

Family Relationships

Two facts stand out in what the Bible says about the family and its relationships. First, the roles of family members stayed about the same throughout the biblical period. Changing culture and laws did not affect family customs to any great extent. It is true that the folks who lived in the early days of the Old Testament period were semi-nomadic—they often moved from one area to another—so their habits were at some points different from those of settled peoples. The Mosaic Law abolished some of the nomadic practices, such as marrying one’s sister. But most of the original family lifestyle persisted, even into the New Testament era.

Second, family life in Bible times reflected a culture quite different from our own. We should recognize this difference when we turn to the Scriptures for guidance in raising our own families. We should search out the principles of Scripture rather than directly copy the specific lifestyles it portrays. These lifestyles were designed for small agricultural communities, and they did not please God in every case.

As an example, the culture of that day allowed a man to have more than one wife, and some men of God did; yet nowhere does Scripture state that God approved this practice. We classify it as a tolerated cultural custom, but not a biblically prescribed one.

Another instance: When Abraham lived in Egypt with Sarah, he told her to say she was his sister, fearing that the Egyptians would kill him because of her great beauty. She was in fact his half sister, a degree of kinship that God later indicated was too close for marriage (cf. Gen. 20:12; Lev. 18:9). As a result, the pharaoh took Sarah into his house and God afflicted the pharaoh’s family with plagues in order to rescue her.

The biblical teaching for family life includes instructions for children, mothers, and fathers. We will see examples of families that followed God’s wishes and were greatly blessed; we will also see families that disobeyed God and reaped the consequences. Along the way we will notice how family life changed during the course of Israel’s history.

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V. SUMMARY

I **The Family Unit.** The family was the first social structure that God produced. He formed the first family by joining Adam and Eve together as husband and wife (Gen. 2:18–24). The man and woman became the nucleus of a family unit.

Why did God create the family structure? Genesis 2:18 says that God created the woman as a helper for Adam, which indicates that the man and woman were brought together first for companionship; the wife was to help her husband, and the husband was to care for his wife. Then the two together were to meet the needs of their children, the offspring of their relationship.

A. Husband. The Hebrew word for *husband* partially means “to dominate, to rule.” It can also be translated as “master.” As head of the family, the husband was responsible for its well-being. For example, when Abraham and Sarah deceived the pharaoh about their marriage, the ruler challenged Abraham rather than Sarah, who had done the actual lying (Gen. 12:10–20). This does not mean that the Hebrew husband was given license to be a tyrant who enjoyed bossing his family around. Rather, he was to assume responsibility for the family and serve the needs of those who were under his authority.

Every Israelite couple married with the idea of having children. They were especially eager to have a male child. A man fortunate enough to father a son was proud indeed. Jeremiah noted, “The man who brought tidings to my father, saying, A man child is born unto thee; [made] him very glad” (Jer. 20:15).

The Israelite father assumed spiritual leadership within the family; he functioned as the family priest (cf. Gen. 12:8; Job 1:5). He was expected to lead his family in observing various religious rites, such as the Passover (Ex. 12:3).

Along with the mother, the father was to “train up a child in the way he should go ...” (Prov. 22:6). The basis for instruction was the Law of the Lord. Parents were admonished to “teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when

thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them on the posts of thy house, and on thy gates” (Deut. 6:7–9).

The father could inflict physical punishment when necessary. This was to be done in such a way as not to “provoke your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4).

In biblical times, a man who did not provide adequately for his family was guilty of a serious offense. A man who failed to do this was shunned and mocked by society (cf. Prov. 6:6–11; 19:7). Paul wrote, “If any provide not for his own, ... he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Tim. 5:8).

As husband and father, the man defended his family’s rights before the judges when necessary (see Deut. 22:13–19). “The fatherless and the widow” had no man to defend their rights, so they were often denied justice (cf. Deut. 10:18).

Israelites were governed by various traditions. The Talmud says that a father had four responsibilities toward his son, besides teaching him the Law. He was to circumcise his son (cf. Gen. 17:12–13), redeem him from God if he were the firstborn (cf. Num. 18:15–16), find him a wife (cf. Gen. 24:4), and teach him a trade.

A good father thought of his children as full human beings, and took note of their feelings and abilities. A Jewish scholar of the time said that a good father should “push them away with the left hand and draw them near with the right hand.” This delicate balance between firmness and affection typified the ideal Israelite father.

B. Wife. In marriage, the woman was expected to take a place of submission to her mate. The wife’s responsibility was to be the husband’s “helper” (Gen. 2:18, RSV), one who “does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life” (Prov. 31:12). Her main responsibilities were the home and the children, but sometimes it extended to the marketplace and other areas that affected the family’s welfare (cf. Prov. 31:16, 24).

A wife’s primary goal in life was to bear children for her husband. Rebekah’s family spokesman said to her, “Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions and let thy seed possess the gate of those who hate them” (Gen. 24:60). An Israelite family hoped that the wife would become like a fruitful vine, filling the house with many children (Ps. 128:3). So a mother greeted the first child with much happiness and relief.

As children began to arrive, the mother was tied closer to the home. She nursed each child until the age of two or three, besides clothing and feeding the rest of the family. She spent hours each day preparing meals and making clothes. When necessary, the wife helped her husband in the fields, planting or harvesting the crops.

A mother shared the responsibility for training the children. Children spent the early formative years close to their mothers. Eventually, the sons were old enough to go with their fathers into the fields or some other place of employment. The mother then turned her attention more fully to her daughters, teaching them how to become successful wives and mothers.

A woman’s performance of her tasks determined the failure or success of the family. The sages said, “A virtuous woman is the crown to her husband, but she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his bones” (Prov. 12:4). If the wife worked hard at the task laid before her, it greatly benefited her husband. Israelites believed that a man could rise to a place among the leaders of Israel only if his wife were wise and talented (Prov. 31:23).

C. Sons. In biblical times, sons had to support their parents when they became old and then give them a proper burial. For this reason, a couple usually hoped to have many sons. “As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate” (Ps. 127:4–5).

The firstborn son held a very special place of honor within the family. He was expected to be the next head of the family. All through his life, he was expected to take greater responsibility for his actions and the actions of his brothers. This was why Reuben, as the oldest brother, showed greater concern for the life of Joseph when his brothers agreed to kill him (Gen. 37:21, 29).

