Israel’s Tribal Culture  from *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament*, Richter

Israelite society was enormously different from contemporary life in the urban West. Whereas modern Western culture may be classified as urban and “bureaucratic,” Israel’s society was “traditional.” More specifically it was “tribal.” In a tribal society the family is, literally, the axis of the community. An individual’s link to the legal and economic structures of their society is through the family. As Israel’s was a patriarchal tribal culture, the link was the patriarch of the clan. The patriarch was responsible for the economic well-being of his family, he enforced law, and he had responsibility to care for his own who became marginalized through poverty, death or war. Hence, the operative information about any individual in ancient Israel was the identity of their father, their gender and their birth order. This is very different from a bureaucratic society in which the state creates economic opportunity, enforces law and cares for the marginalized. In fact, in a bureaucratic culture the family is peripheral—not peripheral to the values and affections of the members of that society, but certainly peripheral to the government and economy. In Israel’s tribal society the family was central, and it is best understood by means of three descriptive categories: patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal.

**Patriarchal.** The first of these terms, patriarchal, has to do with the centrality of the oldest living male member of the family to the structure of the larger society. In his classic work on the topic, Marshall Sahlins states that the societal structure of patriarchal tribalism involves a “progressively inclusive series of groups,” emanating from the patriarchal leader. In other words, the layers of society form in ever broader

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4 “The conical clan ... the main strategy of chiefdom organization ... is a ranked and segmented common descent group. Genealogical seniority is the first rule of rank, and it holds throughout the clan: individuals of the same lineage are graded by their respective distance from the lineage founder; equivalent lineage-branches are likewise ranked according to the position of their respective founders in the clan genealogy. Priority goes to the first-born son of first-born sons, and a different rank is ascribable to every member of the clan, precisely in proportion to his genealogical distance from the senior line” (Sahlins, *Tribesmen*, p. 49; cf. p. 24).

circles, radiating from the closely knit household to the nation as a whole as is pictured in figure 1.1. In Israel’s particular tribal system, an individual would identify their place within society through the lens of their patriarch’s household first, then their clan or lineage, then their tribe and finally the nation. Even the terminology for “family” in ancient Israel reflects the centrality of the patriarch. The basic household unit of Israelite society was known as the “father’s house(hold),” in Hebrew the bêtʾāb. This household was what Westerners would call an “extended family,” including the patriarch, his wife(s), his unwed children and his married sons with their wives and children.

**Figure 1.1. Israelite society**

In this patriarchal society when a man married he remained in the household, but when a woman married she joined the bêtʾāb of her new husband. An example of this is Rebecca’s marriage to Isaac in Genesis 24. She left her father’s household in Haran and journeyed to Canaan to marry.

Modern ethnographic studies indicate that the Israelite bêtʾāb could include as many as three generations, up to thirty persons. Within this family unit, the “father’s house (hold)” lived together in a family compound, collectively farming the land they jointly owned and sharing in its produce. This extended family shared their resources and their fate. And those who found themselves without a bêtʾāb (typically the orphan and...
the widow) also found themselves outside the society’s normal circle of provision and protection. This is why the Old Testament is replete with reminders to “care for the orphan and the widow.” So profound is Yahweh’s concern for those who stand outside the protection of the bêtʾāb that he actually describes himself as “the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing” (Deut 10:17–18). As we will see later in this chapter, there were numerous laws in Israelite society targeted at the protection of “the least of these”—the marginalized of Israel’s patriarchal society.

Correspondingly, it was the patriarch of the household who bore both legal and economic responsibility for the household. In extreme situations, he decided who lived and who died, who was sold into slavery and who was retained within the family unit. An example of this from the Bible is the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38:6–26. Here Tamar has become a member of Judah’s bêtʾāb by marriage, but is currently a widow. Although she is apparently no longer living under Judah’s roof (which is evidence that Judah is not fulfilling his responsibilities to her), she is still under his authority. When Tamar is found to be pregnant, the townspeople report her crime to Judah. It is obvious in this interaction that they expect him as the patriarch of her bêtʾāb to administer justice. And so he does. Judah instructs the townspeople, “Bring her out and let her be burned!” (Gen 38:24). As the head of her household, Judah’s words carry the power of life and death for this young woman. We will return to this story a bit later in the chapter.

