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GENESIS AND FAMILY VALUES

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The phrase "family values" currently reverberates in political, religious, and even academic circles. The conversations are complicated and the tone is often heated. Various organizations spend vast sums of money to promulgate their views on issues such as pro-natalism and gay marriage. People argue vigorously about the very nature of the family. Those debates involve important and foundational questions: What is a family? Is there a normative family structure? What does marriage mean?

One might think that these questions belong primarily to the purview of sociologists, anthropologists, and ethicists, among others. However, as many of us know, the aforementioned conversations regularly involve appeals to biblical literature. When examining the issue of the Bible and family values, Jay Newman recently wrote, "In modern Western democracies, the religious texts that have had by far the greatest cultural impact have been Biblical texts, so it is not surprising that in recent debates in the West about religion and the family, religious cultural critics and reformers have concentrated much of their attention on the values ostensibly imparted by Biblical texts. Questions thus arise concerning, for example, what family values the Bible actually imparts. . . ."[1] If Newman's assessments are accurate, we biblical scholars have a role to play in the current debates, since who better than one of us is in a position to talk about family values as they are depicted either in the Hebrew Bible or in the New Testament.

Within the context of this discourse about family values, one prominent organization, Focus on the Family, has identified five principles or "pillars" that undergird its work of "helping to preserve traditional values and the institution

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[1] Jay Newman, *Biblical Religion and Family Values: A Problem in the Philosophy of Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 14.

of the family." In introducing those pillars, Focus on the Family offers the following statement regarding their source: "These pillars are drawn from the Bible and the Judeo-Christian ethic, rather than from the humanistic notions of today's theorists."[2] Despite this claim, explicit reference to biblical material is not prominent in their formulations.[3]

When one continues to read through the foundational documents of both Focus on the Family and comparable organizations, such as the Family Research Council, it seems clear that certain issues, for example, abortion and the male headship in the family, are of primary importance. In a recent essay devoted to religion and the family, Bryan Turner has concluded that a number of organizations, including the New Christian Right, "have in various ways rejected liberal America in favor of the regulation of pornography, anti-abortion legislation, the criminalization of homosexuality, and the virtues of faithfulness and loyalty in sexual partnerships."[4] Appeal to family values seems to have become a code phrase to address these and other issues, many of which involve human sexuality and familial life.[5] Oddly, some pressing contemporary issues involving the family, such as child or spouse abuse, are not included in these conversations.

As one who is interested in the intersection of Hebrew Bible texts and contemporary life, I began to ask myself: What traditional values are attested in the Hebrew Bible, and what is the institution of the family that we see there? In short, what family values pervade the Hebrew Bible?

When reflecting about these questions, I thought about some of the families attested in biblical literature. Surely the marriages of religiously prominent individuals in the Hebrew Bible would constitute formative moments in the so-called Judeo-Christian ethic, to which Focus on the Family had appealed. I thought about Abraham, who was married to one woman, Sarah, and given sexual access to another, Hagar. I thought about Jacob, who was married to two sisters, Leah and Rachel. I thought about King David, who was married to Michal

[2] See www.family.org/welcome/aboutof.

[3] A similar point is made by Don Browning et al., *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000). When referring both to Focus on the Family and to Promise Keepers, they write, "Although they quote the Bible to support their theories, it is astounding to see both how little and how noncontextually they use the scripture" (p. 232).

[4] Bryan Turner, "Religion, Romantic Love, and the Family," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Family* (ed. Jacqueline Scott, Judith Treas, and Martin Richards; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 299.

[5] See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, who states, "the term *family values* is often used as a code for leaving families to their own devices, which in reality means leaving them to the control of the most powerful" ("Families in Ancient Israel," in *The Family Handbook* [ed. Herbert Anderson et al.; Family, Religion, and Culture; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 280.

(Saul's daughter), Abigail (widow of Nabal), Bathsheba (widow of Uriah), and Haggith (mother of Adonijah). I even thought about Moses, who, the book of Exodus reports, sent his wife away, which is the ancient language of divorce (Exod 18:2; see Deut 24:1). These are not minor figures. Yet the institution of the family as they lived it is quite different from that advocated by many who appeal to biblical norms. Can it be that the family values attested in the Hebrew Bible are not as self-evident to contemporary readers as many have thought? Could it be that the traditional values to which many appeal are not uniformly present in biblical literature?

In order to address these questions, I propose to examine one biblical text that truly focuses on the family. It is the book of Genesis. In this address, I will need to make several arguments: first, Genesis is a book whose authors and editors were concerned about the family; second, Genesis is a book that includes family literature; and, third, Genesis is a book that offers some clear and significant family values.

I. Genesis Is a Book That Focuses on the Family

I contend that both authors and editors of Genesis were concerned about the issue of family.[6] Apart from the ancestral narratives themselves, which we will examine later, we may find the notion of family developed in three other places: in the primeval history, in Gen 12:3, and in the *tôlēdôt* formulae.

First, one of clearest cases in which a reader may observe an Israelite author focusing on the family occurs in the primeval history. There can be little doubt that the ancient Israelite authors knew traditions about the primeval age that had circulated in Mesopotamia and that we now can read in various cuneiform texts. Preeminent among this literature is the so-called Atrahasis myth. It is a myth of two basic parts. The first portion narrates the creation of humanity as a response to a revolt among the lesser gods based on the difficulty of their labor. The second element recounts various attempts by the deity Enlil to silence humanity. The final attempt, a flood, is successful, though a man, the Mesopotamian Noah, and his wife survive.

