

# Family in the New Testament.

## Social location, households and “traditional family values”<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Investigations of the family in New Testament texts require attention for its social location. The family as household was related to the particular ways in which male and female were constructed according to hierarchical notions and gendered distinctions, seen to provide (among others) the framework for procreation. Moreover, marriage and “family” (in the sense of household) was perceived to provide continuity and stability in the social order. New Testament texts dealing with the household relate to such considerations, and therefore require attention for how issues ranging from body through sex and “sexuality”, children, slaves to “family”, were understood in ancient times, deriving their content from but also informing the construction of first-century households. The nature and role of first century CE-households in a Greco-Roman environment with its imperial tentacles, complicates the use of New Testament texts for supporting contemporary appeals to “traditional family values”.

### 1. Introduction: About families

In religious (read, Christian) circles, but increasingly also in broader society, today a return to “traditional family values” is often proposed as remedy for (post)modern anxieties about a range of concerns: a sense of loss of identity and purpose, experiences of alienation, and concern with declining morals. Equally as often, the Bible and New Testament in particular is claimed in support of such values, by and large with the presumption but at times also with explicit claims that these texts provide normative and regulating principles or guidelines for determining the content and structure of such “traditional” family values, if not ready-made blueprints.<sup>2</sup> While both the constituent elements of such notions about traditional values and the notions as such are far from being either neutral or universal, as often suggested when these notions are invoked, claims to biblical material in support of such notions are suspect in other ways, too.

An important but unsettling starting point is to note the ambivalence in the New Testament regarding the reinforcement of the “family values” of the conventional domestic order of the first-century hierarchical society (e.g. Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:8; 1 Tim 2:8-15; 5:11-16; 6:1-2; Tit 2:2-10; 1 Pet 2:18-3:7) amidst expressions anticipating more reciprocity

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<sup>2</sup> In the work of Köstenberger (2004), text-based discussions with little attempt to understand either the early Jesus follower communities as part of first-century society or to account for the ideological setting of texts generally, are then followed by “Insights from New Testament family relationships” and “Implications”. While Barton voiced some criticism of the political use of the Bible to sanction traditional family values (Barton 2001:8-9), he subsequently comes close to reaffirming both the notion of traditional family values and that those are underwritten by the Bible (Barton 2001:17-36; cf Barton 1996:451-462). Attempts to find in the NT documents’ remarks on family the warrant for such important concerns as church unity and ecumenism unfortunately too often rely on a sentimentalist and casual approach to the texts (cf Oduyoye 1991:465-478, esp 471-472). But see Sanders’ enlightening comments on the family and the use of biblical notions on the family, as important points of debate in the modern “culture wars” (Sanders 2002:117-128)

and humaneness towards those of lower esteem. As far as the latter is concerned, it seemed to have entailed more than individual or group enlightened self-interest but also a concern to translate faith in Christ into a new identity and ethos, with now even the subordinate ones in stock-in-trade categories such as women, slaves and children being addressed and dignified in their own right. However, the emphasis on efficient households as the cornerstone of society ensured that the hierarchical framework of society, as the philosophical and political ideal of the time, remained firmly in place,<sup>3</sup> complete with *inter alia* patriarchal marriage and slavery (Osiek 2005:216-217).

This uneven ground, both with regard to the use of relevant texts and in their very ambivalence, already requires the premise that texts on family in the New Testament<sup>4</sup> cannot be appropriated directly as sanction for claims to (the rather ambiguous) “family values” concept.<sup>5</sup> To put it even more strongly, references to the family and related concepts in the Bible are more useful for theologising than moralising, for understanding God’s involvement in human lives than for human relationships (Sanders 2002:117-128). After a brief discussion of some important (strategic!) aspects of families in Greco-Roman times, that are not necessarily found in families in modern times, elements of the ambiguous way in which family features in the New Testament are pointed out, before finally suggesting some dangers to be aware of in the quest to compare New Testament notions of family constructively with contemporary positions on families.

## 2. First-century Greco-Roman “families”

Notions about family and family-life in the New Testament should of course be understood within the first-century context which in living conditions varied considerably between the small, well-off aristocracy and the majority of the population that were poor, vulnerable and lived marginal lives.<sup>6</sup> In what would today be perceived as a harsh environment, the majority of people suffered from generally poor living conditions whether in a rural or urban environment, went undernourished, and lived amidst poor hygiene. Living lives with undesirable standards of safety and sanitation, characterised

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<sup>3</sup> Which raises the question whether the mitigating aspects of the household codes and duties would have indeed been unsettling or simply reaffirming of the hierarchical structures?

<sup>4</sup> Avoiding speculation on the recent resurgent interest in the topic of family in the New Testament and/or early Christianity, suffice it to mention the following works: Balch and Osiek (2003); Osiek and Balch (1997); Moxnes (1997); for family within theological consideration, cf recently e.g. Thatcher (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Neither the family as social reality or as metaphor in the sense of fictive kinship, although the focus here will be on the former.

<sup>6</sup> Using available material evidence rendered mostly by archaeological finds, in combination with literary remains from the time although for the most part tainted (or limited) by its association with the aristocracy, the rudiments of everyday first-century life can be sketched out.

by high child mortality rates and low life expectancy, first-century people had to deal with high levels of overt violence which was normalised through portrayal and practice, and the inescapability of sexuality, also normalised through exposure by public display through art and sculpture, and furthered by the lack of privacy through material (cramped living conditions with no privacy) and structural (slaves overtly tending to very intimate needs of their owners) conditions (Osiek 2005:203-208).

## **2.1 Getting to grips with the Roman familia**

Amidst the moral cross-currents of the first century CE, established but often rival city codes and family codes clashed, and were confronted also by claims of new loyalties, issued by the empire and its accompanying and growing new cult. Even before the time of Hellenistic and Roman empires, certain laws were considered to transcend those of *polis* and thus obligatory to obey.<sup>7</sup> A powerful counter current to loyalty to the city was found in the laws of family, although those were generally interpreted to be a subset of laws of the city<sup>8</sup> (Meeks 1986:19-39). Put differently, the household, the *domus*, had overriding importance in the formation of a Roman's identity (Saller 1999:30-34).

*Familia* in Greco-Roman times stood central,<sup>9</sup> but differed from what is known today as family, generally conceived as nuclear family with a relational structure based on natural birth or adoption. Different shades of content were given to the terms *familia* (family),<sup>10</sup> and the other term increasingly<sup>11</sup> used for family, *domus* (household). Claims to agnatic lineage became more and more untenable in imperial times, so that the respectability of relatives, paternal, maternal and by marriage, within the household came stronger into

<sup>7</sup> In the Greek drama by Sophocles, when the city-state was at its highest level of development around 400 BCE, Antigone defied the decree of her uncle Creon, who also reigned over the city, when she covered the corpse of Polynices, her brother.

