

## FAMILY

The basic household unit which provides a person's central relationships, nurture, and support.  
J. Michael Hester, *Holman Bible Dictionary*

The basic composition of a family changes from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Therefore, the search for the traditional biblical family is difficult. The search is important, however, to understand the essential family structures, relationships, commitments, and functions. Jesus Christ, along with the New Testament writers, used family images to describe the nature of faith and the church. Understanding the biblical definition of family can guide in living out faith in the family more effectively.

The biblical portrayal of family represents the basic structures and conditions of the Near East of biblical times, conditions which still prevail over much of the East today. Throughout biblical times the structures and relationships changed. Likewise, the commitments and functions changed.

### OLD TESTAMENT

The span of the Old Testament allowed for much transition in the family. Their understanding of the nature of God as well as of their culture influenced much of the Hebrew family life.

**Structure** The Old Testament family represents a larger body than the English word suggests. There are two Hebrew words which are used to refer to the family. One word (*mishpachah*) was used to describe the larger patriarchal clan which included those persons related by blood, marriage, slavery, and even animals (as found in the fourth commandment, Ex. 20:10). Occasionally even strangers or sojourners could be included in the larger household.

The second word (*bayith*) was used to suggest the place of residence or household. It had multiple meanings. It represented a clan of descendants (Gen. 18:19), or property and persons of a particular place or residence on which and on whom one depended (Job 8:15).

Central to this household was the oldest male relative who was viewed as the "father," master, and ultimate authority, thus signifying the family as the father's house. All who belonged to him and claimed their allegiance to him were considered part of the household and were similar in beliefs and values. In Genesis 7:1 Noah and his household were directed to enter the ark. Beyond the household was the larger clan, the tribe, and the nation which were descendants of Abraham, the origin of the people of Israel.

**Relationships** With the oldest male as center of the household, he was expected to marry and often have more than one wife (Gen. 38:8-10; Deut. 25:5-10). Polygamy was common, though monogamy was widely practiced in Israel. Abraham, Jacob, and David were all husbands of more than one wife, and they also had concubines which were recognized as a lower status than a wife. See **Concubine**. Jacob's family numbered sixty-six persons in all, not including his sons' wives (Gen. 46:26). The creation story (Gen. 1-2) modeled the monogamous relationship of one male and one female, as does much of the Bible.

The authority of the father was quite significant, even though he may actually have been the grandfather or great-grandfather. His responsibilities included begetting, instructing, disciplining, and nurturing. Abraham had the power to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22). The father could even destroy family members if they enticed him from his loyalty to God (Deut. 13:6-10). However, the father was also to be loving, and the divine mercy of the New Testament was based on the compassionate Old Testament father (Ps. 103).

In the marriage, the male had power over the female or females (Gen. 3:16). They were often considered property of the male. He could have relationships with other women as long as he did not destroy property rights. Therefore, divorce was a male option only. He could divorce for

almost any reason. As an example, he might “lose favor” (Deut. 24:1). He simply had to write a note and place her out. Both persons were free to marry again.

The Hebrew “mother” often saw her primary function as having children. The account of creation, however, described the female as being created equal with the male. After the Fall, women were relegated to the child-bearing role. The mother exercised significant authority over family life and often gave directions. Her primary role was to provide love and care for the members. The prophet Isaiah used the image of the mother to describe the compassion of God (Isa. 66:13). The mother was the object of love and honor and is praised in Proverbs 31 for her good works.

Children were very important to the family and were considered proof of God’s love (Ps. 127:3-5). They were under absolute authority and control of the father. Sons were especially important and were considered second to the father in significance. Descent was through the male which also determined the perpetuation of the family name and the personality. Therefore, sons were trained in the traditions of the community and in the meaning of wisdom (Prov. 3:12; 13:24; 19:18). Daughters were often considered of secondary importance. The fathers were responsible for arranging marriages for the sons (Gen. 24:4) and writing contracts for the daughters.

**Commitment** The Old Testament family was close-knit, and family loyalty was very strong. The family was held together around the central dominant figure of the father. Family honor and respect was high. The covenant was central to understanding Old Testament family relationships as well as relationships with God. A covenant had both an interior bonding and an exterior binding quality. Steadfast love (heed) was the basis of the covenant which created a sense of loyalty, justice, and high regard. Covenants were personal and caring and were greater than contracts for directing the family. Hebrew marriages were covenant marriages (Mal. 2:14). Hosea especially revealed the importance of steadfast love (Hos. 2:19-20).

For the Hebrew family steadfast love was the heart of loyalty and corporate solidarity. Marriages were based on faithfulness and vows of covenant love. This covenant included all family relationships and has helped to maintain the identity of the Hebrew family even until today.

**Functions** The family of the Old Testament had the purposes of reproduction, instruction, care giving, maintaining traditions, and conveying wisdom. The primary function, however, was the teaching of religion, thus providing guidelines and instruction which were central to Hebrew family well-being. They carefully guarded the family from outside influences. When the family moved from a rural to an urbanized culture, their traditions and values were threatened. Consequently, ancient customs were reaffirmed, and faith was used to undergird them.

