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Topic: How does Israel's Cultural Context shed new light on the Biblical Text

Human beings are formed by the culture they create, and this influences their thoughts, practices, and relationships politically, socially, economically, spiritually, and emotionally. This paper will examine how Israel's Cultural Context Shed New Light on a Biblical Text. Chapter One of Matthews and Benjamin's book, *Social World of Ancient Israel (1250 -587 BCE)*, is entitled "The Father". This chapter discussed Kinship and Covenant, Life and Death, Adoptions, Legal Disputes, Work and War, Marriage and Covenants, Inheritance, and the role of the Father in all these. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus on "Kinship and Covenant" in the cultural context of Israel and how this sheds new light on a Biblical Text.

Matthews and Benjamin pointed out that in early Israel, a household was headed by a father and a household tree begins with the father of the household, and all his brothers or his father's sons, to which are added the two preceding generations and the two following generations.¹ The preceding generations include his father and uncles or his father's brothers and his grandfather and great and great-uncles or his grandfather's brothers.²

In Genesis 12:1-5 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation,

and I will bless you;

¹ Matthews, Victor H. and Benjamin, Don C. *Social World of Ancient Israel (1250-587 BCE)* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1993), 7

² *Ibid.*, 7

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.^[a]
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”^t

So, Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.³

Until God called Abram, Abram was a member of his father’s household. Though married, he lived with his father. His father had the responsibility to protect and to provide for his household and children. Matthews and Benjamin asserted that in the Ancient Near East, the father of a household was not just someone who sired, but someone who fed and protected.⁴ The father of the household is authorized to:

- adopt or excommunicate sons and daughters
- recruit workers and warriors
- negotiate marriages and covenants
- host strangers

³ *Life Application Study Bible*, NIV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 23-24

⁴ Matthews, Victor H. and Benjamin, Don C. *Social World of Ancient Israel (1250-587 BCE)* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1993), 8

- designate heir.⁵

In the Genesis 12 scripture quoted above, God (Yahweh) calls Abram and promises him that He will provide (bless him) and protect him. He, God appears to be taking the role of the Father who takes care of His children and protect them. God promises Abram that he should leave his father's household and go to a place He (God) will show him. He will make Abram into a great nation. This suggest Abram will be a "father" of a great nation. The point here is that Abram is departing from a household where he is fathered. There was security there and protection and now God asked him to leave his father's household. How he is going to fare as a Father, provide and protect the household where issues of concern but God assured him that He will bless him, protect, and make him great. Matthews and Benjamin revealed that when the father exercised his authority to determine how the household would farm and herd, he was the image of the Creator feeding and protecting.⁶ The tradition identifying the father with the Creator was widespread in the world of the Bible or the Ancient Near East.⁷ Thus, Abram was identified with Yahweh. The household was part of a remarkably sophisticated system for distributing power. Like many traditional societies, the society of the Bible describes Israel's political system as kinship.⁸ It is critical to note that membership of a household or family (kinship) in the Ancient Near East was by covenant and not household with the same biological parents. Matthews and Benjamin quoted Meyers (1988:127), that even when villages distributed power from parents to children between

⁵ Matthews, Victor H. and Benjamin, Don C. *Social World of Ancient Israel (1250-587 BCE)* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1993), 8

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10

⁷ Ibid., 10

⁸ Ibid., 7

brothers and sisters, this kinship was ratified by covenant. No blood relationship was taken for granted. And although member of households, clans, villages, and tribes in early Israel may have been physically related, the critical requirement for membership was not kinship, but covenant. The Hebrews were not just households with the same biological parents, but households with the same sociological experience and a shared legal commitment to one another.⁹ Needless to say is the fact that the father could also adopt children into the family. Matthews and Benjamin disclosed that at the time a child was born, the father had to decide whether to adopt it into the household or not. They affirmed that in the world of the Bible, life began not with a viable birth, but only with adoption. Regardless of the status of the newborn at the moment of delivery, without adoption it was considered stillborn. If the father did not adopt the child, the midwife took it from the birthing room and left it in an open field to declare it eligible for adoption by another household.¹⁰ The child then becomes a member of the family that adopted him/her.. Probably, this explains why when God instructed Abram to leave his father's household he left with Sarai, lot (his nephew) and all the people he had acquired in Haran because that constituted his household or his own family.

In conclusion, the scripture in Genesis 12:1-5 becomes clearer and more understandable when one knows the Ancient Near East culture and the father's role as the head of the family.

⁹ Ibid., 8

¹⁰ Ibid., 10-11

References

1. *Life Application Study Bible*, NIV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011)
2. Matthews, Victor H. and Benjamin, Don C. *Social World of Ancient Israel (1250-587 BCE)* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1993)