<sup>8</sup> A larger debate in Hellenistic society concerned the tension between universal justice (by nature) and no justice by nature, the latter which made it a matter all about power, the rule of the jungle or the survival of the fittest. The idealists of the time garnered support for Roman efforts to coordinate just this utopian venture, which implied equity and good order that saw those fit by nature, rule, and those suited by nature to be ruled, submit – in the polis as much as in the household. With Rome as the universal polis, the efficiency of her rule underwrote the worthiness and validity of her rule; destined by divine commission to bring nations closer to “one law, eternal and immutable” (Panaetius). Later on Rome's stature would grow, and the quality of justice obtainable seen as superior to that of autonomous city, since appeal to higher court, even emperor, possible (cf e.g. Paul in Ac 25:10-12) (Meeks 1986:19-39).

<sup>9</sup> “Though the nuclear family certainly existed, it does not seem to have functioned as a social unit in isolation, and therefore, it had not nomenclature” (Osiek 1996:11). The extent, to which traditional Jewish sentiments also played a role in how the New Testament authors thought about family, also has to be accounted for. Suffice it to point to some scholars who claim that “the household, for the Israelite, was the place of inclusion, authority, and spiritual continuity (by its role in teaching and preserving the faith and traditions)” and that these three features “are noticeable in the household-church pattern of NT Christianity” (Wright 1992:761-769).

<sup>10</sup> When the jurist Ulpian (*Digest* 50.16.195) distinguishes between people and *res* in describing *familia*, it could in terms of people indicate 4 categories: all those under the power of the father, *patria potestas*: wife, children, children's children, adopted children; more broadly all agnates, i.e. relatives through the male bloodline (brothers, children, and their sisters but excluding the sisters' children); all related through males to a common ancestor (the *gens* or clan); and, the slave staff of the house, farm or organisation (Garnsey and Saller 1987:127).

<sup>11</sup> While Cicero represents the late republic notion of family as an agnatic matter of *nomen* (name) and *gens* (clan), Pliny shows how in early Empire *familia* became to mean *domus* where maternal relatives were as much regarded as paternal relatives (Garnsey and Saller 1987:128-129).

focus (Garnsey and Saller 1987:129). Importantly, Roman *familia* should not be exoticised as idealised construct, or banalised by over-simplified categories or generalisations.

The danger of stereotypical portrayals, especially when relying on contemporary literature which often reflected idealised situations, and then also particular to the elite rather than people generally, looms large. For example, “[t]he standard image of the Roman family as a patriarchal household<sup>12</sup> ruled by an authoritarian, elderly *paterfamilias* and including his wife, sons and unmarried daughters, plus his sons’ children, is untenable” (Garnsey and Saller 1987:201). Although the position of the patriarch and his *patria potestas* were idealised as the utopian norm, lived reality at times differed markedly from the ideal.<sup>13</sup> Roman husband-wife relationships were made complex through the prevailing ideology of the inferiority of women as well as their age-differentials, matched by a wife’s right to and independent control of her own property after her father’s death on the one hand, and her right to divorce and removal of the (typically modest) dowry (Garnsey and Saller 1987:201). A more nuanced treatment of such varied family or household components like slavery, children, gender and marriage in discussions of first-century families,<sup>14</sup> is in order (cf Osiek 2005:208-215).

In the end, it appears that on the one hand the typical material and ideological patterns or frameworks, such as the image of stark patriarchy as accurate portrayal of family life in Roman imperial times, were regularly distorted and subverted by the normal social and other realities of human life and society (cf Garnsey and Saller 1987:126). On the other hand, however, the effective transgression of the ideal type clearly did not entail its displacement, as indicated by the persistent, wide-spread continuation of the *paterfamilias*-family model. The dominance of idealised portrayals, invested by all kinds of interests, of the Roman family by the powerful or their spokespeople of the time, benefitted from the little evidence available from the underside and which could act as

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<sup>12</sup> Another notion, not discussed here, that has been questioned of late, is that large family units would include a number of nuclear families through adult brothers’ families sharing a common household in a *consortium* (Garnsey and Saller 1987:129).

<sup>13</sup> Parental mortality through a generally short life expectancy, and the rather late marriage age of men (late twenties) reduced the level of paternal authority over sons; and even though daughters got married at around age 13 or 14, many fathers failed to even witness these marriages.

<sup>14</sup> Cahill (1996:141) admits to the tension in texts from a hierarchical, patriarchal setting but texts which nevertheless had (some) concern for equity, and therefore urges acknowledgement of the texts’ complexities: the legal codes and other normative texts were written by men; the aim with the texts might have been to portray communities in a particular way rather than reflect social practices, i.e. reflect an anticipated ideal rather than to provide a historical description; might have been intended to control subversive behaviour; and may not correlate with other evidence of the situation at hand.

counterbalance.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, some specific features of the Roman *familia* are important for our discussion.

## **2.2 Household as the foundational unit of the state**

The Roman emperor was often portrayed as head of the household (cf Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*). Julius Caesar, modelled his political rule on an elaborated notion of household management, and claimed the title, *pater patriae*.<sup>16</sup> Augustus initiated many reforms in order to establish social concord and order, which probably played no small role in the bestowal upon him of the very title that got Julius murdered, towards the end of his emperorship and after decades of service to state.<sup>17</sup> Importantly though, the Roman emperors' desire to ground their power and authority through fatherhood claim, relied on the link between empire and household, which saw empire as metaphorical but the ultimate household.<sup>18</sup>

The household or family functioned as the foundational unit of the state in antiquity,<sup>19</sup> and was supported by household codes that served as model for the political order. The rule of the household and priestly supervision each had its identity in antiquity, but these two spheres of authority could and probably often had the same person as head – when the *pater* fulfilled priestly duties at home. Greek rulers and later Roman emperors used father identity, incorporating priestly responsibilities into fatherly duties on behalf of the imperial household. It was not long before the Roman emperor's public image was seen to be constituted by the three-fold authority of political leader, priestly lord, and beneficial head of a communal family (White 1999:173-206).

Household evidently underpinned kingdom, serving as a micro version of the state, “the seed-bed of the state” (Cicero, *On Duties* 1.53-55). On the one hand, during the time of

<sup>15</sup> Cf Saller and Shaw's work on Roman funeral inscriptions (Garnsey and Saller 1987:127-147; Frilingos 2000:94, n18). On the other hand though the stereotyped nature of such inscriptions needs to be accounted for as well, in addition to dealing with issues of representativity when generalising from a relatively small (and at times, elitist?) sample.

<sup>16</sup> Despite many personal vices, his many extraordinary social virtues including genuine dedication to dependents, made Julius Caesar more egalitarian and utopian than his patrician peers by treating dependents with relative equality despite humble or foreign birth and by scorning the republican custom of favouring the upper classes. However, Julius Caesar was also presumptuous and a threat to republican values, not in the least with his singular and universal claims exceeding what was appropriate.