When the father died, a firstborn son received a double portion of the family inheritance (Deut. 21:17; 2 Chron. 21:2–3).

The fifth commandment admonished, “Honor thy father and thy mother; that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee” (Ex. 20:12). Both parents were to receive the same amount of respect. However, the rabbis of the Talmud reasoned that if a son ever had to choose, he must give preference to his father. For example, if both parents requested a drink of water simultaneously, the Talmud taught that both the son and the mother should meet the needs of the father.

Jesus was the perfect example of an obedient son. Luke noted that, at the age of 12, Jesus “went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to [his parents]” (Luke 2:51). Even while enduring the agonies of the cross,

Jesus thought of His mother and His responsibility toward her as the firstborn son. He asked “the disciple whom he loved” to care for her after His death, thereby fulfilling His duty out of love for her (John 19:26–27).

D. Daughters. In ancient times, daughters were not prized as highly as sons. Some fathers actually looked upon them as nuisances. For example, one father wrote, “The father waketh for the daughter, when no man knoweth; and the care for her taketh away sleep: when she is young, lest she pass away the flower of her age [fail to marry]; and being married, lest she should be hated; in her virginity, lest she should be defiled and gotten with child become pregnant in her father’s house; or having an husband, lest she should misbehave herself; and when she is married, lest she should be barren” (Ecclesiasticus 42:9–10).

However, the Hebrews treated their daughters more humanely than some of the surrounding cultures. The Romans actually exposed newborn girls to the elements, in the hope that they would die. The Hebrews believed that all children—male and female—came from God. For this reason, they would never consider killing one of their babies. In fact, when the prophet Nathan sought to describe the intimate relationship of a father to a child, he pictured a daughter in her father’s arms with her head on his chest (2 Sam. 12:3).

Firstborn daughters held a special place of honor and duty within the family. For example, Lot’s firstborn daughter tried to persuade her younger sister to bear a child for Lot, to preserve the family (Gen. 19:31–38). In the story of Laban and Jacob, the firstborn daughter Leah was given priority over the younger sister (Gen. 29:26).

If a family was without sons, the daughters could inherit their father’s possessions (Num. 27:5–8); but they could keep their inheritance only if they married within their own tribe (Num. 36:5–12).

The daughter was under the legal jurisdiction of her father until her marriage. Her father made all important decisions for her, such as whom she should marry. But the daughter could be asked to give her consent to the choice of a groom, and sometimes she was even allowed to indicate a preference (Gen. 24:58; 1 Sam. 18:20). The father approved all vows the daughter made before they became binding (Num. 30:1–5).

The daughter was expected to help her mother in the home. At a very early age, she began to learn the various domestic skills she needed to become a good wife and mother herself. By the age of 12, the daughter had become a homemaker in her own right and was allowed to marry.

In some Near Eastern cultures, families did not allow their daughters to leave the home. If they did appear in public, they had to wear veils over their faces and were not allowed to speak to males. The Israelites placed no such restrictions on their daughters. Girls were relatively free to come and go, provided their work was done. We see examples of this in Rebekah, who talked to a stranger at the well (Gen. 24:15–21), and the seven daughters of the priests of Midian, who chatted with Moses as they watered their father’s flock (Ex. 2:16–22).

The family expected a daughter to remain a virgin until her marriage. Unfortunately, this did not always happen. Some young women were seduced or raped. When this happened, the Mosaic Law made careful distinctions between the punishment for the rape of girls who were engaged and those who were not. (*See* “Marriage and Divorce.”)

Often daughters married at an early age. Such early marriages did not create the problems that they do today. Though a bride left the dominion of her father, she entered the new domain of her husband and his family. Her mother-in-law stepped in to continue the guidance and training that her own mother had given her. The bride and her mother-in-law often developed a deep and lasting bond. This is perfectly illustrated in the book of Ruth, when Naomi repeatedly refers to Ruth as “my daughter.” Micah described a strife-filled family as one in which “the daughter riseth up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Mic. 7:6).

When a young woman went to live with her husband’s family, she did not give up all rights in her own family. If her husband died and there were no more brothers-in-law for her to marry, she might return to her father’s house. That is exactly what Naomi encouraged her daughters-in-law to do, and Orpah followed her suggestion (Ruth 1:8–18).

E. Brothers and Sisters. Love developed between brothers as they grew up together, sharing responsibilities, problems, and victories. One of the proverbs states, “A man that hath friends must show himself friendly, and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24).

Joseph displayed real love toward his brothers despite the fact that when he was young, his brothers sold him into slavery because of their father’s favoritism toward him. Later, when Joseph gained power and position, he could have evened the score with his brothers. Instead, he showed them love and mercy. He said, “Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life” (Gen. 45:5).

The Bible describes many brothers who maintained a deep and abiding love for one another. The Psalmist described the love of brothers by saying, “It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard, upon

the beard of Aaron, down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion!” (Ps. 133:2–3, RSV).

Brothers and sisters often shared a special bond. When Job’s sons entertained they invited their three sisters (Job 1:4). When Dinah was raped, her brothers avenged the crime (Gen. 34).

In earlier times, young men sometimes married their half sisters. Abraham and Sarah had the same father but different mothers (Gen. 20:12). As we have already noted, the Mosaic Law banned this practice (Lev. 18:9; 20:17; Deut. 27:22).

The bond of love between sisters and brothers was so strong that the Mosaic Law allowed even a priest to touch the body of a dead brother, sister, parent, or child (Lev. 21:1–3). This was the only time that a priest could touch a dead person and not become ceremonially unclean.

II The Extended Family. In the most basic sense, a Hebrew family consisted of a husband, a wife, and their children. When the husband had more than one wife, the “family” included all of the wives and the children in their various relationships (cf. Gen. 30). Normally the family included everyone who shared a common dwelling place under the protection of the head of the family. They might be grandparents, servants, and visitors, as well as widowed daughters and their children. The extended family commonly included sons and their wives and children (Lev. 18:6–18). God counted Abraham’s slaves as part of the family group, for He required Abraham to circumcise them (Gen. 17:12–14, 23–27). In Israel’s early history, as many as four generations lived together. This was a normal part of the semi-nomadic lifestyle and the later agricultural one.

Even today in the Middle East, semi-nomadic people band together as large families for the sake of survival. Each extended family has its own “father” or *sheik* whose word is law.