## **NEW TESTAMENT**

The New Testament introduced major changes in understanding the family, and it provided new and creative ways to appreciate the nature of family and the nature of faith.

**Structure** As in the Old Testament the Greek words used to describe family did not refer exclusively to our understanding of the nuclear family. One word (*patria*) was used to identify lineage and descent from a specific ancestor (Luke 2:4; Acts 3:25; Eph. 3:15). Another term (*oikos*) meant a house or a building but could also refer to a lineage or clan much like the Old Testament word for household (1 Cor. 1:16). A similar term (*oikia*) also referred to a building (Matt. 7:24) but was used to describe a household including husband, wife, children, and others. The New Testament household or family, especially the Christian family, probably had one husband and one wife, children, relatives, slaves, servants, and others who lived there for various reasons. The household codes of the New Testament outlined duties for the members including husband/wife, father/child, and master/slave (Eph. 5:21-6:4; Col. 3:18-4:1).

The importance of lineage in the New Testament shifted from a focus on the lineage from an ancestor to lineage from God. In Matthew, Jesus said, “call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven” (23:9). The focus of family structure and family lineage changed from the “earthly father” and was replaced by a lineage from “God the Father,” accessible to anyone through Jesus Christ. Therefore, all who believed on Jesus became part of a broader family of God.

**Relationships** Jesus used the relationships of His own family as well as natural families to define the nature of God’s relationships with His people (Matt. 7:9-10; 11:16-17; 21:28-32; Luke 11:7; 14:11-32).

Jesus even gave greater importance to relationships within the family of God than to the natural family. He said, “whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Matt. 12:50). Following Jesus often meant leaving one’s family (Mark 1:16-20; Luke 9:59-60).

Jesus provided a new understanding of family—the family of God and the family of faith. According to Jesus, neither the nuclear family nor the household was the primary unit of God’s creation. Rather, one’s faith commitment and faith family were central to God’s purpose.

The primary relational dynamic Jesus and the New Testament taught was love (*agape*). This New Testament love expanded the Old Testament understanding of steadfast love (*hesed*) by developing an unconditional, accepting love known initially in the love of God (John 3:16; 1 Cor. 13). This love permeated and transformed the relationships of families and all persons.

Marriage in the New Testament was founded on a love bond experienced by both male and female in contrast to the arranged marriage of the Old Testament. Women were not to be considered property by men but rather were to be loved and nurtured (Eph. 5:25).

The roles of men and women were transformed by the love of Christ. The father was no longer the central figure of the family but was replaced by God the Father and faith in Jesus Christ. The authority of the male became like the sacrificial, servant authority of Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:25-33). The role and status of a woman were not linked intrinsically to her function as a wife and mother. Her identity and personhood were discovered in her faith commitment to Jesus Christ and in doing the will of the Father. Therefore, women did not have to be married or have children to be important in the family of God (Gal. 3:28).

The marriage relationship was important in the New Testament. There was to be marriage between one man and one woman (Mark 10:6-8; Eph. 5:31). The relationship was to be permanent. Jesus addressed the issue of divorce because it was so commonly and easily exercised (for the man). Jesus believed that the love bond made the marriage vows sacred, and they were not to be broken (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). Jesus affirmed the value of marriage but did not view it as more important than the family of God.

The nature of the Christian marriage relationship, guided by Christlike love, called for both man and woman to give themselves voluntarily and sacrificially to each other (Eph. 5:21). This mutual love commitment was a radical departure from the Old Testament marriage model. The New Testament marriage union was based on an equal and mutual sharing guided by love (1 Cor. 7:4).

Children were given a place of high honor by Jesus (Mark 10:13-16). Having a child created an opportunity for parents to become co-creators with God in helping earthly children to become children of God (Rom. 9:8). Therefore, the focus of the parent/child relationship was on love, honor, and respect as well as discipline and instruction (Eph. 6:1-4).

**Commitment** The Old Testament concept of covenant became the foundation for the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Steadfast love was enhanced by Christlike love. Covenants and commitments, in family relationships and faith relationships, were deepened by the new covenant of love which was infused with grace and forgiveness. All relationships were guided by grace and the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ (1 John 3:16). Christian family relationships called for a commitment which was based on openness and compassion, forgiveness and understanding.

This image of family commitment was so significant that it was used by the early church to describe the relationship of Christ and the church (Eph. 5). Since the early churches were house churches, family relationships were very important because of the pagan forces which threatened them. All believers were members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19), which was the household of faith (Gal. 6:10).

**Function** The function of the family in the New Testament was secondary to the primary purpose of the family of God. Obedience to Christ and doing God's will was the calling for everyone. This faith commitment, then, shaped the purpose and function of the family. The family was guided by Christlike love, and the purpose of the family was to give witness to the love of God and bring people to a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ, thus creating the larger family of God.