[6] Though much of this discussion of "family" involves literary analysis, one must attend to the concrete realities of family life in ancient Israel. Basic resources for this study include Lawrence Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* 260 (1985): 1–35; Leo Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John Collins, and Carol Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel* (Family, Religion, and Culture; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Studies in the Archaeology and History of the Levant; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001); Ronald Simkins, "Family in the Political Economy of Monarchic Judah," *Bible and Critical Theory* [Monash University Press], www.epress.monash.edu (2004, paper no. BC040006).

An early Israelite author constructed a larger work based on the narrative structure of that earlier myth. For our purposes, it is particularly interesting to see how that author revised the earlier material and made additions to it. The revisions took place in both the creation and the flood sections. In both instances, the narrator took what were essentially stories about individual humans and turned them into stories about families. The first human of the Atrahasis myth has become a husband and wife, and the flood survivor is now embedded in a family, including not only a wife but also sons and daughters-in-law.[7] In the Israelite version of the primeval history, primeval person became primeval family.

This Israelite author not only revised the traditions he inherited but also introduced new narratives. This new material included the episodes concerning Cain and Abel, Lamech and his wives, the sons of God marrying human wives, and Noah and his sons. There are four new episodes, and all of them depict humanity in familial relationships.[8] In sum, there can be little doubt that the Israelite author of the primeval history was concerned to reflect about humanity's early existence by using the trope of family. The notion of family is of primary importance to the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

Second, at the outset of the ancestral narratives, we find a brief speech of the deity. In that address, God directs Abraham to leave the land in which he had been dwelling and to travel to another land. Following that command, the deity promises to Abraham that he will become a great nation and that "through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3).[9] This is a rich and provocative statement. In three other texts (18:18; 22:18; 26:4), we hear that those others who will be blessed are "nations" (*gôyîm*). In Gen 12:3 (and 28:14), however, the author uses familial language—the noun *mišpāḥot*, which is often translated "clan." Here, at a point where the deity has chosen to interact directly with the lineage of Terah, the biblical author wants readers to know that those outside that lineage have not been ignored. Moreover, they are

[7] In the Atrahasis myth, the flood hero does send his family on board the boat. In the Gilgamesh epic, there is reference to Utnapishtim's family and craftsmen on the craft.

[8] The Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) is the only episode that does not involve the family. This narrative was probably added to the primeval history by a later author. On the tower episode, see Christoph Uehlinger, *Weltreich und "eine Rede": Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung (Gen 11, 1–9)* (OBO 101; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1990).

[9] Or, "through you all the families of the earth will bless themselves." Cf. other instances in which a comparable formula is used—in the *niphal* 18:18; 28:14; in the *hithpael*, 22:18; 26:4. Waltke and O'Connor emphasize "the passive import" of the verb (*IBHS* 23.6.4a). For a discussion, see Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (WMANT 57; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984). 350–53; Patrick Miller, "Syntax and Theology in Genesis XII 3a," *VT* 34 (1984): 472–76; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 151–52; Keith Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context* (BZAW 332; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003).

to be thought of as family, the broader family of humanity. Other parts of that broader family are to share in Israel's blessing.

Third, Genesis was edited by an individual who used familial language to integrate the narratives about various individuals and their families. This editor, probably a member of one of the priestly schools, introduced a series of formulae, the so-called *tôlēdôt* formulae, which link genealogies, reports, and narratives that make up the book of Genesis. This formula appears in the same basic form eleven times in Genesis.[10] In each instance, the formula, best translated, "these are the descendants of PN," occurs prior to the material it introduces.[11] One could suggest that these genealogical formulae are no more than mechanical insertions, crude redactional rubrics, but to do so would miss the significance these formulae had for the Priestly compositor.

I would like to offer two comments about the ways in which these formulae function in Genesis. First, these formulae are consistent with and a development beyond an affirmation made in the material that the Priestly editor inherited. By creating and using the *tôlēdôt* formulae, the Priestly writer emphasizes how broad and deep are the connections between Abraham's family and those of other people. According to the priests, the formulae refer to relationships that already exist. One might read Gen 12:1–3 and think that the author is referring only to future relationships between Abraham and others. The *tôlēdôt* formulae demonstrate that, at least for the priests, the familial relationships between what Abraham symbolizes and other people exist in the present. Frank Crüsemann was surely correct when he wrote, "The genealogies . . . , which pervade all of Genesis, form something like the skeleton of this book, a stable framework which holds together and carries all other parts."[12] The *tôlēdôt* formulae underscore the importance of these genealogical-familial connections. Naomi Steinberg put it well, referring to Genesis 12–50: "Genealogy reflects family succession which moves action forward and is the redactional device used by P to organize family history into narrative cycles."[13] Genesis presents us with movement through time expressed as family time—

[10] Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 36:9; and 37:2. The *tôlēdôt* formulae, therefore, are constitutive for Genesis as a literary whole. The priestly editor underscored the importance of family and progeny by using this formula in Genesis. The formula appears in two other places, Num 3:1 and Ruth 4:18. Both depend on the prior usage in Genesis and are secondary to it.

[11] Three of the formulae introduce narrative material (2:4a; 6:9; 37:2). Elsewhere they introduce genealogies, some of which are brief and immediately followed by narratives, e.g., 25:19.