<sup>17</sup> This honorific title was given to Augustus probably as the culmination of a range of pious actions which started already after the defeat of Antony in 31 BCE, subsequent to which Augustus opposed any public image that glorified him rather than the state; his persistent refusal of the title “dictator”; and, the dedication of temples to him was only accepted if dedicated jointly to Rome (White 1999:173-206).

<sup>18</sup> Cf Lassen (1997:103-120; cf Carter 2008:235-255) on the importance of family metaphors in Roman society, and the father and son metaphor in particular, given the portrayal of the emperor as *pater patriae*; it is interesting that early followers of Jesus-communities at least initially focussed on brotherhood rather than fatherhood; cf Horrell (2001:293-311).

<sup>19</sup> E.g. in the Ptolemaic state, Egypt was the king's estate (*oikos*), with corresponding household terms used for officials (financial manager, *dioikētēs*; submanager, *hypodioikētēs*; steward of an individual district, *oikonomos*) (White 1999:173-176).

the Roman Empire, the arrangements and order which were found in the household and household relations served as the model for and basis of order within the empire. “The empire was a single continuous hierarchy, from *princeps*, to Senate, to Provincial Governors, to cities, to families” (Hollingshead 1998:10). On the other hand, amidst the broader and complex configuration of various orders, classes, tribes and other groups and relationships, people were assigned specific places and accompanying roles.<sup>20</sup>

### ***2.3 Households and the stability of society***

In conjunction with the notion that household were the basic element of the state, human nature was thought of as a hierarchically ordered unity. Human nature was served among others by the male and female distinction which provided the framework for procreation, but which through marriage and “family” (in the sense of household) also provided continuity and stability in the social order<sup>21</sup> (Briggs 2003:178). Family served important functions that related directly to societal stability, including the perpetuation of the aristocracy, possibilities for social mobility, distribution of land as wealth (Garnsey and Saller 1987:126).

With the family or household accorded a vitally important, steadying role in the stability of the state, the promulgation of the Julian marriage laws by Augustus which in effect boiled down to state intervention in “private life” came as no surprise. Set up in the first place to safeguard the continuation of aristocratic families with its high infant mortality rate in the first-century, even the legal standard of three children could not suffice in the end.<sup>22</sup> The Julian marriage laws promoted both marriage and having children and punished and rewarded according to these categories.<sup>23</sup>

The household was believed to emulate the city or larger political configuration *in nuce*, as much as the city would not be seen apart from the cosmos – all of which revolved back to the integrity of the human “microcosmic” body and the perceived need to

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<sup>20</sup> “The empire itself was envisioned as a great household, and the emperor therefore the ‘father of the fatherland’, the benefactor or patron of all” (Green 2001:92; Hollingshead 1998:109).

<sup>21</sup> Along these lines, Musonius with high regard for marriage claimed: “Thus whoever destroys human marriage destroys the home, the city, and the whole human race” (Carr and Conway 2008:292).

<sup>22</sup> The Roman consular family still disappeared by 75% in each generation, with only one consul in four providing a son to take over the consulship, and which left ¾ of the positions open to upwardly mobile families and their young men (Garnsey and Saller 1987:145).

<sup>23</sup> E.g., a woman who bore three or more children were relieved of the guardianship over her (Carr and Conway 2008:289-294; Garnsey and Saller 1987:130, 143-144) In this context, practicing sexual-ascetic practices and celibacy would have been seen as a social threat and a politically subversive act. So also would have the setting and practice of the common meal among followers of Jesus probably raised some questions in first-century society (cf Osiek 1996:16)

regulate and maintain it according to convention. Issues of sex and gender were important but not restricted to household or social concerns, since the potential destabilisation of hierarchical structures related to the household (and the bodies it contained, or, the bodies it made possible or gave life to) extended to the socio-political terrain, where hierarchy was inscribed by imperial power (cf Martin 1995:xviii; 15-21).<sup>24</sup>

#### **2.4 Household as a gendered construction**

Control over households from the perspective of the Empire was obviously important, clarifying the vested interests the Empire had in calling for and sustaining certain patterns in and with regard to households. The household was inevitably a gendered concept,<sup>25</sup> calling up notions of husband and wife, but gendered also as a power-imbued concept, recalling relations between parents and children, and owners and slaves. Household as concept and social structure but also in material architecture<sup>26</sup> (cf Osiek and Balch 1997:215) functioned to form and sustain, to structure and to regulate gendered social behaviour within the household, and beyond since the household was perceived as nucleus of the state (whether at the level of city, province, or empire). The role of women was mostly one of subservience, yet within the balance of power between men and women, husbands and wives, the notion of *obsequium* as the “obedience” or “compliance” with the will of the other was important (De Marre 2005:39-50).

The gendered nature of first-century households did not depend solely then on male and female identity and accompanying gender roles, although such notions were important. The institutional nature of slavery played an important part in the formation of identity, roles and relationships within the household. Elements as diverse as paternal authoritarianism, child-bearing, and patterns of sexual behaviour were all impacted upon by the pervasive presence of slaves in the household (Garnsey and Saller 1987:128), construing these and other elements into a structure which existed as a tight web of relations constituting the household as a gendered construction. Regardless of the extent to which it always functioned as such, fathers nevertheless formally had power over life

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<sup>24</sup> Here the close connection between the household's perceived importance for social stability and the role of slavery in this regard should be noted. The economically powerful secured and monopolised an involuntary workforce through slavery. Slavery was controlled through both punishment and rewards and incentives (the semblance of family life and the promise of freedom) which sought to stabilise and perpetuate the system of slavery itself but at the same time the Roman Empire which depended economically upon slavery (cf Bradley 1987:30, 51, 59, 83; Byron 2004:120-121).

<sup>25</sup> “Familism, belief in the central role and the value of the ‘household’, was foremost in people's minds. The primary way they made sense of their local world was in terms of gender and geography, by viewing spatially situated persons as well a thing as male and female” (Malina and Neyrey 1996:17).

<sup>26</sup> The design of urban houses imposed social status and division, drew boundaries between owners and slaves, between dining rooms and kitchens (cf Balch and Osiek 1997:215).

and death (*vitae necisque potestas*) of children, which literally meant that the *pater familias* could and evidently mostly did decide on whether a new-born child will be raised in the household or will be exposed (Garnsey and Saller 1987:136-141).

Focussing on the social and political scope and implications of family in the Greco-Roman context is not to deny the possibility or reality of loving, mutual companionship among married couples (Dixon 2003:111-129; Balch and Osiek 1997:216), or that its members experienced a sense of belonging and security within a functional household. However, what is evidently not useful, is to use modern norms and values such as companionship and the equality of all people for a hierarchical, patriarchal, slaveholding context; or of marital companionship and personal fulfilment in a context of patriarchal control, informed in part by issues of procreation and economic (household and inheritance) considerations. Greco-Roman family concerns inevitably provided the socio-historical context for the New Testament families, and their interrelatedness with and embeddedness within this context should be taken seriously.

