Industrial-

Revolution Concepts on Bible Interpretation

I would like to advance the notion that our views of “biblical” and other “ancient” families are much influenced by Western post-industrial revolution perceptions of the family, nuclear or cell family, extended family and the like. As living spaces and conditions changed, as pre-modern then modern Western urbanization developed, as the middle classes gained more and more ground, perceptions of what “families” were, or rather of what they should have been, were increasingly projected onto the past. We have developed a basic family model of a married couple—father and mother—plus children, perhaps also half a cat and a quarter of a dog, and ideally its own living quarters; such families, quite simply, seldom existed in the ancient worlds. In the HB there is no trace of a marriage ceremony or proper marriage documentation, apart from half a formula here or there. Is this an oversight? Perhaps, but then perhaps not, since in the Greek worlds knowledge of marriage contracts and ceremonies is also scant (Pomeroy 1997, for instance p. 220). There is enough evidence for female-male partnerships being concluded on the basis of kin, spatial and economic arrangements, to be sure; there is enough evidence for judging that marriage’s first purpose, in ancient Athens as in ancient Israel, was reproduction, a close second production; and that the family—whatever its form and membership—was hierarchical, and regulated parenthood and inheritance. There is plenty of evidence for financial concerns, often justified by kin genealogies and relations, and professional continuity in the forms of guilds. But an idealized picture of the “family” as a basis for social activity, the equation of a marriage hierarchy with a male household marriage partner governing [almost] every family, with a married couple or more than one couple as the nucleus of and synonym for a “family,” seems to me as too exclusive a construct. And I am not the only one to

think this is the case. If I may, look for instance again at this quote, from Mark 3:31-35—

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.” (NRSV)

It is easy and perhaps tempting to understand this passage as Jesus’ rejection of his biological family; but since we have enough evidence in the bible that families were not biological only, and that apparently the understanding of “family” was different, we may want to appreciate this reported pronouncement not as a rejection but as a non-revolutionary [re]definition anchored in the praxis of the Greco-Roman male world, with a difference: the “sisters” are included as well as the “brothers.” Jesus is not rejecting his biological kin-group: he is affirming that “family” is not only biological. The answer to the question, Is this a revolutionary statement, or an acknowledgement of current practice, depends on how we visualize “families” of the past in as much on how we wish to visualize Jesus’ radicality.

Re-Assessment: What Is the bēt ’āb, What Are “Biblical Families”?

In a collection of articles published in 2000 titled *Family and Family Relations as Represented in Early Judaism and Early Christianities: Texts and Fictions* (Brenner and Van Henten 2000), we, the contributors to and editors of that volume, tried to show that in ancient Israel—and I use the plural deliberately, bearing in mind that “Israel” or “Israels” are constructs—“families” were varied and many. Here I am trying to take this notion a step or two further.

First and foremost, let us redraw attention to a reversal. The understanding that

a fundamental human unit, according to the HB (Genesis 1-3), is heterosexual and essentially a unit of reproduction, and only then a unit of production, as in Genesis 1—3, can be put on its head. In a reversal, a fundamental human [social] unit will have its first interest as production for sustenance, with reproduction as just one facet of that necessity. The existence of professional biblical “guilds”—from textile workers to priests and scribes and builders and singers and professions in between, much like in ancient Athens and in Roman cities (Pomeroy), as well as in other ANE countries, supports this notion further. Males as well as females inherited professions, but also acquired them, and even a “household” was not limited to biological kin relationships. That genealogical kin relationships were invented, that the human world was perceived as emanating from a single primordial couple, does not belie the understanding that “families” were more, and less, than “households” (governed by a dominant male or otherwise, as the case might have been). Let us stop here again and remember the wide ranges of the Hebrew term *bayit*, בַּיִת.

There are also other considerations that come to the fore if and when biblical texts are carefully studied—and let me point out once more that according to many scholars many of the biblical texts, even those that describe the world’s beginnings, date in their present form to the so-called Persian period at their earliest, which means not earlier than the Athenian period and probably later than that (and see above, under my *Disclaimer*). A common denominator to most biblical texts is indeed the wishful attempt to describe an alpha male, a father, as heading a household, and having a public and cultic function as well. This might or might not have been true for agrarian societies, not necessarily earlier than other forms of societies. In such Agrarian societies women might have indeed commanded group economic resources, which is not expressed in the extant texts (Meyers 1988, 1992, 1993). But the real difference is

spatial: in urban societies, where “households” transformed into other and more professional interest groups, the situation changed. Moreover, even the most orthodox claims that the “father’s house” was the basic biblical family unit do not allege that the unit governed social/spiritual obligations per se: for instance, worship responsibility is attributed to unit chiefs, mostly men, but is soon taken over by office holders.