[12] Frank Crüsemann, "Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity: Israel's Self-Definition in the Genealogical System of Genesis," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark Brett; Biblical Interpretation Series 19; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 59–60.

[13] Naomi Steinberg, "The Genealogical Framework of the Family Stories in Genesis," *Semeia* 46 (1989): 41–50.

one generation of a family to the next one. Familial language holds the book together.

Moreover, in the first of these *tôlēdôt* formulae (Gen 2:4a), the Priestly editor offers a striking claim about family. This half verse reads, "These are the descendants of the heavens and the earth when they were created."[14] Who are these descendants of the heavens and the earth? If one understands this formula in the way it works every other time it occurs, then one must conclude that the Priestly writer is introducing material that follows the formula. Here, the Priestly editor is introducing literature he inherited, namely, the report about the deity creating humanity out of the earth (Gen 2:4b–25). For the Priestly writer, humanity is to be understood as the progeny of heaven and earth, not just the earth. There is a familial relationship between the broader created universe and that of humanity.

That humanity is related to the heavens and the earth is a striking claim, but it is consistent with what the Priestly writer has accomplished elsewhere. In other places, the *tôlēdôt* formulae and the genealogies that follow them have highlighted the interconnectedness of humanity. In Gen 2:4a, the Priestly writer broadens this claim by contending that humans may be understood as the progeny of heaven and earth. For the Priestly writer, the human family is embedded in the very structure of the universe.

We can see, then, that even apart from the ancestral narratives, the book of Genesis focuses on the family—in the primeval history, in Gen 12:3, and in the *tôlēdôt* formulae. I now want to observe that when we move from Genesis to Exodus, such focus on the family ceases. The final chapter of Genesis marks a major transition—from speaking about the lineage of Abraham as a family to that of a people. To be sure, at numerous points in Genesis, the authors anticipate that the lineage of Abraham and Sarah will become something different. Genesis 12:3 speaks of that lineage becoming a great nation. According to Gen 17:16, Sarah will give rise to "nations, kings of peoples will come from her." And in Gen 28:3, Isaac blesses Jacob with the hope that he will become "a company of peoples." However, prior to the last two chapters of Genesis, there is no instance in which the families that derive from Terah are described as a people or nation.

[14] I maintain that Gen 2:4a is attributable to a Priestly hand, whereas 2:4b belongs to the pre-Priestly narrative. Genesis 2:4b is a temporal clause, which has its syntactical parallel not only in Gen 1:1 but also the initial lines of both the Enuma Elish and Atrahasis myths. Cf. Marc Vervenne, who maintains that Gen 2:4 is a literary unity ("Genesis 1,1–2,4: The Compositional Texture of the Priestly Overture to the Pentateuch," in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction, and History* [ed. André Wénin; BETL 155; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), 46–47.

Some translations obscure the similarity between this first occurrence of the formula and those that follow: e.g., NRSV translates, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth . . ."; JPS reads, "Such is the story of heaven and earth . . . ."

Genesis 50 and Exodus 1 offer that major point of transition—the move from talking about the "sons of Israel" to "the Israelites," the move from familial language to that of a social collectivity. We see this twice in Genesis 50 and twice in Exodus 1. In Gen 50:20, Joseph refers to those with him as "a numerous people." Five verses later, though Joseph uses the phrase "the sons of Israel," that expression here clearly means Israelites, not just those individuals born to Jacob. Exodus 1:7 presents a similar picture. There an author, referring to those who lived after the sons of Jacob had died, describes the next generation as "the sons of Israel," or, more properly translated, the Israelites. This same phrase is placed in the mouth of Pharaoh in Exod 1:9. However, Pharaoh adds to it, such that he speaks about "the Israelite people." By this point in the tetrateuchal account, the lineage of Abraham and Sarah has made the transition from family to people. The end of Genesis marks the end of familial language to describe Israel. Genesis is a book that uses familial language first to describe all humanity (Gen 1–11) and, subsequently, to characterize what will become Israel (Gen 12–50).

In sum, even apart from the ancestral stories, Genesis is a book that highlights the family. When one moves from Genesis to Exodus, language about Israel as family stops and language of a people, *ʿam*, commences.[15] In Genesis, the notion of family is used innovatively—as a way of embellishing Israel's version of the primeval history, as a way of talking about all humanity, and as a way of building humans into the structure of the universe.

II. Genesis as Family Literature

It is one thing to maintain that Genesis is a book concerned about family, it is quite another to contend that Genesis includes family literature. To claim that Genesis is family literature requires discussion of the genre of family literature, which has been understood in diverse ways. Many people who have used the phrase have intimated that family literature is literature produced by families. Elizabeth Stone has written a popular tome, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us*.[16] In that volume, she summarizes many stories told by members of families today and attempts to identify common themes and motifs. For example, she maintains that the mother–child bond in many stories is the most "mythic" and that the fraternal bond is the most fragile. Or, she concludes that our most powerful stories tend to fashion and reflect our feelings about sons. In these and other cases, she appeals to sto-

[15] Earlier in Genesis, the noun *ʿam* was used in burial formulae (25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:29, 32).

[16] Elizabeth Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us* (New York: Times Books, 1988).

ries that derive from particular families. These stories contain so many common elements that she is able to speak of a genre "family stories," stories told by families about themselves.

