

THE
E P I C
O F
E D E N

A Christian Entry into the Old Testament



SANDRA L. RICHTER



IVP Academic

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

CONTENTS

List of Figures and Tables	9
Acknowledgments	11
Abbreviations	13
Introduction: <i>The Dysfunctional Closet Syndrome</i>	15
1 The Bible as the Story of Redemption	21
2 The Bible in Real Time and Space	47
3 The Concept of Covenant: <i>The “General Law” That Holds Our Facts Together.</i>	69
4 God’s Original Intent	92
5 God’s Final Intent: <i>The New Jerusalem</i>	119
6 Noah and Abraham	137
7 Moses and the Tabernacle	166
8 David and the Monarchy	189
9 The New Covenant and the Return of the King	209
Frequently Asked Questions	225
<i>What Role Does the Law of Moses Play in the Christian’s Life?</i>	225
<i>What About Modern-Day Israel?</i>	229
Notes	234
Glossary	255
Scripture Index	260

INTRODUCTION

The Dysfunctional Closet Syndrome

THE BIBLE, IN ALL ITS PARTS, IS INTENDED to communicate to humanity the realities of redemption. Over the centuries, the church has stumbled when it has forgotten this truth, and has thereby, ironically, damaged the authority of the book from which it has drawn its life. Often the error has run in the direction of making this book less than it is—less than the inspired Word of God, less than the supernatural report of God’s doings throughout the ages, less than the definitive rule for faith and practice among those who believe. But just as often, the error has run in the other direction—attempting to make the Bible more than it is. Too often in our zeal for the worldwide influence of this book, we forget that it was not intended as an exhaustive ancient world history, or a guide to the biology and paleontology of creation, or even a handbook on social reform. We forget that this book was cast upon the waters of history with one very specific, completely essential and desperately necessary objective—to tell the epic tale of God’s ongoing quest to ransom his creation. And to, thereby, give each generation the opportunity to know his amazing grace. The Bible is the saga of Yahweh and Adam, the prodigal son and his ever gracious heavenly father; humanity in their rebellion and God in his grace. This narrative begins with Eden and does not conclude until the New Jerusalem is firmly in place. It is all one story. And if you are a believer, it is all your story.

So why is it that most laypeople struggle with the study of the Old Testament? Certainly they recognize that the Old Testament is Scripture, are intrigued by its stories and realize that there must be some significance to the first two-thirds of that leather-bound book they are lugging around. Yet if you talk to the typical layperson you will find that they have not been involved in any sort of intentional study of the Old Testament since . . . well, since they can't remember when. Nor can they remember the last time they heard a sermon on the Old Testament. Why is this? In my now many years of teaching the Bible, I've come to believe that the issues that keep the average New Testament believer from their Old Testament can be categorized under three headings. The first, and to me the most heartbreaking, is that most Christians have not been taught that the story of the Old Testament is their story. Rather, they have been encouraged to think that knowledge of the Old Testament is unnecessary to New Testament faith. Worse, many have been taught that the God of the Old Testament is somehow different from the God of the New; that unlike Christ, Yahweh is a God of judgment and wrath. So these folks stick with the part of redemption's story that seems to include them—the New Testament. The second set of issues that make the Old Testament less than accessible is what I have come to call the "great barrier." As the narrative of the Old Testament happened long, long ago and far, far away, it can be very challenging to get past the historical, linguistic, cultural and even geographical barriers that separate us from our ancestors in the faith. As a result, to the typical twenty-first-century Christian, the God of Israel seems foreign, his people strange. The third category, and perhaps the most challenging, is the one that has driven me to write this book. This is what I have coined "the dysfunctional closet syndrome."

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS YOUR STORY

Two-thirds of the story of redemption is known to Christians as the Old Testament. Yet in the decades that I have been teaching Bible, I have found that most Christians, if allowed to answer honestly, might be tempted to dub this section of the Bible the "unfortunate preface" to the part of the Bible that really matters. But the reality is that the Old Testament is the

bulk of redemptive history. And the church's lack of knowledge of their own heritage renders much of the wealth of the New Testament inaccessible to them. One of my dear friends and colleagues, Mary Fisher, refers to this widespread condition as a sort of Christian Alzheimer's disease. I realize that this is a painful metaphor for many of us, but it is, unfortunately, appropriate. The great tragedy of Alzheimer's disease is that it robs a person of themselves by robbing them of their memory of their experiences and relationships. Hence, an elderly woman with Alzheimer's can watch her own children walk through the door and need to ask their names. (As a mother, I cannot imagine the agony of such a state.) The church has a similar condition. Just as the Alzheimer's patient must ask the name of her own children, the church watches her ancestors walk through the door with a similar response. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are unknown and unnamed. The end result? The church does not know who she is, because she does not know who she was.