In Old Testament days, the extended family was presided over by the oldest male in the household, who was also called the “father.” Often this person was a grandfather or a great-grandfather. For example, when Jacob’s family moved to Egypt, Jacob was considered to be their “father”—even though his sons had wives and families (cf. Gen. 46:8–27). Jacob continued to preside over his “family” until his death.

The “father” of an extended family seems, in patriarchal times, to have held the power of life and death over its members. We see this when Abraham nearly sacrificed his son, Isaac (Gen. 22:9–12), and when Judah sentenced his daughter-in-law to death because she had committed adultery (Gen. 38:24–26).

Later, the Mosaic Law restricted the father’s authority. It assigned the legal right of execution to a court of elders (Deut. 21:18–21). It did not allow a father to sacrifice his child on an altar (Lev. 18:21). It allowed him to sell his daughter, but not to a foreigner and not for prostitution (Ex. 21:7–8; Lev. 19:29). According to the Law, a father could not deny the birthright of his firstborn son, even if he had sons by two different women (Deut. 21:15–17).

Some Hebrew fathers violated these laws. For example, Jephthah vowed to sacrifice whoever came out to greet him upon his victorious return from battle. His daughter was the first. Believing that he had to keep his vow, Jephthah sacrificed her (Judg. 11:31, 34–40). Likewise, King Manasseh burned his son to appease a heathen god (2 Kings 21:6).

We do not know when the extended family of Old Testament times gave way to the family structure we know today. Some scholars feel that it died out during the monarchy of David and Solomon. Others believe that it continued longer than that. But by New Testament times, the meaning of extended family often encompassed parents, children, and slaves (cf. Eph. 5:21–6:9).

The New Testament says that Joseph and Mary traveled as a couple to be registered in Bethlehem (Luke 2:4–5). They went to the temple alone when Mary offered her sacrifices (Luke 2:22). They also traveled alone when they took Jesus into Egypt (Matt. 2:14). These accounts tend to confirm that the “family” of the New Testament consisted only of the husband, wife, and children.

III The Clan. The extended family was part of a larger group that we call a clan. The clan might be so large that it registered hundreds of males in its ranks (cf. Gen. 46:8–27; Ezra 8:1–14). Members of a clan shared a common ancestry, and thus viewed each other as kinsfolk. They felt obligated to help and protect one another.

Often the clan designated one male, called a *goel*, to extend help to clan members in need. In English, this person is referred to as the kinsman-redeemer. His help covered many areas of need.

If a member of the clan had to sell part of his property to pay debts, he gave the kinsman-redeemer the first opportunity to purchase it. The kinsman-redeemer then was supposed to purchase the property, if he could, to keep it in the clan’s possession (Lev. 25:25; cf. Ruth 4:1–6). This situation arose when Jeremiah’s cousin came to him, saying, “Buy my field ... that is in Anathoth ... for the right of inheritance is thine, and the redemption is thine; buy it for

thyselves" (Jer. 32:6–8). Jeremiah purchased the field and used the event to proclaim that the Jews would eventually return to Judah (Jer. 32:15).

Occasionally, an army would capture hostages and sell them to the highest bidder. Also, a man might sell himself into slavery to repay a debt. In both cases, the slave's next-of-kin was supposed to find the clan's kinsman-redeemer, who would try to purchase his kinsman's freedom (Lev. 25:47–49).

If a married man died without having had a child, the *goel* was supposed to marry the widow (Deut. 25:5–10). This was called a *levirate* ("brother-in-law") marriage. The first son born through this arrangement was considered the offspring of the deceased brother. (See "Marriage and Divorce.")

The story of Ruth and Naomi well illustrates the responsibility of the kinsman-redeemer. The widow Naomi had to sell her property near Bethlehem, and she wanted her childless daughter-in-law to remarry. The nearest of kin agreed to purchase the field but was unwilling to marry Ruth. So he gave up both obligations in a ceremony before the elders of the city. Then Boaz, the nearest-of-kin, bought the field and married Ruth (Ruth 4:9–10).

A *goel* was expected to avenge a kinsman's murder. In such a case, he was called the "avenger of blood" (Deut. 19:12). The Law of Moses limited this practice by establishing cities of refuge where killers could flee, but even this did not insure the killer's safety. If the murder was malicious or premeditated, the avenger of blood would follow him to the city of refuge and demand his return. In such a case, the murderer would be turned over to the *goel*, who would kill him (cf. Deut. 19:1–13). Joab killed Abner in this manner (2 Sam. 2:22–23; 3:27).

IV Erosion of the Family. A family that lives in harmony and exhibits genuine love is a delight to all associated with it. Surely this is what God had in mind when He established the family. Unfortunately, the Bible shows us few families that attained this ideal. Throughout Bible history, families were being eroded by social, economic, and religious pressures. We can identify several of these pressures.

A. Childlessness. Childlessness was a major threat to a marriage in biblical times. If a couple was unable to conceive a child, they looked upon their problem as a chastisement from God. (See "Marriage and Divorce.")

Even though he might continue to love his wife, a childless man sometimes married a second woman or used the services of a slave to conceive children (Gen. 16:2–4; 30:3–5; Deut. 21:10–14). Some men divorced their wives in order to do this. While this practice solved the problem of childlessness, it created many other problems.

B. Polygamy. Domestic strife was common when two women shared a husband in Old Testament times. The Hebrew word for the second wife literally meant "rival wife" (1 Sam. 1:6); this suggests that bitterness and hostility usually existed between polygamous wives. Nevertheless, polygamy was not uncommon, especially among the Hebrew patriarchs and Israelite kings. If a man was unable to raise the marriage money for a second wife, he considered buying a slave for that purpose or using one he already had in his household (cf. Gen. 16:1–4; 30:1–8).

In a polygamous marriage, the husband invariably favored one wife over another. This caused complications, such as the need to decide whose child to honor as firstborn son. Sometimes a man wanted to give his inheritance to the son of his favored wife although it was actually owed to the son of the "disliked" wife (Deut. 21:15–17). Moses declared that the firstborn son had to be rightfully honored, and the husband could not shortchange the firstborn's mother to "diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital right" (Ex. 21:10).

Politics was also a motive for polygamy. Often a king sealed a covenant with another king by marrying his ally's daughter. When Scripture speaks of Solomon's large harem, it points out that "he had seven hundred wives, princesses" (1 Kings 11:3). This is likely an indication that most of his marriages were of a political nature. Probably the women came from small city-states and tribes surrounding Israel.