When the patriarch died, or when the bêtʾāb became too large to sustain itself, the household would split into new households, each headed by the now-oldest living male family member. Consider the description of Abraham’s family in Genesis 11:26–32. Here Terah’s household consists of his adult sons, their wives and their children. His oldest son Haran “died in the presence of his father Terah” (perhaps while still a member of his household?) but Lot, Haran’s son, remains under Terah’s care. So when form “in situations in which labor requirements are so demanding that a residential group cannot survive at subsistence level without the productive labor of more than a conjugal pair and their children” (Meyers, “Family in Early Israel,” p. 18). These “demanding” conditions would certainly be true of the settlement period of Israel’s history (the Iron I period, 1200–1000 B.C.), during which time Israel’s tribal coalition was attempting to carve out an agrarian existence in the heretofore unsettled, mountainous, forested, rocky central hill country of the “promised land.”

11 If the paterfamilias was unable to resolve a legal situation within the family, the village elders (hence, the patriarchs of the clan[s] living in the village) would be expected to bring order and to carry out justice. An example of this is the law of the rebellious son in Deut 21:19. See Sahlins, Tribesmen, p. 17; and Oded Borowski, Daily Life in Biblical Times (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 221–22.
Basic Bible, 1Story week 1, Israelite culture

Terah migrates to the city of Haran, he takes Lot with him. When Terah dies, Abram, the eldest, becomes the head of the bêtʾāb and therefore takes responsibility for his brother’s son. Thus Lot comes to Canaan with Abram.

Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. And the land could not sustain them while dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together. (Gen 13:5–6)

As a result, Abraham invites Lot to “be separated from upon me” (Gen 13:11). Lot chooses the fertile Jordan Valley and the original bêtʾāb becomes two.  

**Patrilineal.** The term *patrilineal* has to do with tracing ancestral descent (and therefore tribal affiliation and inheritance) through the male line. In Israel the possessions of a particular lineage were carefully passed down through the generations, family by family, according to gender and birth order, in order to provide for the family members to come and to preserve “the name” of those gone before.

The genealogies of the Old Testament make this legal structure obvious—women are typically not named. When women are named, something unusual is afoot and we should be asking why. A woman might be named in a genealogy if a man had several wives who each had sons, as is the case with Jacob and Esau’s genealogies in Genesis 35 and Genesis 36. A woman might be named in the rare and extreme cases in which she might inherit land or goods (Num 26:33; 27:1–11; cf. Num 36:1–12; Josh 17:3–6). But most often, women are named when the biblical writer has something to say.

Note the genealogy of Matthew 1. Here in what comes to be the opening chapter of the New Testament, the information most significant to a first-century Jewish audience regarding one claiming to be the Messiah is announced—his credentials as the son of the promise. Any Jew knew that the Messiah must be the offspring of Abraham; he must be a son of David. This is the bloodline of the Christ. But notice that there are four women named in this crucial register: Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba) and Mary. Mary’s inclusion is an obvious necessity, but what about the others? Why are they here in what ought to be an exclusively male list? Do you remember Rahab’s occupation? Ruth’s nationality? Bathsheba’s claim to fame? Why might the biblical writer have included these women in the *opening* chapter of the New Testament? I believe it is because this writer has something to say about the nature of the deliverance that this Messiah is bringing. This deliverance is for all people. Not just the Jews. Not just the righteous. Rather, the unclean, the foreigner, the sinner—if they will believe as Rahab did—are welcome. Not merely welcome into the new community, but welcome even into the lineage of the Christ.

The genealogies also give us a window into the privileged position of the firstborn in Israelite society. The firstborn male child would replace his father in the role of patriarch.