THE GREAT BARRIER

If our goal is to know our own story, then we first have to come to understand the characters who populate the Old Testament: who they were, where they lived, what was important to them. Hence, the first chapter of this book discusses culture, and the second chapter rehearses the story of redemption through the lenses of real space and time. For those who are still recovering from your junior high geography classes, it is only fair to warn you that there will be maps. But I promise you that the payoff will be well worth the pain. Ultimately my goal as regards the great barrier is to bring the heroes of the Old Testament into focus, such that you can see them as real people who lived in real places and struggled with real faith, just as you do. We are "Abraham's offspring" (Gal 3:29), and his story is our story. I will know that we have successfully navigated the great barrier when you can see your own rebellion in Adam's choice, recognize your own frailty in Abraham's doubting and hear the hope of your own salvation in Moses' cry: "Let my people go!"

THE DYSFUNCTIONAL CLOSET SYNDROME

Over the years I have served in an array of educational and ministry posi-

tions from youth to adults, the mission field to the local church, university students to seminarians and lots of steps in between. From “newbies” to doctoral students, I have found that the same ailment affects all of those who aspire to study the Old Testament. The ailment? The dysfunctional closet syndrome.

Everyone has a dysfunctional closet somewhere in their lives. A closet where Jabba the Hut could be living, and no one would know it. The closet is crammed full of clothes slipping from their hangers, accessories dangling from the shelves, shoes piled in disarray on the floor. It is impossible to tell where one item stops and the next begins. You can’t find anything; you can’t use anything. Perhaps you are one of those very “together” people who has reduced this syndrome in your life to a single cupboard or junk drawer, perhaps a kids’ toy chest. But even here, where the twine from last year’s Christmas project has permanently entangled itself around the leftover hardware from the kitchen makeover, a person of average courage abandons the quest, closes the door (or drawer or cupboard) and says, “Maybe next summer I’ll sort that out.”

It has been my experience that the average Christian’s knowledge of the Old Testament is much the same. Dozens of stories, characters, dates and place names. Years of diligent acquisition. Yet these acquisitions all lie in a jumble on the metaphorical floor. A great deal of information is in there, but as none of it goes together, the reader doesn’t know how to use any of it. Rather, just like the dysfunctional closet, the dates, names and narratives lie in an inaccessible heap. Thus the information is too difficult, or too confusing, to use. So the typical student of the Old Testament closes the door and says, “Maybe next summer I’ll sort that out.”

Let me offer a personal example—my closet in college. And let me begin by confessing that I have not always been the completely together person I am today. Rather, the clothes that belonged in my closet abandoned their hangers and hooks early on in my college career, such that my room was essentially a heap. So bad was my college dorm room that in desperation my resident assistant finally took pictures and posted them on the lounge bulletin board hoping to humiliate me into reform. A valiant effort, but not an effective one. The result of my dysfunctional closet? Not only did I often look less than “fresh” when I ventured forth onto campus,

but even when I made every attempt to plan ahead, I honestly could not find the pieces that went together to form a respectable outfit. And as my college had a dress code (and a 7:45 a.m. chapel!) this situation often resulted in crisis. The crisis? Either I would be forced to give up on the outfit I was attempting to wear, or I had to invest an outrageous amount of time finding the pieces that went together. As I was not exactly a morning person, the typical outcome was that I would rewear whatever clothes I found on the top of the pile. Did I mention that I often looked less than fresh?

Why do I tell you this less-than-flattering story? In my experience this is how most laypeople (and many preachers) handle the Old Testament. Their closet is a mess, and even with a significant time commitment, they cannot put the pieces together. Thus they wind up either spending an outrageous amount of time putting together an Old Testament study (or sermon), or they wind up with one or two texts or stories with which they feel comfortable and ignore the rest (i.e., the clothes on the top of the pile). The end result is that most decide that the Old Testament is just too hard and give their attention to the New Testament where there is some hope of memorizing the characters, places and dates. And all this is in spite of the fact that most Christians are hungry to understand their Old Testament heritage.

My goal in writing this book, therefore, is to deal a mortal blow to the dysfunctional closet syndrome. I am convinced that the key to the problem described above is order. Until a believer is able to organize what they know about the Old Testament meaningfully, they cannot use it. An appropriate quotation whose source I have lost over the years says this: “Facts are stupid things until brought into connection with some general law.”