After the Exodus, most Israelite marriages were monogamous (Mark 10:2–9). The book of Proverbs never mentions polygamy, even though it touches on many aspects of Israelite culture. The prophets frequently used the concept of monogamous marriage to describe the Lord's relationship to Israel. Such a marriage was the ideal of family life.

C. Death of Husband. The death of a husband always has far-reaching consequences for his family. For people of biblical times this was true as well. After a period of mourning, the widowed wife might follow one of several courses of action.

If she was childless, she was, according to the levirate law, expected to continue living with her husband's family (Deut. 25:5–10). She was to marry one of her husband's brothers or a near kinsman. If these men were not available, she was free to marry outside the clan (Ruth 1:9).

Widows with children had other options open to them. From the deuterocanonical book of Tobit we learn that some moved back to the family of their father or brother (Tobit 1:8). If the widow were elderly, one of her sons might

care for her. If she had become financially secure, she might live alone. For example, Judith neither remarried nor moved into the home of a relative, for “her husband Manasses had left her gold, and silver, and men—servants and maidservants, and cattle, and lands; and she remained upon this estate” (Judith 8:7).

Occasionally a destitute widow had no male relative to depend on. Such women faced great hardships (cf. 1 Kings 17:8–15; 2 Kings 4:1–7).

The childless widow of New Testament times found herself in a much more secure position. If she had no customary means of support, she could turn to the church for help. Paul suggested that young widows should remarry and that elderly widows should be cared for by their children; but if the widow could turn to no one, the church should care for her (1 Tim. 5:16).

D. Rebellious Children. It was a grave sin to dishonor one’s father or mother. Moses ordered that a person who struck or cursed his parent should be put to death (cf. Ex. 21:15, 17; Lev. 20:9). We have no record of this punishment being carried out, but the Bible describes many instances in which children did dishonor their parents. When Ezekiel enumerated the sins of Jerusalem, he said, “In thee have they set light by father and mother; in the midst of thee have they dealt by oppression with the stranger: in thee have they vexed the fatherless and the widow” (Ezek. 22:7). A similar picture is presented in Proverbs 19:26. Jesus condemned religious leaders of His day for not honoring their parents (Matt. 15:4–9).

Sometimes the parent caused more friction in a family than the child. The prophet Nathan announced to David, “The sword shall never depart from thine house, because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife” (2 Sam. 12:10). From that time on, David had problems with his sons.

Amnon fell passionately in love with Tamar, his half sister, and raped her. Yet David did not punish his son, and Tamar’s brother Absalom killed Amnon in revenge. Then Absalom fled to his mother’s country, returning later to lead a revolt against his father (2 Sam. 13–15). David urged his men not to kill Absalom, but the young man died in battle. David wept for him (2 Sam. 18).

As David neared his own death, his son Adonijah wanted to succeed him to the throne. David had not tried to restrain his willfulness, in this or anything else. Scripture says that the king “had not displeased [Adonijah] at any time in saying, Why hast thou done so?” (1 Kings 1:6).

E. Sibling Rivalry. Proverbs 18:19 vividly depicts the problem of children who argue with one another: “A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle.” The Bible describes brothers who quarreled for various reasons. Jacob sought to steal Esau’s blessing for himself (Gen. 27). Absalom hated Amnon because he raped Absalom’s sister (2 Sam. 13). Solomon had his brother Adonijah executed because he suspected that Adonijah wanted his throne (1 Kin. 2:19–25). When Jehoram ascended the throne, he killed all his brothers so that they would never be a threat to him (2 Chr. 21:4).

Sometimes parents provoked sibling rivalry. This was true of Isaac and Rebekah. The Bible says that “Isaac loved Esau ... but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Gen. 25:28). When Isaac wanted to bless Esau, Rebekah helped Jacob get the blessing for himself. Esau became enraged and threatened to kill Jacob, who fled to a faraway country (Gen. 27:41–28:5). It took an entire generation to reunite their families.

Sadly, Jacob did not learn from his parents’ mistakes. He also favored one of his sons, giving Joseph honor before the others. This so enraged the sons that they plotted to kill their father’s favorite. Scripture records that “when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him” (Gen. 37:4).

F. Adultery. The Israelites considered adultery a serious threat to the family, so they punished adulterers swiftly and harshly. (See “Marriage and Divorce.”)

V. Summary. The family was a unifying thread in Bible history. When threatened or challenged, the family unit struggled for survival. God used families to convey His message to each new generation.

God has often portrayed Himself as the Father of His redeemed family (Hos. 11:1–3). He expects honor from His children (Mal. 1:6). Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Our Father.” Even today, children’s prayers prepare them to honor God as the perfect Father who is able to meet all their needs.

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Women and Womanhood

It is fair to say that the people in biblical Israel felt that men were more important than women. The father or oldest male in the family made the decisions that affected the whole family, while the women had very little to say about them. This *patriarchal* (father-centered) form of family life set the tone for the way women were treated in Israel.

For example, a girl was raised to obey her father without question. Then when she married she was to obey her husband in the same way. If she were divorced or widowed, she often returned to her father's house to live.

In fact, Leviticus 27:1–8 suggests that a woman was worth only about half as much as a man. Thus a female child was less welcome than a male. Boys were taught to make decisions and to preside over their families. Girls were raised to get married and have children.

A young woman didn't even think about a career outside the home. Her mother trained her to keep house and to raise children. She was expected to be a helper to her husband and to give him many children. If a woman was childless, she was thought to be cursed (Gen. 30:1–2, 22; 1 Sam. 1:1–8).

Still, a woman was more than an object to be bought and sold. She had a very important role to play. Proverbs 12:4 says, "A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband, but she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his bones." In other words, a good wife was good for her husband; she helped him, looked after him, and made him proud. But a bad wife was worse than a cancer; she could painfully destroy him and make him a mockery. A wife could make or break her husband.

Even though most women spent their days as housewives and mothers, there are some exceptions. For example, Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Esther were more than good wives—they were political and religious leaders who proved that they could guide the nation as well as any man could.