### **3. New Testament families and households**

The family and household were important in the Jewish world,<sup>27</sup> and, if in other ways, equally significant also in the Greco-Roman world,<sup>28</sup> and its significant role in the growth and character of the early Christian movement is therefore understandable. When households and family life in the New Testament are understood within and as part of first-century society (cf Osiek 2005:201-203), it is not to suggest either a homogenous first-century society or denying New Testament authors' occasional deviation from or improvisation upon conventional norms.

#### **3.1 Getting to grips with New Testament families**

Various New Testament documents suppose or promote the household, and at times reconfigure the space of and for the early followers of Jesus as the "household of God".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The traditions of Israel and intermingled with Greco-Roman conventions regarding the family. The family was the basic unit of Israelite culture and society, the basic unit of Israel's stewardship of the land, and the basic unit of the experience and preservation of the covenantal relationship with Yahweh (Sanders 2002:121). In the Old Testament times the household generally, the *ab'-bêt*, the house of the father, had important social and religious significance and roles to play. Some scholars argued that for the Israelite the household was the place of inclusion, authority, and spiritual continuity. Later the people of Israel as people of God would become known as *Yahweh-bêt*, the household of God (Wright 1992:761-769).

<sup>28</sup> Roman law dictated the terms for all people in Mediterranean world of the first century, regardless of other traditions that influence their communities (cf Osiek 1996:10). Cf White (1999:208-216) on the household of faith and fictive kinship within 1<sup>st</sup> CE Roman Empire; cf Hodge (2007:15-16) why "fictive" is not a good term when all kinship relations are social constructions in any case.

<sup>29</sup> The NT authors were not unique nor the first to make use of a family-metaphor to describe communities. Already in the OT, Israel is portrayed as a household (Am 5:25; Jer 38:33) and members as brothers although not as God's family as such. Where the Greeks regarded members of the same political unit and friends as brothers, family designations at Qumran played a (only minor)

In the New Testament, family is expressed by *πατρία*<sup>30</sup> (Lk 2:4; Ac 3:25; Eph 3:15),<sup>31</sup> and was closely related to the household, which in turn was expressed by *οἶκος* or *οἰκία* (and once by *οἰκετεία*; cf *οἰκεῖος*); at times, both *πατρία* and the more usual *οἶκος* were used to refer to household in the New Testament.<sup>32</sup> Within the New Testament, the constituent elements of the family would comprise at least four elements, as indicated also in attempts to translate the New Testament notion of family for our context today, requiring the interchangeable use of words such household (family as socio-political structure), kinship (family as network of natal ties), marriage (family as institution), and inter-relations between household members (family as system of relations) (cf Moxnes 1997b:23-36). To avoid confusion with the modern-day understanding of family,<sup>33</sup> the household concept is often a more appropriate way to think about familial issues in the first century, and therefore the focus of the following discussion.

The terms for household were used literally, as houses or building structures, as households with people of diverse social ranking (Jn 5:52; Ac 16:14-15; 16:31-34; 1 Cor 1:16; Phil 4:22) and even more broadly of the Christian church as a big spiritual *familia* (1 Tim 5:1-16), and used metaphorically (cf Lk 11:17; 12:39; Jn 8:35; Heb 3:5-6) (cf Tsang 2005:9-11). Unlike the early followers of Jesus in Acts who lived as observant Jews, going to the Temple, the distinctive life of Jesus-follower groups increasingly shifted to private homes,<sup>34</sup> initiating the intersection between households generally and the household of God. Private homes had obvious advantages to a sect transplanted to city.<sup>35</sup> Households on the one hand had their own networks of natural connections, built

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role amidst others to regulate the community's life. For the Pharisees, the rabbi was as father to his sons, although fraternal language was not prominent, as with Paul, who further broke convention by also including "sisters". In the Hellenistic Mystery Religions, initiates were referred to as children, Cynic philosophers saw their roles as fathers or nurses, and Stoics saw all men as offspring of the gods and thus brothers. In the NT, Paul was not the first to talk in this manner as the Jesus traditions have Jesus employ similar terminology (cf Mk 3:34-35; 12:30-31) (Banks 1994:47-87).

<sup>30</sup> A concept narrower than *φυλή* but wider than *οἶκος*, it denotes the "lineage, ancestry" or a "family or tribe" (cf Lk 2:4; Ac 3:25; Eph 3:15). *Πατρία* which can be translated as "family", "lineage", or "descent" signifies according to *LSJ* the historical origin of a household, i.e. its "patriarch", rather than its present head.

<sup>31</sup> The overlapping and polyvalent nature of terminology for family and related groups such as clan, ethnic group or even nation is evident in the use of *πατριά* in Acts 3:25, quoting the promise to Abraham in the OT; the LXX however reads "tribes" (*φυλάι*) in the original promise (Gn. 12:3) and "nations" (*ἔθνη*) when the promise is evoked in Gn. 18:18 and 22:18. Similarly, in Lk 2:4 (cf Lk 1:27; for "house of Israel" cf e.g. Mt 10:6; 15:24; Ac 2:36; 7:42; for "house of Jacob", cf Lk 1:33) the words *οἶκος* (house) and *πατρία* (lineage) are both used with evident similarity, the patronymic being the vital point.

<sup>32</sup> The Greek *οἶκος* could be used in different ways, as Osiek (1996:10) illustrated that it referred to the physical household of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16); the house or structure within which the congregation met (1 Cor 16:19); and, the physical but also constructed space of household (1 Cor 14:35).

<sup>33</sup> "Family" and "household" are terms that refer to distinct entities today, but are variant translations for the same words in Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic and Latin (cf Osiek 1996:4).

<sup>34</sup> This claim is borne out by Paul who sent greetings to the assembly or meeting (*ekklesia*) in each city, which probably consisted of a number of small cells in various private houses, or if a more spacious house was found, all cells could meet there on occasion.

<sup>35</sup> Offering a modicum of privacy (in a setting where most of life was public), a stable place to meet and practice rituals, not too isolated to raise suspicions, or to be considered out of ordinary or out of control, complete with a householder as patron of group, offering meeting space, financial support and protection. While the household-setting of the churches affected their growth, those in the household apparently often converted, but that this was not always the situation is underlined by Onesimus' conversion only

upon kinship, friendship, patron-client connections, and affiliations of trade or craft, that could assist in spreading the news about Christ. On the other hand, households were involved in the larger society of the polis in many ways, which would at times lead to conflict (cf 1 Cor 8-10) and in any case led to the development of complex and intricate ways for community members to participate in (or abstain from) the city's life amidst the urge to protect the identity and integrity of their faith and communities.<sup>36</sup>

In the New Testament documents, the church is often depicted as divine household, and apart from employing the metaphor, also its consequences for the nature and life of the community were worked out accordingly. To start off, comments in these documents did not always, however, reflect favourably on the household and family life.