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12 See the similar story of Jacob and Esau in Gen 36:6–8.
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upon his father’s death. Hence, the firstborn took precedence over his brothers during his father’s lifetime (Gen 43:33), and upon his father’s death he received a double-portion of the family estate (Deut 21:17; cf. 1 Sam 1:5). I often joke with my classes about the potential impact of incorporating Deuteronomy’s law of the double-portion into the typical American home. Picture Christmas morning. The first rays of dawn peek over the horizon. Your offspring leap from their beds and bound down the stairs to find the pile of loot that has come to characterize the celebration of an American Christmas. But rather than finding the carefully apportioned, equal stack of stuff awaiting them under the Christmas tree, your children discover that your firstborn has twice as much as his siblings. Anarchy! Chaos! Bloodshed! In my egalitarian society it is obvious why this apportionment would inspire dispute. Not so in Israel’s tribal society. There was a reason that the firstborn received a double-portion: he would become the next patriarch. Thus, during the lifetime of the patriarch, the firstborn was expected to shadow his father, to serve as an apprentice in all his duties. Much more was expected of him than his siblings. As the firstborn came to maturity, he slowly evolved into his father’s peer, until upon the patriarch’s death he was prepared to assume the weighty responsibility of directing and maintaining the bêt ʿāb. Obviously, the firstborn would need adequate resources to insure the survival of the family; hence, the double-portion. All firstborns are special to their parents, but because of his pivotal role in Israelite society, the firstborn in Israel was precious.

Consider the stories of Esau and Jacob, Reuben and Judah, David and his seven brothers. In each of these stories the culture demanded that the firstborn male be the one who received the privilege of leading the family into the next generation. But in each of these cases, God chooses a younger son to lead. Thus each of these stories is an example of how God’s way of doing things often stands in opposition to the cultural norms of his people and how redemption’s story critiques every human culture. The choice of David is particularly telling. As the eighth-born son of Jesse, David’s inheritance would have fit into a backpack. But after surveying all of Jesse’s sons (eldest to youngest, of course), God’s spokesman says “no” to those David’s society would have chosen and “yes” to the one least likely in the eyes of his own community: “For I have selected a king for Myself among his sons” (1 Sam 16:1). Indeed, “people look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam 16:7).

In Israel’s patrilineal society, children always belonged to their father’s tribe, but when a female child came of age she was married into another bêt ʿāb. She became a permanent member of that new household, and her tribal alliance shifted with that marriage. As a result, a woman’s identity in Israel—and her link to its economy and civil structures—was always tracked through the men in her life. She was first her father’s

daughter, then her husband’s wife and then her son’s mother. The resources and protection of the clan came to her through the male members of her family. This is why it was critical for a woman to marry and to bear children. A woman who was widowed prior to bearing a son was a woman in crisis. And a woman without father, husband or son was destitute; without the charity of strangers, she would starve. Because of this, there were a number of laws in Israelite society targeted at the protection of the widow. Consider, for example, Deuteronomy’s gleaning laws, which required that landowners reserve a portion of the produce of their land for those among them who found themselves “on the margins.”

When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. (Deut 24:19–21)

Another law concerned with the well-being of widows, and directed at preserving proper lines of inheritance within Israel’s tribal culture, is the levirate law found in Deuteronomy 25:5–10. The Latin term levir means “brother,” and the law dictates the behavior expected when a brother has left a young widow behind. In sum, the levirate law prescribes that in a bêt āḇ that has more than one son, when a married man dies before he has produced a male heir, his young wife is not to be married off to someone outside the household. Rather, it was the responsibility of a living brother to take that woman as his wife (often his second wife) and to father a child with her. The first child of that union would belong to the deceased brother. The child would be legally recognized as the deceased brother’s offspring and would receive his inheritance. If there were additional children, those would belong to the living brother. The intent of this law was both to protect the young widow from destitution and to protect her deceased husband’s inheritance. The people of Israel considered it a serious offense for a man to fail to fulfill this responsibility to his dead brother.

When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. And it shall be that the first-born whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out from Israel. But if the man does not desire to take his brother’s wife, then his brother’s wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, “My husband’s brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel; he is not willing to perform the duty of a husband’s brother to me.” Then the elders of his city shall summon him and speak to him. And if he persists and says, “I do not desire to take her,” then his brother’s wife shall come to him in the sight of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face; and she shall
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declare, “Thus it is done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.” In Israel his name shall be called, “The house of him whose sandal is removed.” (Deut 25:5–10)

Although this system seems very odd to most Westerners, it worked. The inheritance of the deceased brother was properly conferred upon his legal offspring, and the young widow was secured within the household. Thus her current need for food and shelter was met, and her future need for a child to care for her in her old age was addressed as well.14