I. GOD'S VIEW OF WOMEN

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IV. WOMEN IN ISRAEL'S CULTURE

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B. A Woman's Beauty

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V. WOMEN LEADERS IN ISRAEL

A. Military Heroines

B. Queens

C. Queen Mothers

D. Counselors

E. Religious Leaders

VI. SUMMARY

I **God's View of Women.** Toward the end of the first chapter of Genesis, we read: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Gen. 1:27–28). This passage shows two things about women. First, woman *as well as man* was created in the image of God. God did not create woman to be inferior to man; both are equally important. Second, the woman was also expected to have authority over God's creation. Man and woman are to share this authority—it does not belong only to the man.

God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18, RSV). So God "caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs" (Gen. 2:21). God used that rib in the creation of Eve. This account shows how important the woman is to a man: she is part of his very being, and without her man is incomplete.

But Adam and Eve sinned, and God told Eve, "Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Gen. 3:16). In New Testament times the Apostle Paul told Christian wives, "Submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord" (Eph. 5:22). But even though a woman was to submit to her husband, she was not inferior to him. It just means that she should be willing to let him lead. In fact, Paul called for submission on the part of both the husband and the wife, "submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (Eph. 5:21). In another letter, Paul clearly stated that there is no difference of status in Christ between a man and a woman. "There is neither Jew nor Greek," he writes, "there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

II **The Legal Position of Women.** The legal position of a woman in Israel was weaker than that of a man. For example, a husband could divorce his wife if he "found some uncleanness in her," but the wife was not allowed to divorce her husband for any reason (Deut. 24:1–4). The Law stated that a wife who was suspected of having sexual relations with another man must take a jealousy test (Num. 5:11–31). However, there was no test for a man suspected of being unfaithful with another woman. The Law also said that a man could make a religious vow and that it was binding on him; but a vow made by a woman could be cancelled by her father or (if she were married) by her husband (Num. 30:1–15). A woman's father could sell her (Ex. 21:7), and she could not be freed after six years, as a man could (Lev. 25:40). In at least one instance, a man offered his daughter to be used sexually by a mob (Judg. 19:22–25).

But some laws suggested that men and women were to be treated as equals. For example, children were to treat both parents with equal respect and reverence (Ex. 20:12). A son who disobeyed or cursed either parent was to be punished (Deut. 21:18–21). And a man and a woman caught in the act of adultery were both to be executed (Deut. 22:22). (It is interesting to note here that when the Pharisees dragged an adulteress to Jesus and wanted to stone her, they had already broken the law themselves by letting the man get away—John 8:3–11.)

Other biblical laws offered protection for women. If a man took a second wife, he was still bound by law to feed and clothe his first wife, and to continue to have sexual relations with her (Ex. 21:10). Even the foreign woman who was taken captive as a war bride had some rights; if her husband got tired of her, she was to be set free (Deut. 21:14). Any man found guilty of the crime of rape was to be stoned to death (Deut. 22:25–27).

Usually, only men owned property. But when parents had no sons, their daughters could receive the inheritance. They had to marry within the clan to retain the inheritance (Num. 27:8–11; 36:8–9).

Since Israel was a male-dominated society, women's rights were sometimes overlooked. Jesus told of a widow who had to pester a judge who would not take time to listen to her side of the case. Because he didn't want her to keep bothering him, the judge finally agreed to her wishes (Luke 18:1–8). As with many of Jesus' stories, this was something that could really have happened, and perhaps did.

In spite of this, widows were given some special privileges too. For example, they were allowed to glean the fields after the harvest (Deut. 24:19–22) and share a portion of the third-year tithe with the Levite (Deut. 26:12). So in spite of their weaker legal status, women did enjoy some special rights in Jewish society.

III Women at Worship. Women were considered to be members of the “family of faith.” As such, they could enter into most of the areas of worship.

The Law directed all men to appear before the Lord three times a year. Apparently the women went with them on some occasions (Deut. 29:10; Neh. 8:2; Joel 2:13, 15–16), but they were not required to go. Perhaps women were not required to go because of their important duties as wives and mothers. For instance, Hannah went to Shiloh with her husband and asked the Lord for a son (1 Sam. 1:3–5). Later, when the child was born, she told her husband, “I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the Lord, and there abide for ever” (v. 22).

As head of the family, the husband or father presented the sacrifices and offerings on behalf of the entire family (Lev. 1:2). But the wife might also be present. Women attended the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 16:13–14), the yearly Feast of the Lord (Judg. 21:19–21), and the Festival of the New Moon (2 Kings 4:23).

One sacrifice that only the women gave to the Lord was offered after the birth of a child: “And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son, or for a daughter, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtledove for a sin offering, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, unto the priest” (Lev. 12:6).

By New Testament times, Jewish women were perhaps less active in temple or synagogue worship than before. Although there was a special area at the temple known as the “Court of Women,” women were not allowed to go into the inner court. Extra-biblical sources indicate that women did not read the Torah or recite prayers in the synagogue; but they could sit and listen in the special women's section.

A different picture unfolds in the early Christian church. Luke 8:1–3 indicates that Jesus welcomed some women as traveling companions. He encouraged Martha and Mary to sit at His feet as disciples (Luke 10:38–42). Jesus' respect for women was something strikingly new.

After Jesus ascended into heaven, several women met with the other disciples in the Upper Room to pray. Even though Scripture does not say so specifically, these women probably prayed audibly in public. Both men and women gathered at the home of John Mark's mother to pray for the release of Peter (Acts 12:1–17), and both men and women prayed regularly in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:2–16). That's why the apostle Paul gave instructions to both men and women about how to pray in public.

This freedom for women was so revolutionary that it caused some problems within the church. Paul therefore gave some early congregations guidelines regarding the role of women. He wrote, “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church” (1 Cor. 14:34–35).

In another letter, Paul wrote, “Let the women learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man; but to be in silence” (1 Tim. 2:11–12). Opinions differ as to just what prompted Paul to write these things, and how far they constitute a rule for Christians today. Certainly, however, he was correcting behavior that appeared disorderly in his day.

Several Bible women were famous for their faith. Included in the list of faithful people in Hebrews 11 are two women, Sarah and Rahab. Hannah was a godly example of the Israelite mother: she prayed to God; she believed that God heard her prayers; and she kept her promise to God. Her story is found in 1 Samuel 1. Jesus' mother Mary was also a good and godly woman. In fact, Mary must have remembered Hannah's example, for her song of praise to God

(Luke 1:46–55) was very similar to Hannah’s song (1 Sam. 2:1–10). The apostle Paul reminded Timothy of the goodness of his mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5).

