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OT504: The Hebrew Bible & the Eastern Mediterranean World: OA

### **Villages**

Matthew and Benjamin suggest that the village in ancient Israel was viewed as the place where people lived a decentralized lifestyle. Politics, economics, diplomacy, law, and education were essential components of the village system. Matthew and Benjamin indicated that politics focused on the people who had the power to protect the village. The economic system involved the people who provided sustenance and maintained the food supply for the people. Diplomacy involved the art of tactful negotiation on behalf of the village. Law involved the people who solved the issues in the village and education involved passing on knowledge to people in the village. Many Hebrew families settled in a village setting and they made a home in the village community. I believe Israel's cultural context represented in history was similar to the narrative in the bible.

According to Matthew and Benjamin politics involved protecting the village from the attack of other nations and providing resources so the village could be self-sufficient. Many villages did not have an active army or walls to protect themselves. However, in times of war, they would appoint a chief who would gather men to defend the community. Judges 11:7 stated that "Jephthah replied to the elders of Gilead, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why then have you come to me now when you're in trouble?" This was an agreement for Jephthah to be the captain for the army who would fight the Ammonites and if he won the war, he would become the Chief of the village. Jephthah won the war and he became a Hebrew leader. One of the conditions to maintain the power was to sacrifice the first thing that greeted

him after the war. The sacrifice came with a great cost because he was obliged to sacrifice his daughter to maintain his power. After all, she was the first person to greet him after the war.

The fathers were known to have the authority to make decisions in the community on behalf of his family but the women were very instrumental in implementing decisions made by the men. The women managed the home, the children and assisted with work on the farms. The power in most villages was passed on to the first son. It appears that in most Hebrew families there was a need for the orderly transfer of power and leadership in the village so the first son was usually the likely choice. On rare occasions when there was not an appropriate successor, the leadership was given to the next in line or an appropriate successor. One example of the orderly transfer of power from one leader to another was in Deuteronomy 31:1–8; 34:9) when Joshua took over leadership from Moses and Joshua was able to lead the Israelites across the Jordan River. The goal was to maintain power and order in the family and the village.

A review of the book of Joshua suggests that in ancient Israel many families and tribes lived together in community settlements called villages. The villages were an important cultural establishment. The land for many ancient Hebrew villages was acquired after war. Throughout antiquity, the children of Israel have engaged in war with many tribes and the acquisition of land as a reward was fair for the winner of the war. The biblical text has documented many occasions where land was distributed after the war. Some of the text includes Joshua chapters 13 to 21 which list the inheritance of the children of Israel and it outlined the distribution of land to each tribe. Joshua chapter thirteen verse twenty-three states “And the border of the children of Reuben was Jordan, and the border thereof. This was the inheritance of the children of Reuben after their families, the cities and the villages thereof”. The tribe of Reuben is an example of one tribe that received land as an inheritance. The land was seen as an asset for each tribe. The land was used

to herd animals such as sheep and cattle, plant crops such as wheat and barley and build housing settlements and places of worship. The acquisition of land was the initial step to establishing village communities in ancient Israel's culture. The ownership of land made a powerful social, economic and political statement in ancient Hebrew culture.

It is believed that the early villagers were farmers and herders who had traveled from areas such as Syria and Palestine and their economy was agricultural. The village economy was a subsistence economy which means the people produced food for their daily existence and trade was not a major part of their economy. Also, everyone in the community worked together to contribute to this decentralized village system. It appears that these early settlers had an affinity for Canaanite culture. According to Matthew and Benjamin, the early settlers appeared to be people who may have survived famine, plagues, and war and they migrated in large groups to areas that were near Jordan, Syria, and Palestine. Matthew and Benjamin indicated that the archeological remains from the Hebrew villages suggest that they were farmers and herders. The remnants suggest they planted grain such as wheat and barley, fruit, flax to make linen, olives, vineyards. An example of a remnant from the farms included large storage areas for grain. The remains from the ancient people who lived in the area around Syria and Palestine suggested that they did not build walls to protect themselves and there were no remains of weapons for war. Based on the archeological remains it can be concluded that the ancient villagers focused on farming and rearing animals in the village community.

Another important component of village life was the role of the people. According to Matthew and Benjamin, the village system was an important communal settlement where people in ancient Israel lived and worked together for the greater good of the community. The first ancient Israel villages were believed to be established about 1250 BCE near Judah, west of the

Jordan and North of Jerusalem. The fathers and mothers were responsible for managing the political organization in the village. The fathers and mothers also provided food, clothing, shelter, and protected the children in the village. The parents helped with arranging marriages and negotiated deals with local leaders for their families.

Economics in the village involved managing the natural resources that were available in the village. The farmers, herders, and midwives managed the economic foundation of the village. The farmers plant crops, the herders were responsible for caring for the animals. The animals and crops were used for food to feed the people as well as for trading with other communities. While the midwives were responsible for delivering and caring for newborn babies. Children were considered a blessing so the midwives worked hard to ensure the babies survived most deliveries.

Matthew and Benjamin suggested diplomacy was an art that was necessary to negotiate deals for the village. The leaders in the village were responsible for communicating with other leaders to discuss issues regarding the threat of war, trade, land, laws and other important matters that affected the people in the village. The village chief helped with mediating deals for the community. The leaders used diplomacy for avoiding war and initiating war when necessary. The elders and the widows were the legal guardians for the village and they focused on law in the village. The elders and widows in the village were responsible for solving problems and maintaining law in the village. According to Matthew and Benjamin, the legal system involved a code of honor. This means people were required to do what is right based on moral, social, the Torah or biblical rules. A person's word or a handshake was considered honorable and legally binding. The people who did not follow the village rules were ostracized and publicly shamed for their dishonorable behavior.

Matthew and Benjamin suggested that education was organized by the elders who were responsible for teaching the young people in the village. The values of the clan or group were passed on from the elders to the younger population, the academic, religious and cultural information was communicated to people in the village using a label system. The people who were receptive to the education system and applied the information were referred to as being “wise” while the people who ignored the information were considered to be “foolish”. This approach to education was common in ancient Egypt and Israel. In most Hebrew villages the elderly were revered and their knowledge was appreciated. Therefore, the elders and grandparents were instrumental in passing on wisdom and to the younger people in the village.

The village was responsible for the social wellbeing of the community. Therefore, basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and protection were privileges available in Hebrew villages. The biblical culture described Hebrew families who settled in villages in Palestine and areas around the Jordan River. Joshua was one biblical leader who leads the people of Israel to the promised land. The Hebrew families lived and worked together in the villages. In biblical times Israel was known to be surrounded by tribes who were a threat to the existence of the Hebrew villages. The chief of many villages was able to use diplomacy to avoid war or they were able to use leaders like Jephthah to defend the village settlements.

### Bibliography

Matthew/Benjamin. Social World of Ancient Israel

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