### ***3.2 Disavowing the family***

Various biblical traditions were destabilising of conventional frameworks and patterns of sexuality and gender (Hanks 2000:148-149; 177, 182ff; Mollenkott 2003:192-193; cf Punt 1997:382-398), which in the end spilt over to family or household as well. The New Testament provides evidence not only of a variety of perspectives on the family but contains a tension in itself, between the different documents, as well. In short, and sticking to the gospels for now, discipleship was preferred above family ties, and community cohesion above family integrity.<sup>37</sup> The detachment which characterised the portrayal of Jesus and the disciples in the Gospels included their detachment from ties of place and family, which was no frivolous matter in a first-century rural culture, as both were determinative of identity<sup>38</sup> (Meeks 1986:97-123).

In the gospel traditions, it is interesting that *no positive* sayings about the goodness of the family were preserved or attributed to Jesus<sup>39</sup> (Osiek 2005:218). Given that the household was an elemental version of the larger community, in the end encompassing everyone (and every social structure and institution) from village to the nation or people at large, the implications are probably more wide-ranging than often admitted. Jesus is

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after having left Philemon's household (Phlm 10-16).

<sup>36</sup> Eschatological enthusiasm was rarely found in Jewish writings from Greek cities, which led the apostles to modify, ignore or discard ordinary Jewish rules for proselytes, rethinking the question of the boundaries between "God's people" and "the world".

<sup>37</sup> "While from some of their own writings the first generations of believers in Jesus were receiving a message of domestic harmony as fulfilment of the will of God, a different message, standing in some tension with the former, was coming through from another part of the tradition" (Osiek 2005:217; cf Barton 1997:81-100).

<sup>38</sup> Such detachment would be interpreted differently as patterns of behaviour in the early Palestine mission, in Greco-Roman cities, in other environments, and in the later developments within the Christian church (cf Meeks 1986:97-123).

<sup>39</sup> Although the Synoptics condemned divorce and remarriage and insisted on the honouring of parents; cf also the stress on the household on Mt 19-20 (Balch and Osiek 1997:218).

portrayed as taking an interest in and being sensitive to the family life of others,<sup>40</sup> but at best seems to stand aloof from his own. While Jesus is portrayed as appreciative of religious requirements regarding the family (e.g. Mt 15:3-6 // Mk 7:10-12), and sensitive to the needs of and longing for family life in an environment harsh towards the marginalised (e.g. Mt 9:18-26 // Mk 5:21-43 // Lk 8:40-56; Jn 4:46-53), his attitude towards his own family was hardly one characterised by enthusiasm (e.g. Lk 2:41-51; Mk 3:31-35) except in the end for one portrayal of his death which is characterised by concern for his family (Jn 19:25-27)<sup>41</sup> (Osiek 1996:2-6).

The role which Jesus assumed for himself, claiming to be without a home and not claiming his rightful sonship within his father's household, showed him to be an atypical male in the first century. Jesus' treatment of the household is unexpected in his focus on young men, encouraging them to leave their households (along with their livelihood, work and inheritance) which defined their identity and provided them with both a sense of being and social position and function. Jesus also encouraged small children and women,<sup>42</sup> not married and not childbearing, towards the kingdom of heaven.<sup>43</sup> And all this in the first-century household where everyone knew his or her place and had a sense of limits and boundaries, with its traditional roles and order prescribed by the patriarchal social order and inscribed around binaries such as male and female, we and them, inside and outside, central and marginal (Moxnes 2003:96; but cf. Osiek and MacDonald 2006:1-6).

The gospels' suggestion that Jesus anticipated the dissolving of family bonds (cf. Mt 10:35-36 // Lk 12:53), taking his cue from Micah 7:6, implied the disruption of the household for the sake of the gospel.<sup>44</sup> Jesus re-envisioned the composition and function

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Hellerman (2007) for an argument that Jesus posited the family model (patrilineal kinship group) as a measure to break through the restrictive notion of the Jewish ethnos ("nationalism" of the time), particularly by challenging Sabbath observance, temple polity, and exclusive table fellowship/dietary rules (Jewish identity markers). For a theological discussion on the "teaching of Jesus about families and children", cf. Thatcher (2007:51-77).

<sup>41</sup> Although similar family-subversive sentiments do not surface in the Fourth Gospel, Jn 7:5 does offhandedly state that "even his brothers did not believe in him" (cf. Osiek 2005:218), suggesting that the tension regarding family was deep-set when it came to the Jesus tradition. On the other hand, with familial language of father and son set in a patriarchal framework, the FG extended the family to both community of faith and the life of God (Balch and Osiek 1997:219).

<sup>42</sup> The asceticism of the early Jesus movement was gendered. Young men leaving the household held a *liminal* position in society, "divested of the attributes associated with their previous, structural position". Women associated with the early Jesus movement did not conform to conventional social roles such as "virgin daughter, respectable wife or mother of legitimate children, and were therefore *outsiders*, falling outside the structural arrangements of society (Moxnes 2003:99-101). On the other hand, children and people who lived like angels, i.e. asexually, functioned as metaphor for the kingdom of heaven (Moxnes 2003:91-93).

<sup>43</sup> "There were structural similarities between the young males who identified with the kingdom of heaven and the women who followed Jesus. They inhabited the same space outside of the household, and thereby outside the village system based on households" (Moxnes 2003:100-1)

<sup>44</sup> Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke attempted to mitigate some of the damage done, and in a reconciliatory gesture e.g. wrote the mother of Jesus into the infancy narrative in a prophetic role, and suggested continuation of family ties by putting Jesus' mother present at Pentecost and portraying James, brother of Jesus, as leader in the Jerusalem community (cf. Osiek 2005:218).

of household, its social place and social roles,<sup>45</sup> referring to his followers in household terms, as brother, sister and mother, but not as father or wife and thus without notions of authority, procreation or patriarchy – the household is queered in the kingdom.<sup>46</sup> Amidst socio-political developments such as Herod Antipas' attempt to establish a new, Graeco-Roman style economy, which favoured cities and the elite,<sup>47</sup> Jesus was portrayed as breaking through established social boundaries, offering an alternative social environment for the household.

### ***3.3 Celebrating the family***

In Jesus' disavowal of the family, the seeds of a new version of family were made possible, but this ideal soon proved incapable of overcoming the conventional form of the family, and was even in the communities of faith overrun by appeals for maintaining the status quo. In fact, early Jesus follower communities showed a bias for the household rhetoric of the contemporary society, and to reinforce the rhetoric by supporting it with religious sanction as expressed in the documents such as the Pastoral Epistles but especially in the New Testament's household codes (cf Bradley 1987:38; Byron 2004:127; Glancy 2006:147). The household codes, similar to their presence and function in various other communities, was a regular catechesis<sup>48</sup> which aimed to describe the mutual duties of members of a Christian household: wives and husbands, children and fathers, servants and masters (cf Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:22-6:9; 1 Pet. 2:18-3:7) (Balch 1981:81-109).