However, there is another kind of family literature—not *from* the family, but *about* the family; and this kind of family literature offers striking similarities to that which we find in Genesis 12–50. I offer two examples: the Icelandic sagas and the family novel.

Of particular importance to biblical scholarship is the characterization of the Icelandic sagas as family literature.[17] In his classic study, André Jolles argued that the earliest form of the Icelandic sagas, the ones dealing with the families who left their native Scandinavia and settled in Iceland, reflected a specific milieu (*Geistesbeschäftigung*), namely, the family.[18] In describing this literature, Jolles wrote,

> these stories all deal with individuals, who, as individuals, belong in turn to families. We hear how a family built a house and a farm, how the family wealth increased, how the family came into contact with other families in the same district, how they quarreled, became reconciled, feuded or lived in peace, how many sons and daughters the family had, where the sons got their wives, into which families the daughters married. Sometimes the family is represented as a person, its head; sometimes it appears as a whole.[19]

Some, though few, scholars have discerned similarities between the Icelandic sagas and the narratives in Genesis.[20] When reading Jolles's characterization of the Icelandic sagas, Claus Westermann thought Jolles could equally well have been describing the ancestral literature in Genesis. Westermann deemed the literature in Genesis 12–50 to offer "precise counterparts" to the Icelandic sagas.[21] Scholarship devoted to the sagas since Jolles's time permits one to make the case for even stronger similarities than those noted by Westermann. For example, it is possible to characterize both the Icelandic sagas and the ancestral narratives as "historical fictions."[22] Other compelling similarities

[17] It is important to distinguish between the Icelandic word *saga* and the German word *Sage*. The latter achieved primacy in Hermann Gunkel's analysis of the short narratives in Genesis and was, unfortunately, often translated into English as "legend." For a brief discussion of the terminological problems, see Robert Neff, "Saga," in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature* (ed. George Coats; JSOTSup 35; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 17–32.

[18] André Jolles, *Einfache Formen* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1930), 71–75.

[19] Jolles as quoted in Claus Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Literature* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 33.

[20] The definitive edition of the Icelandic sagas is Viðar Hreinsson, general editor, *The Complete Sagas of the Icelanders, including 49 Tales* (Reyjavik: Leifur Eiriksson, 1997).

[21] Westermann, *Promises to the Fathers*, 33.

[22] The phrase is used by Robert Kellog, "Introduction," in *Complete Sagas of the Icelanders*, 1:xxx.

include prose of high quality, the inclusion of genealogies in long prose works, the presence of familial subplots, the families of commoners (not royalty), a strong chronological sense, and so realistic a depiction of life that it can be examined by social scientists. By examining these similarities, it is possible more accurately to perceive some of the defining features of family literature in Genesis.

If the Icelandic sagas present a medieval example of family literature, Yi-Ling Ru has identified a more recent body of such literature.[23] She maintains that there is a distinct form of the novel, one that may be characterized as the family novel. Although, in her judgment, the family novel emerged near the beginning of the twentieth century, its roots may be traced far back in world literature. Among other ancient works, she appeals to Homer's *Odyssey* and Aeschylus's *Oresteia.* I suggest that one may also discern such roots in the book of Genesis.

Ru argues that the family novel possesses four basic characteristics: (1) family novels depict a family chronology and in a realistic fashion; (2) family novels devote major attention to familial rites within the broader context of traditional communal life; (3) family novels focus on conflicts within the family; and (4) family novels possess a unique form. That form comprises a "long, forward-moving vertical structure"—the family's chronology—with a horizontal component—intrafamilial relations at any one time. Genesis 12–50 includes all four of these elements.

First, family chronology and realism characterize much in the ancestral literature. The book of Genesis provides us with the ages of major characters. Further, the authors and editors have taken great care to spell out the genealogical relations. We know birth orders, if there are twins. We know who marries whom and who predeceases whom, and all this is done with considerable realism. There are no miraculous human journeys. Great attention is paid to matters such as itineraries, agriculture, property, and family life.

Second, familial rites are prominent in the book. One can point immediately to the rite of circumcision, which is introduced in the Abrahamic saga and which continues throughout Genesis. Other rites involving the family include the making of covenants, the taking of an oath, and sacrifice (22:13; 31:54). Moreover, the *tĕrāpîm* (Gen 31:19) that Rachel took almost certainly represented familial deities, perhaps divinized ancestors. And burial rites were of quintessential importance. Entombment is presented as a familial act, husbands burying wives (Gen 23:19), sons burying fathers (25:9; 35:29; 49:29). In each burial of a patriarch, more than one son was involved. Isaac and Ishmael

[23] Yi-Ling Ru, *The Family Novel: Toward a Generic Definition* (American University Studies; Series 19, General Literature 28; New York: Peter Lang, 1992). Her thesis is based on cross-cultural work, primarily novels from England, France, and China.

bury Abraham; Jacob and Esau bury Isaac; and all his sons are admonished to bury Jacob. Familial rites undergird much in the book of Genesis.[24]

Third, Genesis 12–50 regularly depicts strife within the family. At a minimum, there are conflicts between Abraham and Lot, Sarah and Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Jacob and Laban, Joseph and his brothers. Without such intrafamilial conflict, the book of Genesis would offer a far less interesting—and realistic—picture of the patrilineage of Terah.