So my goal in this book is to provide structure. Metaphorically speaking, to pick the clothes up off the floor, get some hangers, a pole and some hooks, and help you build a closet of your very own. You already have many (possibly most) of the facts you need; I am going to give you a place to hang them. How will we accomplish this? By identifying a “general law” that gives order to the whole, and then by rearranging the contents of your closet accordingly. And rather than doing what folks have been doing for centuries—attempting to impose their own paradigm upon the

text—we will attempt instead to discover the paradigm *within* the text. Contrary to popular opinion, the Old Testament is not a hodgepodge of unrelated materials thrown together by some late, uninformed redactor. Nor has it come to us as the result of an empty-headed secretary copying down verbatim some mysterious message. No, the Old Testament writers were themselves theologians, and, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have written for us a carefully formatted and focused piece of literature in which there exists an intentional, theological structure. Our goal, therefore, is to discover that structure (our closet) and to hang our facts within it. Essentially, our goal is to discover and employ a biblical theological hermeneutic.

How are we going to accomplish this? We have some hard work to do. First, we need to get past the great barrier that divides us from them—the chasm resulting from millennia of linguistic, cultural and historical changes. Then we must begin to put the book “in order” so that you, the New Testament believer, will be able to get a handle on your Old Testament heritage. When we are done, it is my heart’s cry that the story of the Old Testament will come alive to you such that you will recognize your own story in the sweeping epic of redemption. More important, my hope is that you will come to know the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who delivered the children of Abraham from the slavery of Egypt and has delivered you as well.*

*The text of this book is designed for the layperson and should be easily understood by most with little assistance. The endnotes, however, are designed for the student who wants to go further. Often I will offer a reference to an easily accessible help, as well as one to more complex and technical materials. Enjoy!

THE BIBLE AS THE STORY OF REDEMPTION

OUR OBJECTIVE AS CHRISTIANS IS TO UNDERSTAND the story of redemption, the Bible. More than anything else, we want to hear the words of the biblical writers as they were intended and claim their epic saga as our own. To accomplish this, we need to get past the great barrier—that chasm of history, language and culture that separates us from our heroes in the faith. In this first chapter we take our first step across the great barrier by addressing what I believe is the most profound distinction between “us” and “them”: culture.

Regarding the average human’s awareness of their own culture, career anthropologist Darrell Whiteman has said that “it is scarcely a fish who would discover water.”¹ This is a reliable statement. Humans, rather than recognizing the trappings of their own culture (and that their culture may in fact be very different from someone else’s), tend to assume that other societies are just like their own. This is known as *ethnocentrism* and is a human perspective that is as old as the hills. As regards the Christian approach to the Old Testament, consider for example the standard depiction of Jesus in sacred Western art. Jesus is repeatedly portrayed as a pale, thin, white man with dirty blond hair and blue (sometimes green) eyes. His fingers are long and delicate, his body frail and unmuscled. Mary is usually presented as a blond. In medieval art, the disciples may be found in an array of attire that would have rendered them completely anomalous

(and ridiculous) in their home towns. I am reminded of the famous “sacred heart of Jesus” image in which Jesus is, again, frail, pale, light-haired and green-eyed, and Marsani’s *Gethsemane* in which the red highlights of Jesus’ hair glow in the light from above, while his piano-player hands are clasped in desperate prayer. These portrayals are standard in spite of the fact that we are all fully aware that Jesus was a Semite and his occupation was manual labor. So shouldn’t we expect a dark-haired man with equally dark eyes? Certainly his skin would have been Mediterranean in tone and tanned by three years of constant exposure to the Galilean sun. His hands would have been rough, probably scarred, definitely calloused; his frame short, stocky and well-muscled. So why is he presented in Christian art as a pale, skinny, white guy? Because the people painting him were pale, skinny, white guys! We naturally see Jesus as “one of us” and portray him accordingly. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, our close association with the characters of redemptive history allows us to see ourselves in their story. And this is as God would have it. But to truly *understand* their story, we need to step back and allow their voices to be heard in the timbre in which they first spoke. We need to do our best to see their world through their eyes.