Whereas in some instances the notion of household might have held out potentially liberating notions for the marginalised, New Testament documents portrayed the "household of God" as a decidedly patriarchal space (e.g. 1 Tm 3:15).<sup>49</sup> The emphasis is on the household as structuring agency for the conduct of members of the community,

<sup>45</sup> Traditional interpretations often failed to appreciate the counter-cultural, radical implications of Jesus' appeal on young men, barren women, and little children to join and thereby redefine the kingdom of heaven contrary to societal conventions. For Moxnes (2003:esp 72-90) this transformed household with its transgression of roles and order, is encapsulated in his saying about himself and his male followers who became "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12), since the eunuch figure infringed masculine identity.

<sup>46</sup> This renders a "queer Jesus", where queer means protest against fixed categories and the affirmation that all categories of identity are historically and socially constructed. "Jesus was an ascetic who transgressed the boundaries of what it meant to be male in first-century Palestine. Moreover, he introduced that transgression as characteristic of the kingdom" (Moxnes 2003:105).

<sup>47</sup> Challenging Horsley's notion that Jesus wanted to revitalise village life according to traditional values, Moxnes (2003:151ff) contends that Jesus also broke with local authority and customs, as reflected in his disputes in the villages that often broached issues about identity. Since Jesus also came into conflict with the elite, his role was ambiguous (Moxnes 2003:154).

<sup>48</sup> According to the narratives in Acts, in the Jerusalem church households were apparently instructed as units (Acts 5:42), a custom Acts ascribed to Paul, as a claim Paul made in so many words to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:20).

<sup>49</sup> Some scholars argued that it is, however, possible to move out of the patriarchal conformities of the 1 Tm 3-text and to appeal to the broader New Testament and the current context of our day where the call to discipleship and ministry is heard not only by women and not only by men, and where women also accept this call. "The metaphor of 'the household of God' projects a possible world in which women as well as men are called to full discipleship and ministry in church and community" (West 2004:169)

and is evidently theologically based on the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus (1 Tm 3:16). Discipleship and ministry emerges as key concepts of household-membership, but these concepts were defined and reserved for males, excluding women from full discipleship and ministry.<sup>50</sup> Since marriages comprised the ritualisation of the honour of two extended families, it generally entailed a union for political or economic purposes and interests. Women were disadvantaged by the patriarchal context, at least until producing a son which enhanced their security and status in the husband's family. For women, marriage often boiled down being disembedded from their families<sup>51</sup> through a ritual positive challenge such as the rendering of gifts of services to their fathers by the fathers of the prospective grooms (Malina 1981:102-3).

The structure of the household and different thoughts about it contained the potential for moral conflict among believers.<sup>52</sup> For example, the differences in rank clashed with an ideal of "equity", not in the sense of equality but rather in proportion.<sup>53</sup> Notwithstanding the notion that any upset in the order of the home would leave the whole society in trouble, rituals in the churches implied challenges regarding the conventional roles of women and for the system of slavery. It is probably not surprising that second generation leaders harked back, with texts such as Col 3, Eph 5, and 1 Pt 2-3, women urged to be subject to their husbands, and slaves to obey their masters in everything, amidst or even when it entails suffering (Meeks 1986:19-39; 97-123).

### **3.4 Families and the household of God**

It is not difficult to explain the metaphorical connection that the early Jesus followers made between the family and the community of the faithful, given the Roman context.<sup>54</sup> Roman social relations always had a sacred character, and this started with the early notions of family and hearth since fathers, both living and the ancestors were considered

<sup>50</sup> As is the case in 1 Pt 3, there are only a very limited brief extended to men as compared to women in the household code of 1 Tm 3. In 1 Tm 3, it is only v7 which prescribes a certain role to men, whereas vv8-15 contains instructions for women.

<sup>51</sup> Depending of course whether the woman *cum manu* (under her husband's authority), which entailed leaving her father's *potestas* and household to join that of her husband. This marriage could only be ended due to serious cause and with heavy financial loss for the party in the wrong. A woman married *sine manu* was considered to still participate in her natal family's property regime (Garnsey and Saller 1987:130). Different forms of marriage thus meant that occasionally the woman did not find herself under the *manus* (hand=power) of her husband, in a marriage based on mutual consent, and with the woman remaining in her father's household (cf Ferguson 1993:68).

<sup>52</sup> Cf Sandnes (1997) on tension between household as patriarchal and brotherhood as egalitarian and participatory models in the NT; rather than the former following the latter as later development, brotherhood was embedded in household from the start. Amidst ambiguity and tension, some egalitarian structures started to emerge in patriarchal structures of household that were still strongly in place. Cf Horrell (2001:293-311) on the move in the Pauline corpus from an emphasis on believers as ἀδελφοί in the authentic Pauline letters, to the believers becoming the οἶκος θεοῦ in the deuterio-Pauline writings, a move signifying changes in the *form* of authority and power rather than what some would claim as a shift from egalitarianism to authoritarianism.

<sup>53</sup> Re equality in the early house churches, cf e.g. Lampe (2003:73-83); Sandnes (1997:150-165).

<sup>54</sup> But cf Barclay (1997:66-80) on the family as the bearer of religion also in Judaism and early Christianity.

sacred.<sup>55</sup> The sacred obligation to the patron fathers, rooted in the idea of *pietas*, remained even when earlier Roman families expanded agnatic into cognatic families, incorporating also other family members, slaves, friends and the like.<sup>56</sup> In the New Testament, it is Paul in particular that describes the community of faith in metaphorical terms as family of God,<sup>57</sup> generating and formatting a symbolic universe by language, calling into being an anti-structure in which Jesus – as member of both – served as the connection between family where God is father and the family where Jesus is the brother of many other brothers and sisters.<sup>58</sup>

The connection made between household and church in the New Testament is strong<sup>59</sup> even if the nature of the connections varies from context to context.<sup>60</sup> From the very practical perspective that the initial gatherings of the followers of Jesus took place in a house, within a household, the association between household and church is rather obvious.<sup>61</sup> Then there is also the link with the Old Testament where the faithful of God became known as the household of God. And in a context where believers were described as adopted sons (Rom 8:15-17) or as servants and stewards (1 Pt 4:10), the description of the church as household of God (e.g. Eph 2:19) or household of faith (Gal 6:10) is hardly surprising. The prominence of and many references to the household in the New Testament testifies to its importance in the growth and stability of early communities of Jesus followers and evidently later Christian church too.

<sup>55</sup> “By his *genius* [creative power or energy], the *paterfamilias* was able to sire children and perpetuate family; he was able to found new life, but always in the context of a founding that has gone on before” (Hollingshead 1998:106-107).

<sup>56</sup> Such considerations were, to put it briefly, intermeshed with a much wider, complex web of relations and significance: the entire empire was a network of obligations characteristic of patronage, which regulated perceptions of the world and empire by also regulated the activities of communities and individuals. The materiality of Roman social practices was the external manifestation of an intangible morality (e.g. the patronage practices within the traditional sanctity of the household), within a holistic perception of the world with Roman religion and Roman society intimately connected. For the Romans, the social order and the divine order was one and the same, and therefore the ethics of Roman society were sacred and not negotiable (Hollingshead 1998:113).