Fourth, the ancestral narratives include the unique form of a family novel—both its horizontal and vertical dimensions. Genesis narrates the patrilineage of Terah over a period of four generations—the vertical dimension. Further, authors invest time with each generation, and each generation is different—the horizontal dimension. The family of Abraham, Lot, Sarah, and Hagar differs from that of Jacob, Esau, Laban, Rachel, and Leah. The structure of the family is different in each generation, even though the lineage remains consistently rooted in the line of Terah.

The presence of these four characteristics does not exhaust the similarities between Genesis and the family novel. In the course of her analysis, Ru discerns a theme central to many family novels: the rise and fall of the family. Most family novels depict a family that ascends to high status or great fortune. Then, over time, the family is unable to maintain its perch. This is true of the patrilineage of Terah as well. The ancestral literature in Genesis narrates the rise of a family. Whether properly characterized as immigrant or refugee, the patrilineage of Terah has left its homeland, entered a new one, and prospered. But, at the end of the book, they have lost that land and are about to lose their status.

The final chapters of Genesis describe a family in disarray. The poem in Genesis 49 reports not only intergenerational improprieties—Reuben's defiling of his father's couch (49:4)—but also hierarchy emerging among the brothers—Judah's ascendance (49:8) and Joseph's being set apart (49:28). The language of brotherhood and family subsequently disappears, only to be replaced by that of a people. The trajectory of "twelve" brothers is transformed into that of twelve tribes. The family has, as it were, fallen. This theme, too, is characteristic of the family novel, literature written about families. In sum, there are striking similarities between the distinguishing features of the family novel and Genesis 12–50.

[24] On household religion, see Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Ugarit, and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (SHCANE 7; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 181–265.

III. Genesis and Family Values

If Genesis is a book that highlights the family and one that shares elements with family literature, it is an especially appropriate place to search for values about families depicted in the Hebrew Bible. Some might, at first glance, demur from treating Genesis as a resource for thinking about family values. To be sure, not all episodes depict families in the best light. After all, it is a book in which one brother kills another (ch. 4); a book in which a father banishes his surrogate spouse and her son (ch. 21); a book in which a father almost kills his son (ch. 22); a book in which numerous brothers come near to killing their sibling (ch. 37); and a book in which a father-in-law has sexual intercourse with his widowed daughter-in-law (ch. 38).[25] Further, the patrilineal kinship structure in Genesis disadvantaged women, whether they were matriarchs, daughters, a widow, a sister, or servants. Clearly, family structure and life involved many problematic elements.[26] Nonetheless, when we examine the lineage of Terah, we may discern at least three important family values that have hitherto not been recognized, values that need to be part of contemporary discussions of family values in biblical literature.

First, the book of Genesis challenges readers to have an expansive view of the family. These stories and genealogies present family as something far larger than a couple or a nuclear family.[27] The household as described in the Hebrew Bible often included more individuals than just a husband, a wife, and their children. Moreover, the lineage of Terah is truly an extended family. It extends beyond the boundaries of the household, and it extends over generations. This perception stands in sharp contrast to contemporary rhetoric about the family as comprising essentially the nuclear family.

Families in Genesis do not exist in isolation. Abraham, Lot, and Isaac have

[25] Scholars differ in their analysis of the values at work in these episodes. On Genesis 21, see, e.g., Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 20–29, who deems Hagar to have been subject to terrible oppression; and Savina Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), who argues that Hagar was ultimately liberated.

[26] Cf. the characterization of the family conveyed in the Hebrew Bible as "patriarchal family clan" in a recent volume devoted to discourse about religion and family (Browning, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground,* 132). See similarly, Frymer-Kensky's judgment, "These stories (the central narrative of the Hebrew Bible [Genesis-Kings]) reveal the problem with 'family values': The power that men have over their children can lead to abuse and chaos, and society has an obligation to create a layer above the power of the patriarch to which men will be subordinate" ("The Family in the Hebrew Bible," in *Religion, Feminism, and the Family* [ed. Anne Carr and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen; Family, Religion, and Culture; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996], 55).

[27] See Schloen, *House of the Father,* 135–36, on the importance of the "joint family household" in ancient Israel. This household regularly included "servants and more distantly-related kin."

the following sons, who do not belong to the privileged line of descent: Ishmael (16:16), Moab (19:37), Ben-Ammi (19:38), Midian (25:2), and Esau (25:30). Each of these children functions as an eponymous ancestor for those nations that will later be near neighbors of Israel: the Ishmaelites, Moabites, Ammonites, Midianites, and Edomites, respectively. The genealogies and narratives in Genesis demonstrate the manifold ways in which Terah's patrilineage includes those who live proximate to Israel. The family of Terah includes what will become Israel's immediate neighbors.[28]

For one priestly writer, the breadth of the human family extends into the structure of the cosmos. Humans are construed as the descendants of the heavens and the earth. Humans belong inextricably to both the heavens and the earth, as does a child to its mother and father. This view is comparable to that of the psalmist: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little less than divine, and crowned them with glory and honor" (Ps 8:5–6). A priestly writer in Genesis complements this high view of humanity by using familial imagery to depict the innate relationship of humans to the universe—the heavens and the earth—in which they live.