The flip side of ethnocentrism is a second tendency I have come to speak of as “canonizing culture.” This is the unspoken (and usually unconscious) presupposition that the norms of *my* culture are somehow superior to the norms of someone else’s. Like ethnocentrism, this tendency is also as old as the human race. And in case you are tempted to think that the members of your culture have evolved past these sorts of presuppositions, let me counter for a moment. As an American, I spent most of my life simply assuming that democracy was somehow morally superior to monarchy, that bureaucratic cultures were more sophisticated than tribal cultures and that egalitarian relationships were more “advanced” than patriarchal. Why? Because these are the norms of my culture and I naturally saw them as “better than” the norms of others’. In fact, until challenged, I would have been hard-pressed to even *separate* the norms of my culture from my values or beliefs. Consider, for example, the early European and American missionaries who wound up exporting not only the gospel but Western culture as they spread across the globe. The New England missionaries to

Hawaii are an example made famous by James Michener's novel *Hawaii*.² Here, as the Hawaiians converted to Christianity, they were subsequently also converted to the high-collared, long-sleeved, long-skirted uniforms of the missionaries. Petticoats and suit jackets for a seagoing people living in an island paradise! Why? Because these valiant missionaries were unaware of the distinction between the message of the gospel and their own cultural norms. They had "canonized" their own culture such that they saw their Western dress code as part and parcel of a Christian lifestyle. For the same reason, my senior pastor back in the 1980s would not allow my youth group to listen to Amy Grant or Petra. As their youth leader, I was instructed that if the kids wanted to listen to contemporary Christian music, they could listen to Sandi Patty. Why? It had nothing to do with the message or lifestyle of the respective musicians (my senior pastor did not actually know much about Amy Grant or Petra . . . or Sandi Patty for that matter). It was because Sandi Patty sang slowly, she sang soprano and she had no drums in her accompaniment. In the mind of my senior pastor, her music was "holier" than her more percussion-driven contemporaries because it was similar to the music of his youth and the music that inspired him to faith. My senior pastor, like most of us, was having trouble separating culture from content. But history proves to us that it is impossible to diagnose any human culture as fully "holy" or "unholy." Human culture is always a mixed bag; some more mixed than others. And *every* culture must ultimately respond to the critique of the gospel.

As we open the Bible, however, we find that the God of history has chosen to reveal himself through a specific human culture. To be more accurate, he chose to reveal himself in several incarnations of the same culture. And, as the evolving cultural norms of Israel were not without flaw (rather, as above, there was a mixture of the good, the bad and the ugly), God did not *canonize* Israel's culture. Rather, he simply used that culture as a vehicle through which to communicate the eternal truth of his character and his will for humanity. We should not be about the business of canonizing the culture of ancient Israel, either. But if we are going to understand the content of redemptive history, the merchandise that is the truth of redemption, we will need to understand the vehicle (i.e., the culture) through which it was communicated. Thus the study of the Old

Testament becomes a cross-cultural endeavor. If we are going to understand the intent of the biblical authors, we will need to see their world the way they did.

THE WORD REDEMPTION

But even as we attempt this first step of our journey into the Old Testament, we crash into the great barrier because the very term *redemption* is culturally conditioned. It had culturally-specific content that we as modern readers have mostly missed. In fact, *redemption* is one of several words I have come to refer to as “Biblish”—a word that comes from the Bible, is in English, but has been so over-used by the Christian community that it has become gibberish. So let’s begin our crosscultural journey with this word: What does the word *redemption* mean, and where did the church get it? The first answer to that question is obvious; the term comes from the New Testament.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for He has visited us and accomplished *redemption* for His people.
(Lk 1:68)

Knowing that you were not *redeemed* with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.
(1 Pet 1:18-19)

Christ *redeemed* us from the curse of the Law. (Gal 3:13)

Okay, so the word comes from our New Testament, but what does it mean? And where did the New Testament writers get it? A short survey of the Bible demonstrates that the New Testament writers got the word from the *Old* Testament writers. The prophet Isaiah declares,

But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, “Do not fear, for I have *redeemed* you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!” (Is 43:1)

And where did the Old Testament writers get the word? Contrary to what we might assume, they did not lift it from a theological context. Rather, this word and the concepts associated with it emerged from the

everyday, secular vocabulary of ancient Israel. “To redeem” (Hebrew *gāʾal*) in its first associations had nothing to do with theology, but everything to do with the laws and social customs of the ancient tribal society of which the Hebrews were a part. Thus if we are to understand the term—and what the Old Testament writers intended when they applied it to Israel’s relationship with Yahweh—we will need to understand the society from which the word came.

