

All on the family

by [Susan R. Garrett](#) in the [December 16, 1998](#) issue

*By Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins and Carol Meyers, Families in Ancient Israel. (Westminster/John Knox, 285 pp.)*

*By Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches. (Westminster/John Knox, 329 pp.)*

In the debate among Christians over family values, the Bible plays a conspicuous role. Nearly all parties to the debate draw upon it to warrant their positions. But of course, participants differ wildly on the ground rules for using the biblical text. Behind such an innocent-looking phrase as "the biblical view of the family" lurk many interpretive assumptions.

The authors of these two volumes (both part of Westminster/John Knox's "Family, Religion and Culture" series) clearly lay out their presuppositions and intent. The scholars presuppose that the Bible offers not a monolithic perspective on the family but various points of view, which exhibit both continuity and change over the 14 or so centuries the books cover.

This convention reverses the more typical direction of arguments about the Bible and the family. Most commonly, participants in the debate have striven to show how biblical perspectives should influence the structure and functioning of actual modern families. But the authors of these two volumes are chiefly interested in demonstrating how social, cultural and economic factors shaped the lives of actual ancient families and, in turn, how the realities of life in ancient families contributed to the various theological perspectives that come to expression in the Bible.

Leo G. Perdue writes that in ancient Israel "the household was the theological lens, the ethical paradigm, the human context for understanding the character and activity of God and for living out moral responsibilities to others." Thus the "household" provided a crucial model or template for reflecting about God and God's relationship to God's people.

The authors of both volumes share the conviction that the meaning of biblical discourse about the family can be recovered only when one sees how that discourse functioned within specific social and cultural contexts. In keeping with this commitment, the two books employ biblical evidence in conjunction with archaeological findings, noncanonical texts and, in some cases, data from comparative ethnography to construct social descriptions of the family in premonarchic and monarchic Israel, second-temple Judaism and the early church.

The authors of *Families in Ancient Israel* do not obviously aim to be provocative or iconoclastic. Yet the work is full of findings that challenge current claims about the family. For example, the authors discuss the variety of forms of marriage that were accepted (sometimes even mandated) in ancient Israel, including polygamous unions, obligatory marriage of a rapist and his victim (Deut. 22:28-29), and levirate marriage (in which the next of kin must marry the wife of his dead, childless relative). Carol Meyers demonstrates the importance of child labor in Israel for households' economic survival. John Collins discusses the contractual view of marriage that prevailed in at least some sectors of second-temple Jewish society, as well as the ease and availability of divorce in that period.

*Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* falls into two parts. Part One describes the material and social environment of the Greco-Roman household. Topics include the architecture of actual, excavated houses (with diagrams and photographs) and how these spatial arrangements help us understand the emergence and functioning of house churches; cultural values pertaining to such matters as gender, family relationships, boundaries and meals; and laws and conventions regulating such diverse matters as the patron-client system, the actions and movements of women, marriage and divorce, education, the control of slaves, and family religion.

Part Two considers similar topics, but with a specific focus on early Christian beliefs and practices. The authors effectively demonstrate that Christians in the New Testament era and beyond were profoundly influenced by the social and cultural settings in which they found themselves. Sometimes Christians resisted or subverted conventional expectations (such as the expectations regarding the status of slaves, and attitudes about women); at other times Christians embraced "worldly" values (as, for example, in the unquestioning acceptance of slavery as an institution).

Osiek and Balch find it impossible to locate one single blueprint for the family in the New Testament or in any other early Christian writing. Rather, they stress the variability of views held by early Christians in different locations and times. In reading this second volume, as in considering its counterpart, one is often impressed by the social and cultural chasm that separates us from the authors and first readers of the ancient texts. The remarks on ancient medical and philosophical assumptions about femininity and sexual abstinence effectively draw attention to this stunning gap.

By no means do the authors of these two volumes suggest that the Bible is irrelevant to the current debate about the family. In fact, Perdue's final essay seeks to apply the lessons learned in previous chapters to the family today. But the authors are cautious about applying any particular passage to very different circumstances. In Perdue's words, "No ideal, absolutist theological or moral teaching exists that is equally valid for every Christian and Jewish community at all times in every situation." These books bring readers a vastly improved sense of how biblical discourse about families might have arisen, and how such discourse might have been understood by the authors and earliest readers of the ancient texts. But by showing how far distant we are from those authors and first readers, the studies also limit the applicability of the texts to the modern setting. (This is, of course, the dilemma posed by so much modern biblical criticism.)