One part of the human family can act for the benefit of others. Genesis 12:3 makes this clear. The patrilineage of Terah will in some consequential way be a source of blessing for "*all* the families of the earth." Those families include not only the near neighbors in Syria-Palestine, but the far neighbors, those attested in the table of nations (Gen 10). So, speaking about family values in Genesis, the interpreter must consider both values germane to a far-flung family and the ways in which one part of that family affects another. Genesis values humanity as a family; it does not focus on the nuclear family. Genesis offers an expansive view of the family. That is family value *number 1.*

Second, the patterns of marriage and sexual access in Genesis attest to the importance of the family continuing over time. The world depicted in the ancestral literature offers patterns for marriage and sexual access different from those normally practiced in North America. Abraham married Sarah, almost certainly a close relative.[29] Clearly, this marital choice is one in which staying inside the larger family is important. Anthropologists call this particular marital pattern patrilineal endogamy. Sarah, however, was unable to become pregnant. Since her status as wife—and, hence, her place in the family—

[28] Though, to be sure, those neighbors have been "diselected"; so R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12–36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah* (SemeiaSt; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001).

[29] Genesis 11:29 reports that Abraham's brother, Nahor, married his niece, Milcah, a liaison that suggests that Abraham would have made a comparable marital choice. In Gen 20:12, Abraham reports that Sarah is the daughter of Terah, but was not born to his mother.

depended on her ability to give birth to an heir, she devised a plan by means of which she might bring a child into the family. She commanded Abraham to have sexual intercourse with her Egyptian slave girl. Interestingly, nothing in the biblical narratives condemns Sarah's strategy. In fact, anthropologists have found this pattern of sexual access in other cultures. They term it "polycoity," a family in which one male has sexual access to more than one female. The family value driving such behavior is the need for an heir, someone to whom the family's property may be passed on.[30] Many scholars have argued that this sort of economic role for the family was its most important feature prior to the nineteenth century.[31] This family value attested in Genesis and concerning the transmission of property derives from the economic function of a traditional family.

Abraham's family with Sarah and Hagar was not the only unusual one in Genesis. Jacob's marriage was also decidedly different from those familiar to us today. Jacob, like Abraham and Isaac before him, married within the family of Terah, Abraham's father. (Isaac's wife, Rachel, was the daughter of Abraham's nephew, Bethuel.) But Jacob's marriage was, by our standards, even more unusual than Abraham's. Jacob married two sisters: Rachel and Leah. Though the story reports that he wanted to marry only Rachel, Rachel's father, Laban, tricked Jacob to ensure that his elder daughter, Leah, would not be left without a spouse. What is reported in the biblical literature as a trick is, in the anthropological literature, presented as a genuine pattern of marriage, one in which a man married two sisters. Such a marriage is known as sororal polygyny. The goal of this familial pattern is apparently very similar to that of polycoity, namely, to ensure that an heir will be present and that the family will be able to preserve its property. The family here is not simply one couple, but households, which are themselves embedded in a powerful kinship structure, the patrilineage of Terah.

Why would this insistence on providing an heir have been so important for the families depicted in Genesis 12–36? The answer is, I fear, dismayingly simple: The deity had made a promise that Abraham's posterity would become numerous, that they would possess the land, and that they would become a blessing. In order for that promise to work out, it was incumbent for the family not to die off. Hence, a primary family value was to keep alive the lineage of Terah. It was a more important value than monogamy, particularly for Sarah,

[30] I depend here on the work of Naomi Steinberg, who has analyzed the structure of families in Genesis 12–50 (*Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Approach* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993]).

[31] So, e.g., Louise A. Tilley and Miriam Cohen, "Does the Family Have a History?" *Social Science History* 6 (1982): 131–79; Tamara Hareven, "Modernization and Family History: Perspectives on Social Change," *Signs* 2 (1976): 190–206.

whose status in the family depended on the presence of a male heir—and just such an heir had been promised to Abraham (Gen 15:4), but not initially to Sarah. The existence of the lineage over time, together with its ability to maintain property, was a premier value. That is family value *number* 2.

The third family value is not so readily discernible, but it may be the most important for contemporary discussions about family life. We will discover this value by examining those instances where there is conflict within the family that traces its origins to Abraham's father, Terah. I will focus on three such moments of conflict.[32]

Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13)

Early on in the ancestral narratives, Abraham and Lot settle in the land of Canaan. The biblical writer characterizes both men as wealthy, owning prodigious herds that were cared for by numerous shepherds (vv. 2–5). Though Abraham and Lot did not live in the same place, their herders apparently came into regular conflict—when their sheep and goats wandered over the landscape of the central highlands (vv. 6–7).[33] The text does not describe the nature of the acrimony, but it certainly could have led to violence between the herdsmen. As a result, Abraham proposes to Lot that he choose where he would like to live (vv. 8–9).

Abraham is often remembered for being the gracious figure, giving Lot first choice—and that is true. But he is even better remembered if we recognize that Abraham is dealing with a member of his family, his nephew. Abraham creates a plan designed to resolve strife within the family. This plan involves distancing, removing the parties from each other. Abraham's strategy is not unknown today. Whether in family disputes or conflicts between other types of contesting parties, simple separation to avoid further conflict and violence is often necessary. Abraham and Lot went their separate ways and, in so doing, avoided an escalation of the conflict into violence.

Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31)

Jacob and Laban present us with another time of difficulty. Jacob had been living in Laban's household. He had married two of Laban's daughters—Rachel and Leah—and prospered. Not only did he have eleven sons and one daughter, but he had amassed sizable herds as well. Further, he perceived that Laban no

[32] The familial conflicts identified on p. 14 are resolved in diverse ways. In the three following cases, the family members themselves resolve the strife. In other instances, those involving Hagar and Sarah and Joseph and his brothers, the deity acts to assist the disadvantaged party.