With this insight into the nuts and bolts of a patrilineal society, let us return to the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. We have already learned that the widowed Tamar had become a member of Judah’s bêtʾāb through marriage, and as such Judah is responsible for bringing her to justice after the townspeople announce her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. In agreement with societal norms, Judah orders her execution. But there are details of this story that must be reconsidered. According to Genesis 38:6–11, Tamar had been the wife of Judah’s firstborn, Er. When this man died, Judah had instructed his second son Onan to fulfill the “duty of a husband’s brother” by marrying Tamar and fathering a child in his deceased brother’s name. But because Onan knew that the child would not be his, “when he went in to his brother’s wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother” (Gen 38:9). The text tells us that for this crime, Yahweh requires his life. Although the law called for Judah now to give this woman to his third son, Judah did not. He was afraid that there was something wrong with this woman (as opposed to something wrong with his sons), and that if his third son Shelah married her, he would die too. So Judah deceived Tamar saying, “remain a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up.” The biblical narrator makes it very clear that Judah has no intention of carrying out his responsibilities toward this young woman either by marrying her to his third son, or by making a place for her within his household. Thus, “after a considerable time,” when Tamar saw that Judah was not going to fulfill his obligation to her (Gen 38:14), Tamar decided to take matters into her own hands. She “removed her widow’s garments,” and disguised herself such that when Judah encountered her along the road, he believed her to be a prostitute. Judah propositioned her, and she consented, providing that he leave a pledge of payment with her. The pledge she requested? “Your seal and your cord, and your staff” (Gen 38:18). Tamar’s plan worked; she conceived. And when her condition became apparent to her village, they reported it to Judah. Even though this woman was living in her own father’s home, Judah ordered her burned. Now consider Tamar’s response:

It was while she was being brought out [to be burned] that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, “I am with child by the man to whom these things belong.” And she said, “Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?” Judah recognized them, and said, “She is more righteous than I.” (Gen 38:25–26)

14 For further reading see King and Stager, Life in Biblical Israel, pp. 53–57.
“She is more righteous than I”? Hadn’t this young woman just tricked her father-in-law into illicit sex? How could one of the twelve patriarchs of Israel make such a statement? To answer this question, we have to understand the culture of the people of the Old Testament and resist the temptation to impose our cultural norms on them. Although in my world Tamar’s actions would be reprehensible, in her own culture it was Judah who was worthy of rebuke. For it was Judah who had failed to honor the levirate law and had allowed another household to take responsibility for the support of his widowed daughter-in-law. In Israelite culture, Judah was the villain; Tamar was the courageous (albeit a bit audacious!) heroine.

Another important biblical law regarding inheritance addressed land. Throughout its national period, the bulk of the Israelite populace lived on small family farms in which the main economy was a mixture of pastoralism and diversified agriculture. The primary goal of that economy was insuring the survival of the family. As a result, for the typical household in ancient Israel, the inherited land holdings of the bêt āb were the family’s lifeline. Thus there were laws in ancient Israel designed to insure that the family plot (Hebrew naḥālā) remain within the lineage. Based on the concept formulated early on that the promised land actually belonged to Yahweh and had been distributed among the tribes as he intended, the only legally permissible permanent transfer of land in Israel was through inheritance. And the parcels of land originally distributed by Yahweh were to pass from father to son in perpetuity. But if poverty or dire life circumstances forced the sale of some portion of the patrimonial estate, the land was not to be sold permanently. Rather, according to the “inalienable land law” of Leviticus 25:13–28, it was the responsibility of the seller’s nearest kinsman to step in and buy back what his relative had sold. If there was no kinsman, but the seller managed to recoup his loss such that he was able to repurchase his land, the buyer was required to give him that opportunity. And if there was no kinsman, and the seller was incapable of raising the funds necessary to reclaim his patrimony, “then what he has sold shall remain in the hands of its purchaser until the year of jubilee; but at the jubilee it shall revert, that he [the seller] may return to his property” (Lev 25:28). Although we have no evidence to prove or disprove the actual practice of the widespread restoration of patrimonial lands at the year of jubilee, we do have firm evidence that the kinship-based land tenure