Not all Jewish women in Bible times were as loyal to God as the preceding. According to the book of Jewish writings known as the Talmud, some women were “addicted to witchcraft” (Yoma 83b) and paganism. The Talmud also alleged that “the majority of women are inclined to witchcraft” (Sanhedrin 67a). Some rabbis believed this was why God told Moses, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Ex. 22:18). (Some translations render the Hebrew word for witch as *sorceress*.)

But to be fair, the Scriptures do not indicate that women were any more interested in the occult than men were. Several scriptural references to women who were involved in the occult (e.g., 2 Kings 23:7; Ezek. 8:14; Hos. 4:13–14) clearly imply that men were also involved. And of the four times that sorcery is mentioned in the Book of Acts, only once was a woman involved (Acts 8:9–23; 13:4–12; 16:16–18; 19:13–16).

IV Women in Israel’s Culture. In Israelite society it was assumed that a woman’s place was in the home. She was expected to find fulfillment in life as a wife and mother. Apparently Jewish women accepted that role willingly.

A. The Ideal Wife. Every man wanted to find a suitable wife, one who would do him “good and not evil, all the days of her life” (Prov. 31:12). No man wanted a wife who was bossy or who liked to fight! Proverbs 19:13 compared a wife’s quarreling to the continual drip of rain on a person’s head. In fact, “it is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman” (Prov. 21:19).

What qualities went into making the “ideal wife” in ancient Israel? What qualities did parents look for in a bride for their son? What qualities did a mother try to instill in her daughter to prepare her for being a good wife and mother?

Most of these qualities are described in an interesting poem in Proverbs 31. The poem is an *acrostic*—in other words, each verse begins with a different Hebrew letter in alphabetical order. We might call these verses the “ABCs of an Ideal Wife.”

According to this poem, the ideal wife has many talents. She knows how to manage a household and provide for her family (vv. 13, 15, 19–22). She never wastes her time, but spends her time in more important tasks (v. 27). She has a knack for seeing what needs to be done and doing it. She has a good understanding of business, knowing how to buy and sell wisely (vv. 16, 24). However, she is not selfish. She helps the needy and gives advice to those who are less wise (v. 26). She also has a deep reverence for God (v. 30). She tries in every way to be a “helper fit” for her husband. The poem suggests that when she does all these things, her husband will be lifted to an important place in the eyes of the community (v. 23).

A shorter outline of what makes an ideal wife can be found in Ecclesiasticus 26:13–16: “The grace of a wife delighteth her husband, and her discretion will fatten his bones. A silent and loving woman is a gift of the Lord; and there is nothing worth so much as a mind well instructed. A shamefaced [modest] and faithful woman is a double grace, and her continent mind cannot be valued. As the sun when it ariseth in the high heaven, so is the beauty of a good wife in the ordering of her house.”

B. A Woman’s Beauty. Each society has its own standards of physical beauty. Some cultures associate beauty with plumpness, while others favor thinness. It is difficult to know just what the ancient Hebrews thought in this regard.

Most of the attractive women mentioned in the Bible are not described in detail. The writer usually notes simply that a woman was “beautiful.” The biblical concept of beauty is open to different interpretations.

Take, for example, the statement that “Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful and lovely” (Gen. 29:17, RSV). Some scholars think that the Hebrew word for “weak” could be better translated as “tender and charming” (cf. KJV, “tender-eyed”). If so, it might mean that each sister was beautiful in her own way. Leah might have had beautiful eyes, while Rachel had a beautiful body.

The most extensive descriptions of a beautiful woman are found in the Song of Solomon; but even here they are not always all that illuminating. The poet uses a long series of similes and metaphors to portray the woman, and sometimes the poetic technique gets in the way of the description. For example, her teeth are white, like a flock of sheep, with none of them missing. Her lips are like a scarlet thread (Song 4:2–3).

Some of the most important women in the Old Testament were said to be beauties. Sarah (Gen. 12:11), Rebekah (Gen. 26:7), and Rachel (Gen. 29:17) are all described that way. David was tempted to commit adultery with Bathsheba because she was so beautiful (2 Sam. 11:2–3). Tamar, David’s daughter, was raped by her half-brother Amnon because of her beauty (13:1). Both Absalom and Job had beautiful daughters (2 Sam. 14:27; Job 42:15). The struggle between Solomon and Adonijah to succeed David as king was ended when Adonijah asked to marry beautiful Abishag. Not only was his request denied, but it cost him his life (1 Kin. 1:3–4; 2:19–25). The Jews living during the Persian era were saved by a beautiful Jewess named Esther (see the book of Esther).

Of course, not all women were naturally beautiful, but the rich could improve their looks with expensive clothes, perfumes, and cosmetics. (See “Clothing and Cosmetics.”) The prophet Ezekiel said that the nation of Israel was like a young woman who bathed and anointed herself. She wore fancy clothes and shoes made of leather. God said to the

nation, “I decked thee also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck. And I put a jewel on thy forehead, and earrings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thine head. Thus wast thou decked with gold and silver; and thy raiment was of fine linen and silk, and embroidered work” (Ezek. 16:11–13). There is an even more extensive list of jewelry in Isaiah 3:18–23, including anklets, headbands (KJV, “cauls”), amulets (KJV, “tablets”), signet rings, and nose rings. Some of these items have been found by archaeologists.

Jeremiah talked about another practice which was common in his day. Women painted around their eyes to make them more noticeable (Jer. 4:30). Other women put jeweled combs in their hair to make it look nicer. Many of these combs and hundreds of mirrors have also been found, dating all the way back to biblical times.

But there are two kinds of beauty—outer beauty and the inner beauty of a pleasing personality. The Scriptures warned men and women not to place too much importance on physical features and expensive clothes.

One sage said, “As a jewel of gold in a swine’s snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion” (Prov. 11:22). Another sage wrote, “Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised” (Prov. 31:30). Peter and Paul told the women of their day to be more concerned with inner beauty than with good looks (1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 3:3–4).

C. The Woman as Sexual Partner. It was against the Law for an unmarried woman to have sexual relations. She was to remain a virgin until after the marriage ceremony. If anyone could prove that she was *not* a virgin when she married, she was brought to the door of her father’s house and the men of the city stoned her to death (Deut. 22:20–21).