From the very beginning, the Hebrew god is depicted as a father: a single and unnatural male parent no doubt, as clear from both creation stories in Genesis. No woman/goddess is involved in this unnatural parenthood. Later on, in the Prophets, he becomes husband to his wife/people as well. Again, no natural heterosexual liaison is indicated by this hyperbole. Do these images testify to the primacy of a patriarchal family model in ancient Israel, in any period? This is a possibility. But an equally viable option is that the metaphors, many images of male parenthood and husbandhood, exclusive of female participation, are the products of regulatory desire born out of regulatory desire. Entertaining this option might upset the [re]construction of ancient Israelite social norms, but it may also open the way for another vision. For if procreation and the role of women are largely absent from genealogies such as in Genesis 5; and if in 1 Chronicles 1—9 only traces of female genealogies are retained (and see Ingeborg Löwisch’s work, in progress)³—these absences do not indicate no knowledge of reproductive biology. Rather, the absences, or deletions, indicate ideologies of male supremacy that might or might not have been paramount in biblical times, and who knows to what extent, down to the late Hellenistic era. Such ideologies seem to have been essential for the writers of the biblical texts and for their

³ Ingeborg Löwisch is writing a PhD on female genealogies, especially in Chronicles 1—9 and by comparison to a contemporary documentary investigating a partly Jewish “female family,” at the University of Utrecht. A sample of her work can be found as

desired mode of life. At the same time, such presentations strengthen the feeling that our habitual definitions of “families,” based as they are on kin and heterosexual relations and a notion of overarching patriarchy, are slightly or more than slightly unsuitable for describing what “families” meant in the ancient worlds.⁴

Additional Models; Possibilities of Multiple Constructions and Socio-Spiritual families

That there were non-patriarchal families, or small social units headed by females, in biblical times and places, seems beyond doubt. That their number seems small by comparison to the patriarchal norm may be the result of tendentious writing by males. At any rate, traces as recounted above, or the story of Zelophehad’s daughters (Numbers 27 and 36), or the short mentions or stories about women as genealogical head figures in 1 Chronicles 1—9, evidence this state of affairs. What I would like to suggest here is to go one step further than pointing what might be construed as well-known exceptions to a patriarchal rule: to go back to basics and look anew at materials relating to the basic human organizations in the ANE, Hebraic, Hellenistic and Roman, early Jewish and Christian, societies, usually defined as patriarchal.

In the Hebraic worlds as depicted in the HB, male groups of sons of the prophets, priests and other cult officials, scribes and teachers and so on existed side by side with reproductive+economic resource-governing units. It suits us to call the former “guilds” or “communities” or “professions” or “classes,” and the latter

Löwisch 2009.

⁴ That homosexuality and bestiality are forbidden (as famously and in no generous terms in Leviticus 18:22-23 and 20:13,15-16) probably stems from the presumed damage to human reproduction from such practices, as well as to male anxiety of gender-bender and human-animal exchange roles. This, however, is the topic for another article altogether. Suffice be it to note here that the apparent homophobia

“families,” since the former are productive, whereas the latter are productive and reproductive. But this division is perhaps misleading. If we remember that,

[a] not every “family” member is a blood kin;

[b] propaganda aside, not every family is reproductive;

[c] not every family is heterosexual, at least not always;

[d] every family remains a productive unit, or attempts to remain such in order to sustain itself and continue its existence; and finally,

[e] belonging to a group is a matter of identity and memory, and those can be chosen, manufactured and manipulated.

If and when we remember these considerations, then a vista opens to other views and other definitions. In that case both groups, the productive/reproductive and the productive, were “families”. An individual—especially a male individual—could have and may have belonged simultaneously to a reproductive/heterosexual family dedicated to survival in the sense of biological self-generation and economics, *and* to an economical and socio-spiritual family that more often than not was a same-gender unit: a case of dual family identity, if you wish. Certainly, there always was slippage between the socio-spiritual and production modes; that social roles and professions were presented as hereditary supports that. But, and this seems important to me, later social developments, such as same-gender [male] rabbinic Torah study and same-gender celibate groups, appear less explicable if we do not read the signs early on, the signs that insist that our contemporary [post] modern term “family” is too limited to describe the dual-tiered reality of ancient times, biblical and otherwise.

