

Scriptural families outside Genesis

Our search for Scriptural lessons—both good and bad—from the parents and families we meet in the Bible continues in this piece with the guidance of Tony Benson (Norwich, UK). Surveying the Biblical material from the book of Exodus onwards, we meet characters from Moses and Eli in the Old Testament to Simon and Timothy in the New.

OUR SUBJECT COVERS a big area of Scripture: all the narrative parts of the Bible except Genesis and what the Gospels say about the family of Jesus (both of which are the subject of separate articles¹). Whereas the book of Genesis is predominantly a narrative about one family, that of Abraham, the narrative parts of the rest of the Old Testament are predominately about a nation, Israel, and the narrative parts of the New Testament about preaching missions by Jesus and the apostles. Nevertheless, even though insights into family life are incidental to these main themes, there are many interesting points to be garnered.

Moses and his family

We look first at Moses. We know that he married Zipporah, daughter of Jethro, priest of Midian, and had two sons by her, Gershom and Eleazar. They accompanied Moses when God sent him back to Egypt, were sent back at some stage, then rejoined Moses in the wilderness of Sinai (Ex. 18:2-6) and presumably remained with him. His responsibilities as leader of Israel must have made it difficult for him to be involved in the bringing up of his children. We do not know how his sons turned out, but we do know from Judges 18:30 that his grandson Jonathan became an idolater. (It is generally accepted that “Manasseh” in this verse should read “Moses”.)

Aaron had two sons who turned out badly, being killed by God for their presumption in offering “strange fire” at the dedication of the tabernacle (Lev. 10:1,2), and two, Eleazar and Ithamar, who remained faithful and from whom the priesthood of Israel was descended. One of Aaron’s grandsons, Phinehas, in contrast to Moses’ grandson, showed himself zealous in seeking to stamp out idolatry and immorality amongst the people (Num. 25:7,8).

What do we learn about families from this? It shows that godly parents do not necessarily have godly children, and that children of the same parents may turn out very differently. Furthermore, although the two brothers, Moses and Aaron, along with their sister Miriam, were united in God’s work of bringing the Children of Israel out of Egypt into the Promised Land, they were not always united as a family. We have the sad incident in which Miriam and Aaron were critical of Moses over his Cushite wife (presumably Zipporah), seeking to exalt themselves over him (Num. 12:1,2). It would seem that they considered themselves superior in having Israelite spouses. When members of the same family are in the Truth, there can sometimes develop bitter divisions which go on for many years.

Joshua, Judges and Ruth

We learn little about the family lives of the characters who are prominent in this period of history, and what we can discover is generally not favourable. At the conquest of the Land, Achan sinned by taking spoil from Jericho, bringing trouble upon the whole nation. This resulted in death for him and his whole family, who may well, of course, have been complicit in the sin (Josh. 7:20-25). Similarly, the families of Dathan and Abiram perished along with these rebels themselves (Num. 16:27-33). Though it was a principle of the Law that children should not be put to death for their fathers’ sins (Deut. 24:16), and though the children of Korah had the sense to separate themselves from their father’s rebellion, and thus escaped his fate (Num. 26:11), all too often children suffer the consequences of their parents’ errors. This is no less the case today when parents leave the Truth, lose their commitment to it, or separate themselves from their brethren and sisters for any reason.

In the book of Judges the only family we read much about is that of Gideon. After his Divinely aided defeat of the Midianites, he became judge of Israel and took many wives, by whom he had

1. See [“Fractured families in Genesis”](#), p. 182; [“The Lord Jesus and his family”](#), p. 188.

seventy sons, and presumably a good number of daughters too (Judg. 8:30). He also had another son, Abimelech, by a Shechemite concubine, possibly a Canaanite (v. 31; 9:2), by whose hand all but one of the other seventy were murdered. No father, however godly, could have properly instructed and disciplined so many children, and it is unlikely that all his wives would have been godly women in those evil times. Gideon's folly in taking a concubine led to the destruction of his family after his death, and even without this there was surely no prospect of brotherly harmony amongst so many sons.

As the son of a concubine, Abimelech was no doubt treated contemptuously by his half-brothers (all the more if he was half-Canaanite), for which they paid with their lives. Such treatment need not necessarily have had such terrible results, however. Jephthah was born as a result of his father's liaison with a harlot, and was cast out by his half-brothers (11:2), yet became one of the Divinely aided deliverers of his people. People can overcome their background and upbringing, however unfavourable, if they have a mind to do so.

The book of Ruth begins with a man foolishly taking his wife and sons to a heathen land, with dire results. But it ends with a contrasting and happier picture: one man and one woman coming together in marriage, being blessed with a son in a happy rural environment, with a doting grandmother and rejoicing neighbours. Here we see what God intended the institution of marriage to be like. It is probably no coincidence that David, the man after God's own heart who became Israel's best and greatest king, came from this simple rural community rather than from the grander household of a judge with many wives and sons.