The distinctive approach taken in these two volumes is apparent when one compares them to other recent works in the field. At one end of the spectrum, for example, are the articles in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway, 1991). The essays in this volume were written in explicit agreement with the "Danvers Statement," a document that affirms "the noble biblical vision of sexual complementarity." According to this "biblical vision," in the home the husband offers loving, humble headship and the wife offers intelligent, willing submission; in the church men exercise spiritual leadership and women observe specified limitations on their roles. The authors of the essays do not countenance the possibility that the biblical texts are themselves layered or in any way incompatible with one another.

Further, the authors offer no analysis of the social, cultural and material factors that may have determined the texture of everyday life in actual ancient families. The "biblical view of the family" here refers not to what real families may have looked

like in biblical times, but exclusively to God's eternally valid directives for how the family should be ordered. These directives are pulled from a select group of biblical passages (such as Gen. 1-3, 1 Cor. 11:2-16, 14:33b-36, Eph. 5:21-23 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15). Though the key texts are subjected to painstaking philological and grammatical scrutiny, "ancient culture" is mentioned only where the authors find it necessary to demonstrate that a particular directive continues as authoritative for the church (such as 1 Cor. 14:24, which means that "if women pray and prophesy in the church, they should do so under the authority of male headship") or may be safely dismissed as peculiarly suited to the first-century setting (as with 1 Cor. 11:5, which doesn't mean that women must actually wear veils/bind their hair, but only that "they should dress so that they retain their femininity").

As a second example, consider Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen's *Gender and Grace: Love, Work & Parenting in a Changing World* (InterVarsity, 1990). Van Leeuwen opposes the Danvers Statement, taking instead an egalitarian view of gender relations. While she does not assume that the Bible speaks with one voice, she does believe that one can identify "a framework of [scriptural] control beliefs about sex and gender." The "control beliefs" are derived by privileging certain biblical passages over others, which are then used as a standard against which to assess current theories produced by social science regarding sex and gender. Surprisingly, Van Leeuwen even uses this framework of control beliefs to relativize certain biblical teachings—for example, passages that would seem to advocate polygamy or that subordinate women.

In Van Leeuwen's reading, Pentecost marks the watershed between the chauvinistic Judaism of Jesus' contemporaries and the more enlightened world of Jesus and of the church (where "barriers between men and women come tumbling down"). A few other key texts are then arranged on a time line around this pivotal moment. Van Leeuwen is ostensibly interested in actual family-related beliefs and practices of Jesus, his contemporaries and members of the early church, but the picture she sketches of these beliefs and practices is based on a highly selective reading of the biblical texts which presumes rather than demonstrates their historical veracity.

As a final example, consider *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, by Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick (Baker, 1991). The Balswicks identify several general concepts that they regard as normative for the family. "The biblical perspective we have incorporated reflects broad theological truths woven throughout the Scriptures rather than specific proof texts. The

overarching biblical themes of covenant, grace, empowering and intimacy are the foundation of our theology of family relationships." Along similar lines, in his final essay in *Families in Ancient Israel*, Leo Perdue also emphasizes the fruitfulness of the concept of "covenant" in making a constructive statement about family relations among modern people of faith. But Perdue centers on the idea of covenant only after an elaborate demonstration of how that very concept was itself hammered out on the anvil of beliefs and practices governing family life or the "household" in ancient Israel. Balswick and Balswick make no pretense of representing what various biblical people actually said, thought and did. Rather, they intentionally base their notion of the centrality of covenant (and related concepts) on "an examination of biblical writings on how God enters into and sustains relationships with humanity."

What do people mean when they speak of the "biblical view" of the family-or of any other topic? This quick survey suggests that the expression "biblical view" (or "views") is shorthand for a set of complex assumptions that partially determine what one finds in the text. These assumptions pertain to such matters as the authorship of the Bible; the delineation and dating of its constituent parts; whether it offers a univocal message or varying points of view; whether the interpreter may legitimately select a particular concept (say, "covenant," "post-Pentecostal equality" or "male headship") or a particular passage and use it to control the biblical message, or must rather try to hear the (assumed) individual voices of scripture and interpret them against (scholarly constructions of) the social contexts out of which they arose. Given the many ways that one can answer these questions, there would seem to be little chance for the participants in the debate over the family ever to come to any kind of resolution or consensus.

We cannot agree on "the biblical view" because we cannot agree on how to read the Bible. But perhaps the quality and hence the fruitfulness of the debate will be improved by our becoming more aware of how our respective positions have been shaped by our prior assumptions. I, for one, am grateful to the authors of *Families in Ancient Israel* and *Families in the New Testament World* for their valuable clarity on these matters and for the substantiveness of their work.