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15 Carol Meyers speaks of the Israelite farmers as “smallholders: ‘rural cultivators practicing intensive, permanent, diversified agriculture on relatively small farms’ ” (“Family in Early Israel,” p. 3). Because of the typical Israelite family’s subsistence approach to farming, agricultural production ran year round. The planting of cereal grains occurred in the fall, legumes in the winter and the care and pruning of vineyards and orchards throughout the year. The barley harvest began with the spring equinox, wheat in late April. Grapes and other fruits were harvested during the summer months, with the olive crop gathered from late August to late October. For further reading see Borowski, Daily Life in Biblical Times, pp. 13–42; and “Day in Micah’s Household,” pp. 12–19, in King and Stager’s, Life in Biblical Israel.
described in Leviticus, and the responsibility of the nearest kinsman to restore patrimony when possible, was indeed the expectation of Israelite society (cf. Jer 32:6–44; 2 Kings 8:1–6). Again, this system of land tenure is very different from the capitalist economy in which I have been raised, but, generally, it worked. The end result was that no lineage in Israel was condemned to permanent or inescapable poverty.

**Patrilocal.** The term *patrilocal* has to do with the living space of the family unit which, as we have come to expect, was built around the oldest living male. Corresponding to the makeup of the *bêt āb* as an extended family, the architectural structure in which the Israelite family lived was not so much a house as it was a compound. Nuclear families were housed in individual units which were clustered together within a larger, walled enclosure, and this living space was also known as the *bêt āb*.

The integration of data gathered via archaeology, modern ethnographic study and the biblical text leaves us with a surprisingly clear picture of this Israelite family compound.

Here the individual dwelling places circled a shared courtyard in which the necessary domestic chores were carried out by family members. At any given daytime hour, one might find the women of the household in this courtyard grinding grain into flour, preparing food or baking bread in the standard domed oven known as a *tannûr*; all of this was done with the small children close at hand. A pergola of grapevines for the family’s use and animals who had been brought in from the fields to be watered and housed would also be typical courtyard residents. At day’s end the family would regather within the security of the walled compound for the evening meal and sleep.

The individual dwelling units of the Israelite *bêt āb* are especially characteristic of Israelite culture and are so consistent in their design that they have come to be known as the “four-room, pillared house.” In the States, you might call them the “two-bedroom

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16 Interestingly, there is no epigraphical evidence (inscriptions) for the sale or purchase of real estate in Israel. Even though there is a great deal of such evidence from Israel’s neighbors (Christopher J. H. Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], pp. 55–58; cf. pp. 119–41).


Cape” of the average Israelite neighborhood. In a rural setting, the houses might be free standing, but frequently (especially in more crowded, urban settings) these houses were more like townhomes—sharing their exterior walls, with their rear walls sometimes doing double-duty as the wall around the compound and/or village.\footnote{For further discussion see Stager, “Archaeology of the Family,” p. 19; \textit{Life in Biblical Israel}, p. 11; Amihai Mazar, \textit{Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000–586 B.C.E.} (New York: Doubleday, 1990), pp. 338–45, 485–88; cf. J. David Schloen, \textit{The House of the Father}; and Israel Finkelstein, \textit{The Archaeology of Israelite Settlement} (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988), pp. 254–60.}

Figure 1.2 offers a diagram of the foundation of such a house, excavated in Tall al ‘Umayri (within the territory of the tribe of Reuben). Known as Building B, this is the best-preserved Iron Age I four-room house in the Levant. Figure 1.3 offers a reconstruction of the same.\footnote{Larry G. Herr and Douglas R. Clark, “Excavating the Tribe of Reuben,” \textit{BAR 27}, no. 2 (March/April 2001).}
Notice that this typical Israelite home has two stories, each of which has three long rooms delineated by rows of pillars, and a long room which spanned the back of the house. The house was constructed of a mixture of field stone and mud brick, sealed and plastered. The roof was composed of small branches, plastered together with eight to ten inches of tempered clay and mud and/or sod, all of which required a great deal of maintenance. The side rooms of the first floor functioned as stables and were therefore often cobbled. Apparently this warm, protected space was ideal for young or vulnerable animals, as well as the space in which one would house the “stall-fed calf” in order to fatten him up for feast day (1 Sam 28:24). And although the aroma of this shared habitat might be less than ideal, the animals’ presence on the first floor provided the family with a cheap source of central heat. The center room often housed a hearth and was used for domestic chores and storage. This center room typically had a floor of beaten dirt or plaster. The long room in the rear was utilized for food storage, often with pits used as grain silos dug into the floor. The family members ate, slept and entertained on the second floor and (during good weather) the roof (cf. 1 Sam 9:25–26; 1 Kings 17:19, and perhaps the “upper room” in Acts 1:13). Based on the now well-known design of the Israelite four-room house, Lawrence Stager has proposed that the story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem had nothing to do with a stable down the street as we often assume and regularly picture in our nativity sets. Rather, the Bethlehem innkeeper is probably telling Joseph that although he has no room for the laboring woman in the house proper, the little family is welcome to stay on the first floor with the animals. Here, hopefully, they would be warm and safe and the innkeeper’s wife would be close at hand in case of trouble. The stone feed troughs that typically separated the stalls from the central room probably served as Luke’s “manger” (Lk 2:7).