Eli, Samuel and Saul

1 Samuel begins with two unhappy families, one of which became happy through Divine blessing, the other being overwhelmed with disaster through Divine judgement. Regarding the first, it seems likely that Elkanah took Peninnah as his second wife because his first wife, Hannah, had not been able to bear him the son who was all-important in ancient Israel. However, it was an action which led to a disunited household, as polygamy almost inevitably does. Peninnah, it would appear, taunted Hannah for her childlessness, perhaps driven by the fact that Hannah was the favoured one, and that she saw herself

as a mere child-bearer for Elkanah rather than a companion.

There is no hint of retaliation by Hannah, however, and much evidence of a godly mind. She was blessed with a son in response to her prayers, only to give him up to the service of the Lord as she had promised. Her faithfulness was rewarded with five more children (1 Sam. 1:27,28; 2:21).

The other unhappy family was that of Eli the high priest, ironically the one into whose care the infant Samuel was entrusted. It was unhappy because of the evil ways of Eli's sons, which caused him much vexation, as it must have done to their wives too, for they would not have been happy at their husbands' casual acts of unfaithfulness with the female tabernacle servants. In this environment Samuel grew in godliness, instructed by Eli and probably cared for by Eli's sons' wives, especially the wife of Phinehas, whose last words indicate a concern about Divine things (4:20,21).

The picture of Eli in 1 Samuel 2 is a rather pathetic one, the elderly father vainly remonstrating with his sons for their evil ways (vv. 22-25). Was it his fault that his sons had gone so badly astray? According to the prophet sent to pronounce judgement on Eli's house, it was: "Wherefore kick ye at My sacrifice and at Mine offering, which I have commanded in My habitation; and honourest thy sons above Me, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel My people?" (v. 29). Eli and his sons had preferred to indulge themselves rather than honour God. Eli had not only failed to discipline his sons, he had set them a bad example, and suffered the consequences in seeing them develop much further in wickedness. Parents who set a bad example to their children are in no position to exert influence on them later on.

It cannot, however, be said of Samuel that he showed a bad example to his children; yet when given responsibilities by their father they proved to be unworthy of them, misusing their office for material gain by perverting judgement (8:1-3). We do not know how well Samuel instructed and disciplined his children, but we do know that he spent a lot of time away from home in his work of judging the nation (7:16,17), and this may have been the problem. This is, of course, a continuing problem; brethren active in the Truth's work have to ensure that they are not neglecting family responsibilities, and all parents who work need to balance the demands of careers against the demands of parenthood.

Of Saul there is little to be said. He had one righteous son, Jonathan, and we do not really know what the others were like, though there is nothing in the account of Ishbosheth's short reign to indicate godliness. When Saul went astray, his sons were probably grown up (Jonathan certainly was), and in his earlier years his may have been a godly household, for would God have given the people as king one who was already astray from Him? Yet, whereas David came from the righteous family established by Boaz and Ruth, Saul was of Gibeah, the city which committed the appalling atrocity recorded at the end of the book of Judges.

David and Solomon

David is, of course, a prime example of one who suffered great family problems, mainly of his own making. During the early years of his reign, while based at Hebron, he had six sons by six different wives, and also took back his first wife Michal, whose sour reaction to David's rejoicing at the entry of the ark into Jerusalem indicates an absence of marital harmony. Later he had thirteen more sons by an unknown number of wives, and also had sons by concubines (1 Chron. 3:1-9). Allowing for a similar number of daughters, this indicates about fifty children by at least a dozen mothers.

David could not have provided spiritual instruction and proper discipline for so many children at the same time as being the leader of the nation, and harems have always been notorious for intrigue and backbiting. Not all his wives would have been as spiritually minded as Abigail, and at least one, Absalom's mother, came from outside Israel. When David allowed lust to get the better of him in taking Bath-sheba, with its terrible consequence in the murder of Uriah, he committed grievous sins which apparently became widely known (2 Sam. 12:14), and certainly would have been the subject of much discussion in the palace.

God said to David through Nathan, "the sword shall never depart from thine house . . . I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house" (vv. 10,11). How this came to pass is covered in some detail in subsequent chapters: in the accounts of Amnon's rape of his half-sister Tamar, and Absalom's revengeful murder of him; then of Absalom's exile, return, rebellion and eventual death. Though these events are presented as God's work, they developed out of David's failings as a parent in two respects.