<sup>57</sup> Even if Paul’s attempts to construe the *ekklesia* in 1 Corinthians amounts to configuring sanctuary rather than household space (Øklund 2004), his use of household metaphors still have to be accounted for.

<sup>58</sup> Since the linguistic turn of the twentieth century, there is greater recognition for the indirect, mediated and heterogeneous relationship to the world, and for the central role of language in all of this (Lategan 1989:105-116). Although Paul invoked through his metaphorical use of family concepts an anti-structure in the form of Jesus follower communities that challenged certain aspects of the social reality of 1<sup>st</sup>-century family life, claims that such reconceptualisation translated into an “egalitarian effect” and the “conspicuous absence of any hierarchical relations or structures” (Lategan 1989:110-111), need to be mitigated. These do not do justice either to Paul’s (at best) ambivalent position towards reigning Greco-Roman social practices (which he adopted and used for framing his own while challenging aspects thereof) or his own ideas and practices he referred to in his letters. Moreover, any hasty alignment with Paul may unnecessarily make an interpreter dependant on Paul’s perspectives, insensitive to the position of his detractors and unwilling to investigate Paul’s vested interests in the situation.

<sup>59</sup> Evidently not without tension, since the communities of Jesus followers would not always have abided by the rules governing households. “The indiscriminate mixing of persons of every age, sex, and social status without proper supervision by appropriate patriarchal authority was perennially suspect, for it threatened the social hierarchy by which power was maintained” (Osiek 1996:16).

<sup>60</sup> Some scholars argue that the basis of Paul’s family terminology was the relationship between Jesus (and the believers) and God, cf. Banks (1994:47-87). Cf. also recently the longer study by Osiek and MacDonald (2006) on household-churches and in particular the role of women in these churches.

<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, however, it should be remembered that it was not always a household as a whole but sometimes only individuals that joined a community of Jesus followers; cf. Crispus and Gaius (1 Cor 1:14-16; cf. 1 Cor 7:12-16, 1 Pt 2:18-3:16 for the possibility that women, even wives, and other dependants could make their own decisions; cf. Osiek 1996:14-15).

The tension in the New Testament between the household paranesis and the appeals to discipleship, is sometimes addressed by the claim that, in the case of the latter, family is not abolished but extended, with the disciples now having become and functioning as a family – as much as the church at an early period already started to see itself as surrogate family (e.g. Osiek 1996:20, 23).<sup>62</sup> But such readings tend towards too much abstraction, and fail to consider the fact that in the New Testament's appeals to radical discipleship, the family is redefined. In fact, not only is family redefined, but the family concept is probably also over-asked to the extent that it must be asked whether family is still family? And whether the concept has survived its metaphorical deployment? And, of course, whether the use of family as metaphorical milieu for the *ekklesia* in the end did not perhaps do the church more good than the family? And with such questions in mind, a few broad comparisons between families then and now, even if preliminary and dangerous, are in order.

#### **4. Dangerous but necessary comparisons? Family *then* and *now***

The New Testament texts do not speak with one voice on or provide a blueprint for households or families. At best, interpreters construe implicit commendations of differing lifestyles in the different New Testament documents which count against singling out any one form of behaviour as authoritative. Such construals remain provisional, deriving with other models also their authority from the New Testament. In fact, Paul's celebration of the diversity that constitutes the Body of Christ unequivocally warranted such multiplicity of community and personal life patterns<sup>63</sup> (Good 2007:1-2).

The several different perspectives on the family in the Bible, as well as the different ways in which family is depicted, do not augur well for a straightforward defence of the modern nuclear family. Jesus' subversion of close kinship ties challenges simplistic biblical appeals to family values. The persistent tension of patriarchal attitudes (if no longer elaborate systems) in the community of faith, has led many, especially feminists, to call for a radical reinterpretation of the Bible and early Christianity, and to

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<sup>62</sup> As became increasingly clear in the literature typified by the household codes, "the church came more and more to resemble an extended household, characterized by patriarchal leadership, high expectations of cohesiveness, and exclusive claims to honor by some over other members". Some decades later the conceptual shift present in the Synoptics are completed when the church rather than the household became the center of allegiance for the faithful (Balch and Osiek 1997:220).

<sup>63</sup> The radical disjuncture between marriage and family in NT times and today (cf Thatcher 2002) requires respect for plurality and discontinuity in meaning and practice (Thatcher 2007:25-28). Cf also criticism from Carroll (1998:57-61), particularly for the commodification of the Bible and its ideological use with regard to the notion of family values.

reconceptualise the community of believers as a community of equals (cf Stuart and Thatcher 1996:440). Questions are asked also about the continuing value of marriage as generally perceived for contemporary times (Ellison 1996),<sup>64</sup> and, about the unproblematic advocacy of the nebulous concept of traditional family values, a discussion that evidently requires caution and restraint.<sup>65</sup>

The vastly different socio-historical and ideological settings of families in the first century<sup>66</sup> add caution to finding easy resemblances between ancient and modern families.<sup>67</sup> A number of differences between these structures fatally flaw such a comparison from the start. Firstly, combined with its composition, structure, and purpose, the broader role which the ancients perceived households to have played within society is a distinguishing aspect between ancient and modern households:<sup>68</sup> Greco-Roman households were multifunctional, in the sense that it was more than simply a domestic residence but also had specific political, economical and religious functions as well, not to mention its broader socio-cultural impact. Notwithstanding the general notion today that stable family life is beneficial to both the development of wholesome citizens and a healthy society – “a stable, nuclear family was associated with an idea about a stable society” (Moxnes 1997b:14) – the first century socio-political setting of the family and its constituent framework and links was not found in contemporary families or its discourse.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> The argument that appeals to biblical teaching on marriage is inadmissible when slavery is rejected, because the two are “as indissolubly linked as a man and woman are linked in marriage” (Thatcher 1993:16). The same logic is applicable to the argument that traditional family values can effortlessly be harvested from the Bible – both marriage and slavery were after all two prominent elements of first-century families, also in the Bible. Cf Harvey (1996:34-39) on the danger of appeals to family values becoming oppressive, partly in becoming a measure to avoid other, related matters (such as lesbian relationships) and partly in refusing to acknowledge a broader moral berth for such discussions.

<sup>65</sup> The lesbian debate has alerted us to the danger of reading heterosexist assumptions into texts dealing with marriage, and that “the nuclear family of the mid-twentieth century in the industrialised West”, can easily be idealised (Germond 1997:200). Not only homophobia proves to be a particular challenge in contemporary communities of faith, but even more especially heteronormativity because of its subtlety, achieved through its perceived and claimed naturalness as well as its deeply ingrained nature.