Sex was a very important part of married life. God had ordained the sexual relationship to be enjoyed in the proper place and between the right people—marriage partners. The Jews felt so strongly about this that a newly-married man was freed from his military or business duties for a whole year so that he could “cheer up his wife which he hath taken” (Deut. 24:5). The only restriction was that the husband and wife were not supposed to have sexual relations during her menstrual period (Lev. 18:19).

Sex was to be enjoyed by the wife as well as the husband. God told Eve, “Thy desire shall be to thy husband” (Gen. 3:16). In the Song of Solomon, the woman is portrayed as very aggressive, kissing her husband and leading him into the bed chamber. She expresses her love for him over and over, and she urges him to enjoy their physical relationship (Song 1:2; 2:3–6, 8–10; 8:1–4).

In New Testament times, there was a disagreement in the Corinthian church about the role of sex. Some people, it seems, felt that all of life was to be enjoyed, so whatever one wanted to do sexually should be all right—including adultery, prostitution, and homosexual acts. Other people thought that sex was somehow evil and that one should not have any physical relations at all, not even with one’s spouse. Paul reminded the Corinthians that adultery and homosexuality were sins and should be avoided (1 Cor. 6:9–11). But he also said that husbands and wives should enjoy God’s gift of sex together. Paul’s instruction was, “The husband should give to the wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ... Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control” (1 Cor. 7:3, 5, RSV).

D. The Woman as Mother. In ancient times without the benefit of modern medicines and painkillers, childbirth was a very painful experience. In fact, many mothers died while giving birth (e.g., Gen. 35:16–20; 1 Sam. 4:19–20). In spite of these dangers, most women still wanted to bear children.

Being a good wife and mother was extremely important to Hebrew women. The greatest honor a woman could have received would have been to give birth to the Messiah. We can hardly imagine Mary’s excitement when the angel Gabriel greeted her with the words, “Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee! Blessed art thou among women!” (Luke 1:28). He then went on to tell her that she would be the Messiah’s mother. The greeting that Mary received from Elisabeth was similar (cf. Luke 1:42).

E. A Woman’s Work. By today’s standards, we would not consider the daily life of the average Israelite mother to have been very stimulating. It was marked by hard work and long hours.

She was up each morning before anyone else, starting a fire in the hearth or oven. The main food in the Jewish diet was bread. In fact, the Hebrew word for bread (*lehem*) was a synonym for food. One of the jobs that the wife and mother had, then, was to grind grain into flour. This involved several steps. (See “Food and Eating Habits.”) She obviously had none of the electrical gadgets that are available today, so all of this work had to be done by hand.

She used thorns, stubble, or even animal dung to fuel the oven. The children usually had the job of finding the fuel; but if they were not old enough to leave the house, the woman had to find the fuel herself.

Every household needed water. Sometimes families built their own private cisterns to store rain water; but most often the water came from a spring or well in the middle of the village. A few cities mentioned in the Old Testament were built above underground springs; Megiddo and Hazor were two of these cities. In Hazor a woman would walk through the streets to a deep shaft. Then she descended 9 m. (30 ft.) on five flights of stairs to the water tunnel, along which she proceeded to the water level to fill her large water jug. She needed considerable strength to climb back out of the watershaft with a heavy water jug. But it wasn’t all bad. The trip for water gave her a chance to talk with the

other women of the village. The ladies would often gather around the water source in the evening or early morning to exchange news and visit (Gen. 24:11). The woman at the well in Sychar no doubt came at noon because the other women of the town would not have wanted anything to do with her because of her loose living, and so they snubbed her (John 4:5–30).

The wife was also expected to make her family's clothes. (See "Clothing and Cosmetics.") Small children had to be nursed, watched, and kept clean. As the children got older, the mother taught them proper manners. She also taught the older daughters how to cook, sew, and do the other things that a good Israelite wife must know about.

In addition, the wife was expected to help bring in the harvest (Ruth 2:23). She prepared some crops like olives and grapes for storage. So her daily routine had to be flexible enough to include these other jobs.

V Women Leaders in Israel. Most Israelite women never became public leaders, but there were some exceptions. Scripture records the names and deeds of several women who became prominent in political, military, or religious affairs.

A. Military Heroines. The two most famous military heroines mentioned in the Old Testament are Deborah and Jael; both had a part in the same victory. God spoke through Deborah to tell the general named Barak how the Canaanites could be beaten. Barak agreed to attack the Canaanites, but he wanted Deborah to go with him into the battle. She did so, and the Canaanites were duly defeated. However, the Canaanite general Sisera escaped on foot. Jael saw him, went out to greet him, and invited him into her tent. There he fell asleep. As he was sleeping, Jael came in and hammered a tent peg through his head, killing him (Judg. 4–5).

Several women helped defend their city of Thebez against attackers. The leader of the attack, Abimelech, moved in close to the tower gate to set it on fire. One of the women saw him at the gate and dropped a millstone on his head. The heavy stone crushed Abimelech's skull. As he lay dying he commanded his armor-bearer, "Draw thy sword and slay me, that men say not of me, A woman killed him" (Judg. 9:54). The attack was called off. Later generations gave the unidentified woman credit for the victory (2 Sam. 11:21).

A popular story told by the Jews in the days of Jesus was about a rich widow named Judith, who was devout and beautiful. The story begins with Israel being invaded by an Assyrian army led by the general Holofernes. He surrounded one of the cities of Israel, cut off its food and supplies, and gave it five days to surrender. Judith encouraged her fellow townspeople to trust God for a victory. Then she put on beautiful clothes and paid a visit to Holofernes. The general thought she was very lovely and asked her to visit him every day. The last night before the Jews had to surrender, Judith was alone with Holofernes. When he fell into a drunken stupor, Judith took his sword, cut off his head, and put it in a basket. Then she returned to the city. In the morning, after the Assyrians found that their leader was dead, the Jews won an easy victory.

B. Queens. Not all the women in the Bible were known for their good deeds. Queen Jezebel is likely the most notorious woman in the Old Testament. She was a daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians. She married Ahab, the prince of Israel, and moved to Samaria. When Jezebel became queen, she forced her wishes on the people. She wanted the Israelites to bow down to Baal, so she brought hundreds of Baal's prophets into the country and put them on the government payroll. She also killed as many of the prophets of the Lord as she could find (1 Kin. 18:13). Even godly laymen like Naboth were cut down. The prophet Elijah ran away and hid from Jezebel to save his life. He felt that he was the only true prophet left in the entire country. In fact, it was said that in the entire kingdom there were only 7,000 people who had refused to worship Baal (1 Kings 19:18). Years after Jezebel had been overthrown and killed, the worship of Baal continued.