First, he was too indulgent with his sons, as is shown by the way that he immediately acceded to Amnon's request that Tamar bring him food, and the fact that Tamar said to him, "speak unto the king; for he will not withhold me from thee" (13:13). David did not learn the lesson from this sad incident, for at the end of his life, when his son Adonijah attempted to wrest the throne from David's appointed successor Solomon, we are told that "his father had not displeased him all his life in saying, Why hast thou done so?" (1 Kgs. 1:6, RV mg.). Second, this failure to discipline his sons was compounded by David's own bad example. The result was three vain and completely self-centred sons, who all met with deservedly violent deaths.

David's outpouring of grief on hearing of the death of his favourite son, Absalom, is heart-rending but excessive, and it took Joab's warning that he was turning the people away from him to get him back to taking up the normal duties of a king. The statement of the Apostle Paul, "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7), is most apt when applied to David's failures as a parent. True parental love requires discipline when appropriate, and example as well as precept; the popular phrase, 'Don't do as I do, do as I say', has no place in Scripturally guided parenting.

Of Solomon as a parent we know little. He himself began well, and we surmise that David did take care in instructing him in God's way, knowing that he was his Divinely chosen successor. We might like to think also that his mother Bath-sheba had put her youthful involvement in David's sin behind her and sought to bring her children up in godly ways. We do not know how many children Solomon had, but with a thousand wives and concubines there must have been many; too many to have been instructed in the things of God by Solomon himself. Many of his wives were foreign, and would not have brought children up in God's way, and these wives led Solomon himself into idolatry in his old age. His son and successor Rehoboam was not a good king; not surprising in view of the fact that his mother was an Ammonitess.

The New Testament

We do not read much about families in the narrative portions of the New Testament, but what we do read is favourable, the absence of polygamy being significant here. The one family mentioned in the Gospels that we have details of consisted of adults: the household at Bethany where Jesus

was entertained. Putting together the accounts of the anointing of Jesus shortly before his death (Mt. 26:1-13; Mk. 14:3-9; Jno. 12:1-8), we gain a picture of a man, Simon, and his three children, Lazarus, Martha and Mary. We may surmise that their mother was dead, for in the incident recorded in Luke 10:38-42 Martha is in charge of the domestic arrangements, and we surmise also that they were young, else they would have been married.

It is good to see this household of young people, all faithful supporters of Jesus. It stands, presumably, as a testimony to how they had been brought up, but it is interesting to consider whether Judas was of the same family, for he is termed "Simon's son" in John 12:4. How sad it is for all concerned when one member of an otherwise faithful family goes astray from the Truth!

In the book of Acts we read of two households, rather than families, accepting the Truth, the first being that of Cornelius, which included relations and friends (10:24), and the second that of the Philippian jailor (16:32). Other households are mentioned in Paul's epistles, such as those of Aristobulus and Narcissus at Rome (Rom. 16:10,11), and that of Onesiphorus at Ephesus (2 Tim. 1:16). These households would have included children, both young and grown up, but servants as well.

In conclusion, we have a fine example of a child being brought up in the knowledge of

God's Word in Timothy, brought up in a religiously divided household, for his mother was a Jew and his father a Greek, and yet instructed in Scripture. We are told that "from a child" he knew "the holy scriptures" (2 Tim. 3:15), and this is attributable to the fact that both his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois were women of "unfeigned faith", which Timothy learned to follow (1:5). Though having two parents equally committed to the Truth is the best environment for children to learn and accept the Truth, the example of Timothy shows that, if only one parent holds it, children can still be successfully taught to follow it.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, what we glean about families from the Old Testament histories does not make very happy reading (though there are exceptions), whereas the opposite is the case in the New Testament. This may be thought to reflect the failure of the old covenant and the benefits brought by the new. In particular, the widespread practice of polygamy by the leaders of Israel was disastrous for good family relations, being contrary to God's intentions at the beginning, though not forbidden by the Law of Moses, which sought to regulate what was widely practised at the time. How wise, then, that the New Testament consistently goes back to the original Divine intention of marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman for life!

The Lord Jesus and his family

Joseph and Mary would have provided a godly and happy home for the Lord Jesus to grow up in. However, because of Jesus' unique status as the Son of God, he and his family experienced trials the like of which have not been experienced by any other family. Nigel Bernard (Pembroke Dock, UK) discusses the human and Divine aspects of Jesus' upbringing, and the family relationships he would have experienced.

WHAT WOULD a day in the life of the family of the young Jesus have been like? Joseph and Mary would have no doubt followed the command of the Law and ensured that the day was filled with talk about the Word of God from beginning to end: "and thou

shalt 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" (Deut. 6:7).

Spiritual development

Like any child, the Lord Jesus would have had plenty of questions. When at the age of twelve his parents found him in the temple, he was "both hearing them, and asking them questions" (Lk. 2:46). The temptation for young brethren who have some understanding of Scripture is to speak rather than listen. But the Lord Jesus, whether at home in Nazareth or in the temple in Jerusalem, was "swift to hear, slow