Family Language in the Old Testament

By: Paul Sheneman

So Joshua rose early in the morning, and brought Israel near tribe by tribe, and the tribe of Judah was taken. He brought near the clans of Judah, and the clan of the Zerahites was taken; and he brought near the clan of the Zerahites, family by family, and Zabdi was taken. And he brought near his household one by one, and Achan son of Carmi son of Zabdi son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken. Joshua 7:16-18

This brief section of text from the book of Joshua captures the multiple terms used to describe the various spheres of kinship or family relations in the Old Testament. The concepts that relate to the terms and phrases translated as *household*, *clan*, and *tribe* will be explored to understand the kinship relations.

Beginning with the rise of Ancient Israel, the Hebrew phrase *bet' ab,* literally *father's house*, is what typically gets translated as *household*.[i] The Old Testament also contains the phrase *bet' em*, which is literally translated *mother's house* and also means *household*.[ii] These two phrases can also refer to a person's biological lineage, possessions, or a compound where one lives. However, *household* typically refers to the basic family unit, made up of multi-generational kinship relations and non-kinship relations.[iii] For example, a household in the Old Testament might have consisted of a wife (or wives) and a husband, their sons, daughters-in-law, the unmarried daughters, nephews, nieces, cousins, servants, parents of the man and/or the woman, and potentially any captives taken in military actions (e.g., Jacob's household, David's household).

The household shared a common religion, provided for the material needs of each individual, and provided protection and education.[iv] It would be at this level that individuals understood their specific identities. For example, many names in the Old Testament would be accompanied by the phrase *son of* or *daughter of*, such as Achan son of Camri in the text above.

The concept of the household was most prominent during the period of Ancient Israel when the rural life demanded much from each family unit in order to survive.[v] However, as times changed with the rise of the nation state and beyond, this basic family unit was weakened.[vi] After the exile, the household was still present in the community but no

longer a prominent part of the way of life for Second Temple Jews. Therefore, the household was an enduring institution throughout the Old Testament.

The *clan* is typically the translation for the Hebrew word *mispahah*. More technically, the *mispahah* is a kinship unit of related *bet' ab*, or households.[vii] In other words, a clan was a collection of related households. Along with common ancestry, the clan shared their resources, a common religion, and also the responsibility for protection.[viii] It would have been from this level of kinship relation that people would find marriage partners (Genesis 24, 29).[ix] This would have ensured that the property—both land and animal—stayed within the clan.[x]

Finally, *sebet* is the Hebrew word that is translated as *tribe*. It would be accurate to understand that this relationship is an association of clans.[xi] At this level of kinship, there would have been a common religion and military obligation. The strongest bonds at this level were clearly their kinship and kinship-in-law relations, along with their religion.[xii] The tribes would have understood their identity as collectively being '*am YHWH* or the *kindred of YHWH*.[xiii]

The kinship language, or language used between family members to talk about each other and their responsibility to one another, has typically been obscured in years past by the emphasis placed on covenant language. Frank Moore Cross makes the point:

> *Often it has been asserted that the language of 'brotherhood' and 'fatherhood,' 'love,' and 'loyalty' is 'covenant terminology.' This is to turn things upside down. The language of covenant, kinship-in-law, is taken from that language of kinship, kinship-in-flesh.*[xiv]

Cross comes to this conclusion through a study of West Semitic tribal groups which he believes to be grounded in kinship.[xv] He finds that their identities, properties, legal acts, and military power were tied to an understanding of their obligations to their kindred.[xvi] Phrases that have been explained as covenant language such as *bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh* and the love terms *hesed* and '*ahabad*, are better understood as first being family language.[xvii] Also, the obligation to redeem (*ga' al*) is best understood as *to act as family*.[xviii] This responsibility was turned into a role in the religious rituals of Israel with the rules of the *go'al*, or *kinsman redeemer*.

As the complexity of the West Semitic tribal groups grew from households to clans and then tribes, there became the need to articulate their relationships with the larger group. The kinship language was a natural way to talk about these people; thus, the rise of the kinship-in-law language, which was a legal fiction that allowed for outsiders to become insiders.[xix] The language of marriage, adoption, and oath used by both individuals and groups allowed for ways of understanding one's relationship to others outside the kinship-in-flesh, along with their responsibilities to them.[xx] Therefore, the language that was used above to describe the clan and tribe were all part of an increasingly complex family language that was developed by the West Semitic tribes and found in the Old Testament.

Therefore, when we read the Old Testament terms we typically refer to as *covenant language*, it would serve us well to keep in mind that it developed from family language. This does not degrade the religious significance or theological implication of such language. Rather, it deepens the reality that when people made covenants in the Old Testament, they were declaring that their relationship with a person or God was as close and meaningful as their own flesh and blood. In short, covenant language declared an outsider as family, which carried all the roles, responsibilities, identities, and religion described

[i] Joel F Drinkard, *An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament: Maybe Not as Different from Us as We Usually Think* (2001) 490–492. The period of Ancient Israel is dated between 1200 to 1000 B.C.E. This has typically included the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth.

[ii] Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel*, 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 34. Examples: Genesis 24:28; Ruth 1:8; Song of Solomon 3:4 and 8:2.

[iii] Drinkard, *An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament*, pp 490-491.

[iv] Blenkinsopp, Collins, and Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel*, pp 24-27.

[v] Blenkinsopp, Collins, and Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel*, p 38.

[vi] Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon* (JHU Press, 2000), pp 16-18.

[vii] Drinkard, *An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament,* pp 492-493.

[viii] Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, pp 3-4.

[ix] Drinkard, *An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament*, pp 492-493.

[x] Ibid.

[xi] Drinkard, *An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament*, p 494.

[xii] Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, pp 11-12.

[xiii] Ibid.

[xiv] Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 11.

[xv] Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 3.

[xvi] Ibid.

[xvii] Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 4.

[xviii] Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 5.

[xix] Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 8.

[xx] Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, p 9.