[33] The noun *rîb*, translated here as "conflict," rarely, if ever, refers to physical violence.

longer was as accommodating to him as he once had been. Hence, he decided to return to the land of his birth. He leaves while Laban is off shearing sheep. When Laban discovers that Jacob has fled, he gathers some of his male kinsmen and pursues Jacob. When he finally catches up with Jacob, there is a tense scene. They exchange accusations. Laban accuses Jacob of stealing some of his religious objects, whereupon Jacob accuses Laban of cheating him over the years. It would not be far off the mark to claim that Jacob and Laban engage in verbal conflict.

To Laban's credit, he recognizes that he and Jacob have reached an impasse. He could do Jacob harm, but in so doing he would jeopardize the fate of his daughters and grandchildren. Hence, Laban proposes that he and Jacob draw up a legal decree of separation, a *bĕrît,* or covenant. They will also establish a physical boundary that neither will be permitted to cross.

Here again, we see two members of a family resolve their dispute, but this time they exchange acrimonious words. The text refers explicitly to the possibility that Laban might have done Jacob harm. Hence, one has the sense that Jacob and Laban could not simply go their separate ways, as Abraham and Lot had done. No, those strong words created the necessity of a more formal arrangement. It involved the taking of an oath, the making of a covenant, and the creation of a tangible boundary.

Sometimes in a familial dispute, the differences are so great that there is serious potential for violence. A simple distancing would not suffice, as it had for Abraham and Lot. After all, Abraham and Lot would meet again. Jacob and Laban must not meet again; hence, this dispute must be resolved differently.

Even the casual reader of Genesis 31 can see that Jacob and Laban use the legal language of covenant and oath. Less clear is that they make those oaths by swearing allegiance to different deities. Laban swears by the God of Nahor, and Jacob swears by the Fear of his father Isaac.[34] We should ask: What is the significance of this reference to two different deities?[35] The God of Nahor and the Fear of Isaac are important to the flow of this story of conflict and its implications. Two relatives, two members of the same large family who could trace their heritage back to Terah, not only swear never to encounter each other again, but they now adopt different religious language. Both names—the God of Nahor and the Fear of Isaac—had, presumably, arisen within the family of Terah. Now they split off from each other. Those associated with Laban will use one way of talking about the deity, whereas those associated with Jacob will use another. The familial schism becomes religiously sectarian.

[34] Some modern translations capitalize *paḥad,* e.g., NRSV, "Fear of his father Isaac" (Gen 31:53).

[35] See the classic study of Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

The picture is clear. Jacob and Laban have created something akin to a divorce. Their differences are irreconcilable. For them to remain in contact would be terrible, almost certainly leading to violence. Their relationship up to this point has been characterized by deceit and theft. There is now only one realistic option—a clear legal separation, which also expresses itself in religious terms. What had once been one family now becomes two families.

Divorce is rarely a happy time, and the biblical writer does not depict Laban and Jacob's separation as particularly heartwarming. Laban kissed his daughters and grandchildren and returned home, never to see them again. Still, all the members of the family are alive. Laban can go back to his kin and his herds. Jacob can return to his native territory with his large family and with his flocks. No one was killed. The family of Terah has, again, successfully devised a strategy to deal with severe conflict; and, in this instance, the family has changed because of the formal acts of separation. On narrative and religious grounds, Laban's household will no longer be viewed as part of the immediate family that bears the deity's promise.

Jacob and Esau (Genesis 32)

After Jacob disengages from Laban, he knows that he must inevitably confront his brother Esau. Just as Laban and his kinsmen had charged after Jacob, so now Esau and four hundred men rush to engage Jacob. The strategies of distancing *à la* Abraham and Lot and legal remedy *à la* Jacob and Laban are not likely to work here. Jacob is rightly worried. He prays to Yahweh, "Deliver me from the hand of Esau my brother. . . . he may come and kill us all, including the mothers and children" (Gen 32:11). Based on what Esau had said earlier, "I will kill my brother Jacob" (Gen 27:41), Jacob's fears are well grounded.

However, rather than waiting for the deity to save him, Jacob develops a twofold strategy. The first involves the giving of a gift. To give a gift and to have that gift accepted are a powerful weapon. As Marcel Mauss observed many years ago, to give a gift is to put someone in your debt, to gain control of them.[36] Apparently knowing this social reality, Jacob sends Esau a gift: 200 female goats, 20 male goats, 200 ewes, 12 rams, 30 lactating camels and their colts, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys, and 10 male donkeys—542 animals in all. Some commentators have viewed these animals as decoys, thinking that they would head in one direction while Jacob moved in another. But such a view misses the point of Jacob's strategy; he wanted to overpower Esau economically by means of this gift.

[36] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954).

Jacob deploys his second strategy when he and Esau actually encounter each other. It is an emotional scene, and one fraught with tension. Jacob engages Esau in a verbal jousting match. Based on their early history, Jacob would have good reason to think that he might win; and he will.

At first, Esau will not accept Jacob's gift. Jacob then offers a psychologically compelling speech in which he says to Esau, "Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor" (Gen 33:10). This is a highly ambiguous statement. If an individual sees God, that individual might well die. Jacob's statement about seeing Esau's face may subtly allude to Esau's earlier threat to kill him. Then, Jacob defines Esau and his band of four hundred men as a favorable response to him. That is an ingenious way of redefining what Esau no doubt intends. Jacob's verbal parry begins to disarm Esau.