Herodias was another woman who used her influence to get what she wanted. When John the Baptist spoke out against her marriage to King Herod (Antipas), she influenced the king to arrest John and put him into prison. On Herod's birthday, Herodias' daughter danced for the guests. This pleased Herod very much, so he promised to give her anything she asked for. Herodias told her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Herod complied, and John was executed.

Of course not all the queens of the Bible were evil. Queen Esther used her position to help the Jews. For a full account of her story, see "The Persians."

C. Queen Mothers. The writers of 1 and 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles tell us much about the queen mothers of Judah. In referring to the 20 different kings who ruled in Judah from the time of Solomon to the time of the Exile, only once do these books fail to mention a queen mother. A typical example of what is said about the queen mother is found in this passage: "In the second year of Joash the son of Jehoahaz king of Israel, Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jeru-salem. His mother's name was Jehoaddin of Jerusalem. And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (2 Kin. 14:1–3, RSV).

We assume that the mother of the king must have been an important person in Judah. Unfortunately, very little is known about her role in the government or the society. (See "Government.") One instance of a queen mother's having decisive influence may be noted. Because Adonijah was David's oldest surviving son, he felt that he should be the next king after David. Several high officials agreed with him—including Joab, the general of the army, and Abiathar, the

priest. On the other hand, the prophet Nathan and another priest named Zadok believed that Solomon, another of David's sons, would be a better king. Bath-sheba, Solomon's mother, persuaded David to designate Solomon as his successor (1 Kings 1:30). Solomon respected his mother for what she had done (1 Kings 2:19).

However, not all queen mothers were treated so respectfully. When King Asa brought religious reforms to the country, he quite justifiably removed his mother from her position at the court because she had made an image of the goddess Asherah. He also banished the prostitutes and destroyed all the idols, including the one of Asherah (1 Kings 15:9–15).

One queen mother who had tremendous power was Athaliah, the mother of Ahaziah. When her son was killed in battle, Athaliah seized the throne and tried to kill all the rightful heirs. But one of the infant princes was hidden from her. For six years Athaliah ruled Judah with an iron hand; but as soon as the young prince was old enough to become king, Athaliah was overthrown and killed (2 Kin. 11:1–16).

D. Counselors. Most villages had wise persons whom other people often asked for advice. The king's court had many counselors as well. (See "Government.") While there are no Scripture references to women counselors in the king's court, there are several examples of village wise women.

When Joab, the commander-in-chief of David's army, wanted to reconcile David and his son Absalom, he got a wise woman from Tekoa to help him. The woman pretended to be a widow with two sons. She said that one of her sons had killed the other in a fit of anger, and that the rest of her family wanted to kill the remaining son. David listened to her story and ruled that she was right to forgive this second son. Then the woman pointed out to the king that he was not practicing what he preached, for he had not forgiven Absalom for a similar crime. David saw that he had been wrong and allowed Absalom to return to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 14:1–23).

Another wise woman saved her town from destruction. A man named Sheba led a revolt against King David. When the revolt failed, Sheba ran away and hid in the city of Abel. David's general Joab surrounded the city and was getting ready to attack it when a wise woman from the city appeared at the wall and asked to speak to Joab. She reminded him how important her town had been to Israel; she said that he was seeking to destroy a city that was "a mother in Israel." So they agreed to a plan. If Sheba were killed, the city would not be attacked. The wise woman returned and told the townspeople about the plan. They killed Sheba and watched Joab and his army ride away (2 Sam. 20).

E. Religious Leaders. In Israel, God did not ordain priestesses. A woman could not, in any case, have become a priest because her monthly cycle made her unclean. Priestly ministry was restricted to the male descendants of Aaron. However, women could perform other ritual tasks (Ex. 38:8; 1 Sam. 2:22). They also participated in other forms of public ministry and worship.

Women served as prophetesses—that is, spokeswomen for God. One of the most noteworthy Hebrew prophetesses was Huldah, the wife of Shallum. She was active in ministry during the days of King Josiah. When the book of the Law was found in the temple, the religious leaders came to her and asked what God wanted the nation to do. The whole nation, including King Josiah, tried to carry out her instructions to the last detail, for they were sure God had spoken through her (2 Kings 22:11–23:25).

There are other prophetesses mentioned in the Old Testament, including Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4), and Isaiah's wife (Is. 8:3). The New Testament reports that Anna and the daughters of Philip were prophetesses, but we don't know much else about their lives or their messages (Luke 2:36; Acts 21:9).

Some women used the musical talents that God had given them. Miriam and other women sang a song of praise to God after the Israelites had been delivered from the Egyptians (Ex. 15:20–21). When God helped Deborah and Barak defeat the Canaanites, they sang a victory song as a duet (Judg. 5:1–31). Three daughters of Heman were also musicians; according to 1 Chronicles 25:5, they performed at the temple.

In the church at Cenchræe there was a deaconess named Phoebe, who Paul said was "a helper of many and of [him]self as well" (Rom. 16:1–2, RSV). In a letter to Timothy, Paul wrote that wives of deacons, or women deacons, "must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things" (1 Tim. 3:11, RSV). But he made it clear that he did not want any woman in the Ephesian church to teach or to have authority over men (2:12).

Other female leaders of the early church included Priscilla, who explained to Apollos "the way of God more perfectly" (Acts 18:24–26). Euodias and Syntyche were two of the spiritual leaders at Philippi. Paul said, "They have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers" (Phil. 4:3, RSV). Thus it appears that they were doing a work which was similar to his own.

VI. Summary. An old Jewish story demonstrates how important the woman was in Israel. The story says that a pious man once married a pious woman. They were childless, so they eventually agreed to divorce one another. The husband then married a wicked woman and she made him wicked. The pious woman married a wicked man and made him righteous. The moral of the story is that the woman set the tone for the home.

The Israelite mother held an important place in the life of the family. To a large degree, she could be the key to a successful family or the cause of its failure. She could have incalculable influence on her husband and her children.

Israel's history and its culture owes a great deal to these hard-working women.