<sup>66</sup> Although much energy is, rightly, expended on describing and understanding the first-century context of New Testament texts and topics such as family, the linguistic “setting” of such texts also needs attention. One important aspect is the metaphorical language used in the New Testament. In the Pauline texts a range of metaphors focussed on bodily or physical reality and the family in particular, was employed and these can be interpreted in different ways, reflecting hierarchical, patriarchal reality but also suggesting intimacy and tenderness. More than reading the metaphors against the grain, contemporary interpreting communities need “to choose the moment” in which to interpret them, choosing whether to align themselves with an authoritarian role claimed by Paul or that of dependency required of the communities addressed, but also whether the particularly attitude accompanying the role is appropriate today (cf Polaski 2005:80-81).

<sup>67</sup> A seemingly frivolous matter is a good illustration of the differences in socio-historical context and the nature of families then and now: “The rich ate in, the poor ate out” (Osiek 1996:12), because the cramped living conditions of the poor, especially in the *insulae* of the cities, mostly did not allow for cooking or food preparation. With first-century houses often providing beyond a secure and safe lodgings, they also served as places of work, manufacturing and doing business, for entertaining, spaces for children to play and so forth – unlike today, houses then did not offer the modern day equivalent of sacred privacy of the home (Osiek 1996:12).

<sup>68</sup> “The main difference between traditional and modern societies may not be so much in the group of people who form a ‘nuclear family’ or a household, but in its function and relevance within the total social system” (Moxnes 1997b:15).

<sup>69</sup> The widespread use of the term family belies the difficulty in defining what is meant by family. For the sake of this brief investigation, the family of today will be viewed as “an organized network of socio-economic and reproductive interdependence and support grounded in biological kinship and marriage” (Cahill 2000:x-xi; cf Thatcher 2007:4-6). Cf Moxnes (1997b:14) on the question of a “universal definition” for family – one possibility is “The family is a small kinship structured group with the key function of nurturant socialization” (Reiss in Moxnes 1997b:38 n1); but such definitions are complicated by the tendency that family “is always part of a wider social context and has a cultural meaning” (Moxnes 1997b:15).

Secondly, families as households went beyond the boundaries of the nuclear family, and often included slaves, who could occupy different roles and positions in the household; in addition, other family members, associates through work or organisation, and freedmen and freedwomen regularly completed the number of those who lived in the household.<sup>70</sup> Thirdly, role expectations differed widely from modern sensibilities, since children were not simply accepted into the household; once accepted, they were not only nurtured but had to play an active role in contributing to the household. The role of the head of the household, the *pater familias*, was powerful, managing the household and exercising authority over every single member of it – even if such absolute authority were often mitigated for legal and practical reasons. The Roman society's insistence on the principle of reciprocity entailed that every person in the household would be related to others in some way. And finally, a wide spectrum of values was attached to family terminology, not common today, such as the connection that was often even if not exclusively made between children and economics (cf e.g. Frilingos 2000:93-97; Tsang 2005:23).

## 5. Conclusion: The New Testament, and families today

The contemporary practice of lamenting the decline in family morality was found already among the Romans of the Augustan age, comparing their times with the idealised past (Garnsey and Saller 1987:126). However, the radical differences between ancient and modern times and contexts in perceptions of what constituted family, the problems with it and how to address those problems, caution against unqualified appeals to the New Testament in formulating positions on family or family values today. Moreover, the New Testament documents themselves are characterised by the tension between the promotion of harmonious relationships within recognised social structures, and the subversive challenge to the most basic of human relationships at social and conceptual level<sup>71</sup> (cf Osiek 1996:7-8). Therefore, since the different New Testament perspectives on family in the first place cannot simply be assimilated into one model, and even if the construction of such a model would have been possible, it would not have been possible to make it into the reigning framework for modern-day thinking about families. In fact, overrated claims on the family have the tendency to reach the point of becoming

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<sup>70</sup> "The upper-class Roman household (*familia*)...often included tenants, freedmen, former family slaves, laborers and business associates" (Tsang 2005:23).

<sup>71</sup> An anti-familial trend points to the subversive implications of faith in Christ for the family, and the other trend tried to re-embed Christian discipleship in the household (Barclay 1997:66-80; Harvey 1996:38-39). In fact, in the New Testament the proper model according to which believers can live lives of love and faithfulness in Christ, was not family but early communities of followers of Jesus, *ekklesiai* (Woodhead 1996:41).

idolatrous (cf Martin 2006:17-40; Woodhead 1996:40), with family idealised amidst uncritical allegiance (Harvey 1996:38).<sup>72</sup>

Strong positions with regard to the “defence” of the conventional nuclear family stumble over other, related concerns, and can become subterfuge for avoiding wider social engagement and for ignoring the need to formulate and consider alternative morally responsible manifestations of social relationships and unions. “If family breakdown can be attributable to individual moral weakness, then the contribution of socio-economic conditions to the plight of many families can be bracketed out. If the breakdown can be attributable to the decline of religious faith, then its patriarchal scope can be ignored” (Stuart and Thatcher 1996:439).<sup>73</sup> In other words, the focus on an idealised family concept can become an excuse for not considering the bigger picture of human relationships in society in a morally sensitive way. The strong insistence on traditional family values that ostensibly claims its sanction from the Bible is not only hermeneutically inappropriate, and theologically dangerous, but also morally restrictive, closing down on possibilities for Christian living.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Harvey sees the “unconverted need to receive our identity from the family” at the roots of the idealised model of the family (Harvey 1996:39).

<sup>73</sup> Critical questions can be raised against “critical familism” as formulated by “The family, religion and culture” project in the USA headed up by Don S Browning, and its claims that the Bible promotes equal-regard marriage and egalitarian family. The idea that early Christianity move along a “trajectory” towards notions such as “egalitarian marriage” and “servant leadership”, is seriously jeopardised by the inadequacy of historical constructions and the textual strangeness wrought by the socio-historical placement of texts (Thatcher 2007:14; 33-42). Thatcher’s uneasiness with an all too strong reliance on history in the exegetical process, “the greater the contextualization, the greater the cession of interpretation to the historians” (2007:35), casts some suspicion on his perception of the relation between hermeneutics and exegesis (as though the two can be so neatly separated), and his inclination to nudge historiography beyond its constructionist role towards a more positivist-sounding approach. It is worrying that Thatcher seems to suggest a new *analogia fidei* as control for exegesis (Thatcher 2007:41-50), in the form of a Trinitarian-based Christology that is bound to impose on exegesis in ways more dangerous than allowing a free run for historical concerns.

<sup>74</sup> Cf e.g Woodhead (1996:46). It is important to acknowledge and seek to reverse the damage done by the church’s oppressive and uncritical collusion, over many centuries, in its endorsement of patriarchal, sexist and marginalising versions of family life (Barton 1996:451-462). This raises many questions as to how to unsettle such fixed socio-political and socio-economic patterns and theological rationale and justification, about the place and role of the (continuing) use of the Bible in such thinking, and on finding an alternative theological grammar and vocabulary to address body, sexuality and marriage, as well as family, gender and children? Without valorising the family to the extent of engaging in what Barton (1996:460) called “bourgeois idolatry”?

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