The narrator continues, "So Jacob urged him, and Esau took the gift" (Gen 33:11). One might have thought that Jacob is, at this point, safe. However, we soon learn that Esau, who probably realizes that he has just been outwitted, intends to accompany Jacob. This time Esau initiates a dialogue with Jacob. Esau says, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you" (Gen 33:12). Jacob offers a canny and quick-witted reply, "I have to move slowly with my flocks and children, while you, Esau, will want to move at a more rapid pace." Jacob even says that he will visit Esau in his own country, which he never does (Gen 33:14). Esau then makes another proposal, that some of his men remain with Jacob. Jacob responds even more brilliantly. He asks a question, a question that has the same laudatory tone that was present earlier in his dialogue with Esau. Jacob says to Esau, "Why should my lord be so kind to me?" (Gen 33:15). Esau can think of no reply, probably because he did not intend to be kind to Jacob. As a result, Esau, like Laban before him, heads home, and Jacob continues on his way.

Genesis 33 presented a dire situation, a fraternal encounter that might have eventuated in fratricide. That potential calamity was averted by Jacob's use of the strategy of gift giving and his ability to conduct verbal warfare. Moreover, Esau played by those same rules. By accepting the gift, he agreed not to attack Jacob. And by engaging Jacob in dialogue, he opened the door to a resolution through a war of wits rather than a war of weapons. Esau lost that war, but honored the game by leaving the playing field after he had lost a second time.

Jacob and Esau avoid violence by engaging in two well-known strategies—gifting and a war of wits—and they achieve a solution, one that allows them to separate peacefully. The two brothers will meet again, but only once, when they bury their father, Isaac. Thus ends the third scene of conflict.

These three moments of familial conflict are all resolved by deploying a

value important to this family, namely, conflict resolution without physical violence. Members of the family use diverse strategies to keep from injuring or killing each other.[37] That is family value *number 3.*

IV. Conclusions

Let me conclude. In this address, I have tried to take seriously the notion of family values, particularly as they derive from biblical literature. In that regard, I have focused on the family in the book of Genesis, a biblical book that, for multiple reasons, may serve as a source for reflection about the family in the Hebrew Bible. I have argued that Genesis highlights the family both in the primeval history and in the ancestral literature. Genesis 12–50 shares numerous features with extrabiblical family literature. Moreover, I have identified three family values at work in the ancestral literature: (1) the value of defining family in expansive terms; (2) the value of familial continuity; (3) and the value of nonviolent resolution of conflict within the family. I do not pretend that these values are the only ones embedded in this biblical book. Nor do I ignore the problematic character of some other family values lived out in Genesis. I do think, however, that these three values have not been part of the contemporary conversations; and they should be.

These values are interrelated and they are important today. Talk about family values should focus on family in its broad sense, including, of course, but moving beyond concern for the so-called nuclear family. Further, when one thinks about humanity in familial terms, as the book of Genesis certainly does, then the value of familial continuity becomes important for all of us. If the human family is to continue and flourish, all members of that family need to deploy nonviolent forms of conflict resolution.

The value of nonviolent conflict resolution is of immediate relevance to human families, especially in their households. In those households, domestic violence has reached epidemic scale. If one looks at the statistics concerning spousal abuse alone, "Experts estimate that in the U.S. 1.8 million women are beaten in their homes each year."[38] And this is not just a North American problem. "At least one in five women around the globe has been a victim of spousal abuse."[39] Such violence within the family should be of primary concern to anyone who is committed to the thinking about the Bible and family values.

[37] Members of the family behave differently to those outside the lineage, as Genesis 34 makes terribly clear.

[38] Leonard Edwards, "Reducing Family Violence: The Role of the Family Violence Council," *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* 43 (1992): 1.

[39] Nancy Nason-Clark, "When Terror Strikes at Home: The Interface between Religion and Domestic Violence," *JSSR* 43 (2004): 308.

There is a phrase currently being used within the Jewish community as it wrestles with the issue of domestic violence. The phrase is *šālôm bayît*, which one might translate literally, "peace at home." Ancient Jewish writers took this family value, *šālôm bayît*, very seriously. As one scholar recently wrote, when summarizing the views of early sages, "The ultimate achievement of peace on earth depends upon its achievement in the smallest social unit, the family."[40] I would build on that conviction and suggest that the ancestral narratives in Genesis depict, on a number of occasions, families striving to reach such peace, when or after they have been in conflict.

The Hebrew Bible offers testimony about the family of Abraham, which is to serve as a source of blessing for others. Members of that family, on occasion, harbored murderous intent. However, by using one or another strategy—distancing, oaths, contracts, legal separations, verbal combat, gifting, battles of wit—they were able to resolve that conflict without physical violence. In so doing they were able to create a sort of *šālôm bayît*. In Genesis, this Abrahamic family has lived out a family value of nonviolent conflict resolution. It is a traditional family value, and it inheres in the biblical text. Were we able to deploy this biblical family value, particularly in a world that continues to be shaken by violence both within families and between nations, it would truly be a blessing to all the families of the earth.[41]

[40] Marcia Spiegel, "Spirituality for Survival: Jewish Women Healing Themselves," *JFSR* 12 (1996): 123.

[41] I am grateful to Ingrid Lilly, Gail O'Day, and Naomi Steinberg for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this article.