And on to Some Modes of Spiritual/Intellectual Families

betrays a real anxiety that, in its turn, deconstructs patriarchal supremacy further.

As we progress in time towards the Common Era, when rabbinic Judaism developed alongside nascent Christianities, and vice versa, various social groups, typically male, emerge. Sages and students of Torah spend long periods away from their marital obligations and spouses. Essenes found male centers in the north and the south, although they may make place for women and children, at the margins of their communities, as it seems.⁵ Disciples, mostly male, follow Jesus, regardless of kin or marital family ties. Females in Rome begin forming households that eventually institute monastic ways of life. The basic metaphors for all these social organizations are hierarchical and identical with those of the “natural,” that is, biological or reproductive family: father, mother, children, other kin... Is this simply a metaphor or transference? Or is it further evidence that “family” is not “just a metaphor” and substitute term for biological facts but a reality of expression over and beyond the reproductive/economic unit we would like to define as such? In other words, should we not consider the possibility that in later Israel, much like in for instance in Athens and in Rome, at least privileged males had a dual familial identity: a reproductive/economic family membership as well as a contemporaneous economical/spiritual/intellectual identity; and that both identities were as important, and as basic, social markers, not to be distinguished as “familial” as against “communal,” or private as against public. Moreover, as we have seen, this was also possible for women, in a more limited way—at least for Elite women or for very poor

⁵ See Flavius Josephus, especially in *War* 2.119-161, also in *Antiquities* 18.18-21 and elsewhere; Philo, *Apology*, 12:75-87; Pliny, *Natural History*, 5:73. For a convenient summary of scholarly positions and discussion of the Essenes’ attitude to marriage and procreation (although Mason’s own conclusions are often disputed), as in Josephus’s and the other relevant ancient texts, see Steve Mason, “What Josephus Says about the Essenes in his Judean War,” Parts 1 and 2, <http://orion.huji.ac.il/orion/programs/Mason00-1.shtml> and

or marginal ones.

Again: In the name of the Father; Or, the Egg and the Chicken, by Comparison to the Greco-Roman Worlds

In this essay I tried to reconsider the current practice of romantization and idealization of the “biblical family” so that the term suits what seems like the needs of current western societies. That the concepts of “families” or, worse still, “the family” as we sociologically define it, does not work for ancient civilizations is clear, even if reworked according to what we imagine as the appropriate [past] *Zeitgeist*. Memories of those times are manufactured, at best near-authentic, at worst inexplicable. Our definitions are at best inadequate, at worst *confessionally, emotionally or academically biased*. *Confessionally*, since the basic biblical call for reproduction as the family’s *raison d’être* is confused with heterosexual marriage as the basis for reproduction and allowed theological and moral authority, discounting matters of choice and reality then and now, by women and by men. *Emotionally*, since parenthood is romanticized as a natural, biologically motivated wish, especially for females. And *academically*, since the classical Roman (Augustan) model has influenced many scholars, classically trained, to extend it to other societies in antiquity; and feminist criticism, in its zeal, largely if not always and paradoxically, foregrounded patriarchy while, at the same time, spending too little time in questioning not its values—this has been done arduously!—but the details of its historical veracity beyond the matriarchat paradigm. At any rate, explaining how [mostly, typically, male] groups belonged at one and the same time both to marital families *and* to mono-sexual designated families cannot be done without reference to the conjecture that individuals, at least privileged males and some privileged and

underprivileged women, could and did see themselves as belonging to two family units or hierarchies all at the same time.

We now finally come down to the question, And what about love as motivation for family membership? To which we can answer: the story of heterosexual love in the HB is sad and limited. Outside the Song of Songs (a great exception), females may love other females (Ruth loves Naomi), but not male spouses. Only Michal loves a male, David; usually males love females (Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob and Rachel). Women love their children; males too love their offspring. But also, Proverbs recommends to “sons” that they should love a personified female Wisdom as an erotic mistress; and later Jewish students and sages love the Torah as a desired mistress, spending as much or more time in the house[hold?] of Torah than with their marital families, although rabbis are not exempt from marriage and reproduction/production. Jesus’ disciples prefer him to other concerns. Perpetua of the milky beasts chooses martyrdom over her baby. To conclude, a dual identity sometimes requires a choice, preference of the one love object, the one concurrent identity, over the other. But a dual identity and commitment it seems to have remained in the Mediterranean region throughout antiquity and beyond.

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