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21 Note that the number of rooms delineated by the pillars is somewhat fluid; one, two or three rooms have been excavated.

22 Douglas Clark offers an engaging summary of what would go into the construction of one of these houses in “Excavating the Tribe of Reuben,” BAR 27, no. 2 (March/April 2001).


24 Stager, Life in Biblical Israel, p. 35.

The design of the family compound helps us see that one of the primary goals of Israel’s tribal culture was tribal solidarity—the tribe intended to live together. In their unity they found the capacity to prosper under the harsh economic conditions of the highlands, to defend themselves against their Canaanite neighbors and to insure their survival as a people group. This solidarity of the extended family persisted even into death, as is apparent from Israelite burial practices. Archaeology has made it clear that the standard practice was to immediately bury the dead in one fashion or another to allow for the decomposition of the flesh, but then to gather the bones into the family tomb such that the family member was housed permanently with the rest of the clan. The biblical expressions “to sleep with” and “to be gathered to” one’s fathers are the literary expressions of this “secondary burial” practice in Israelite culture. Consider the biblical stories surrounding the cave of Macpelah, which Abraham purchased to bury Sarah, and in which Abraham, Isaac, Rebeccah, Jacob and Leah were all eventually laid to rest (Gen 23:1–20; 25:9–10; 49:29–32; 50:13). Here several generations of a single family found their rest together. This burial practice also helped to communicate land tenure—

Figure 1.3. Israelite four-room pillared house (Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project excavations at Tall-al-‘Umayri, Jordan. Artist: Rhonda Root ©2001)

the family buried on a plot of ground owned that plot of ground. It is for these reasons that Jacob and Joseph make their sons swear that when they leave Egypt they will take the bones of their ancestors with them, and bury those bones in the land of promise (cf. Gen 47:30; 50:25). The bêt ʾāb that lives together, dies together.

LEAVING AND CLEAVING IN GENESIS 2:24

In Israel’s patrilocal society, it was the women who did the relocating when marriages were formed. Typically much younger than her fiancé, and probably still in her teens, this young woman was expected to leave her home and family and join her husband’s bêt ʾāb. Can you imagine the relational challenges this young woman faced? Building a new marriage with a man she might hardly have known, relearning how to cook, weave and do laundry according to her new family’s habits; navigating the pecking order of this unfamiliar family system … all under the watchful eye of her new mother-in-law. Add to this the inevitable homesickness resulting from leaving her own mother and siblings for a group of near strangers, and it is not difficult to envisage some very difficult times for this new wife. Now consider the well-known passage in Genesis 2:24: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” Wait a minute. Doesn’t the biblical author know that Israel was a patrilocal society? Why is he speaking of the groom doing the leaving? I believe the reason for this apparent “mistake”—like the listing of women in Jesus’ genealogy—is that the message of the biblical writer is one of critique. Everyone knew that the relational burden of forming a new household fell upon the women in Israel’s society. Everyone knew that it was she who was uprooted and isolated by the process. Yet the earliest and most foundational word we have regarding marriage states that a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. They shall become one flesh. I believe this is an intentional reversal on the part of the biblical author. And I think he is intending to communicate something like this: “Young man, although you have all the benefits and comforts in this system, from this day onward you shall live your life as though you too have left. She is now bone of your bones and flesh of your flesh. Your most significant kinship alliance, as of today, is her.”

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27 King and Stager, Life in Biblical Israel, p. 365.