ISRAEL’S TRIBAL CULTURE

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.”³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ In other words, the layers of society form in ever broader 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

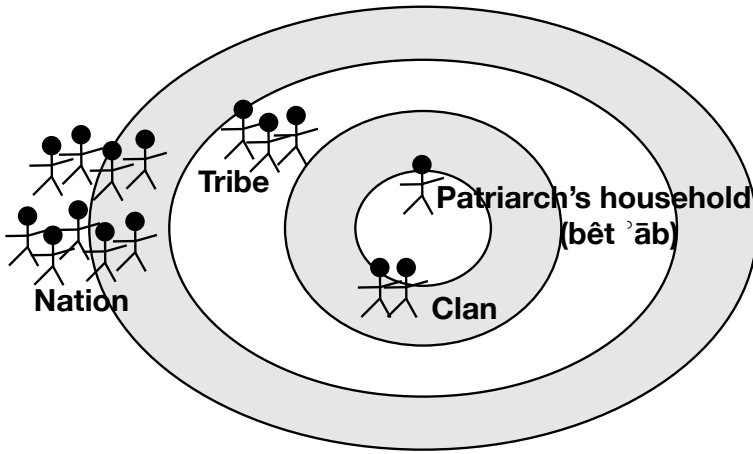


Figure 1.1. Israelite society

their place within society through the lens of their patriarch’s household first, then their clan or lineage,⁶ then their tribe and finally the nation.⁷ 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 *bêt ’āb*. 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.

In this patriarchal society when a man married he remained in the household, but when a woman married she joined the *bêt ’āb* 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 *bêt ’āb* could include as many as three generations, up to thirty persons.⁸ 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.⁹ This extended family shared their resources and their fate.¹⁰ And those who found themselves without a *bêt ’āb* (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 *bêṭ 'āb* 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 *bêṭ 'āb* 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 *bêṭ 'āb* to administer justice.¹¹ 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 *bêṭ 'āb* 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 Terah migrates to the city of Haran, he takes Lot with him. When Terah dies, Abram, the eldest, becomes the head of the

bêt ʿāb 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 *bêt ʿāb* becomes two.¹²

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 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).¹³ 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 *bêṭ ʾāb*. 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 'āb*. 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 *bêṯ 'āb* 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 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 *bêt 'āb* 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)

"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.¹⁵ 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 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).¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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 make-up of the *bêt ʿāb* 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 ʿāb*.

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.¹⁸

The individual dwelling units of the Israelite *bêt ʿāb* 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 Cape” of the average Isra-

elite 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/

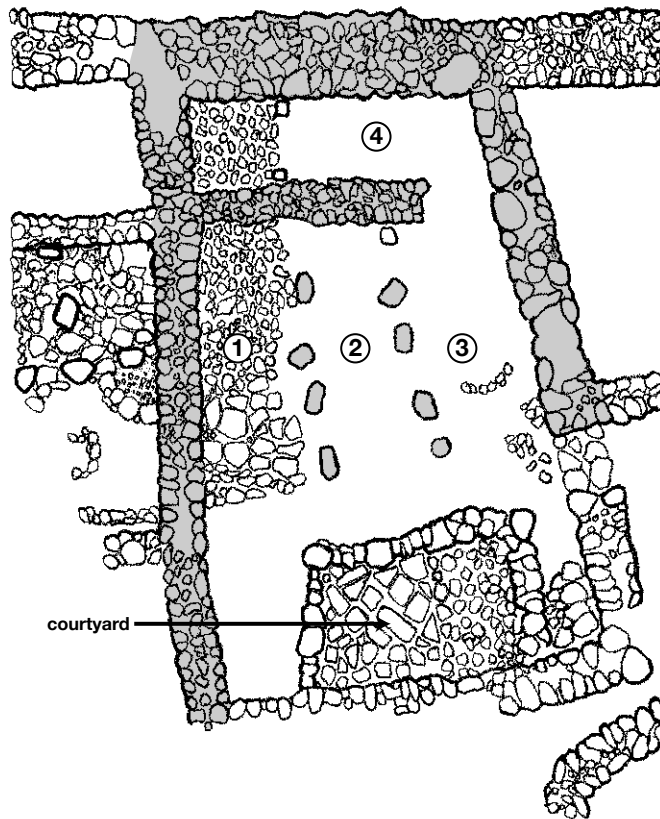


Figure 1.2. Footprint of the Israelite four-room pillared house (Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project excavations at Tall-al-'Umayri, Jordan)

or village.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

Notice that this typical Israelite home has two stories, each of which has three long rooms delineated by rows of pillars,²¹ and a long room

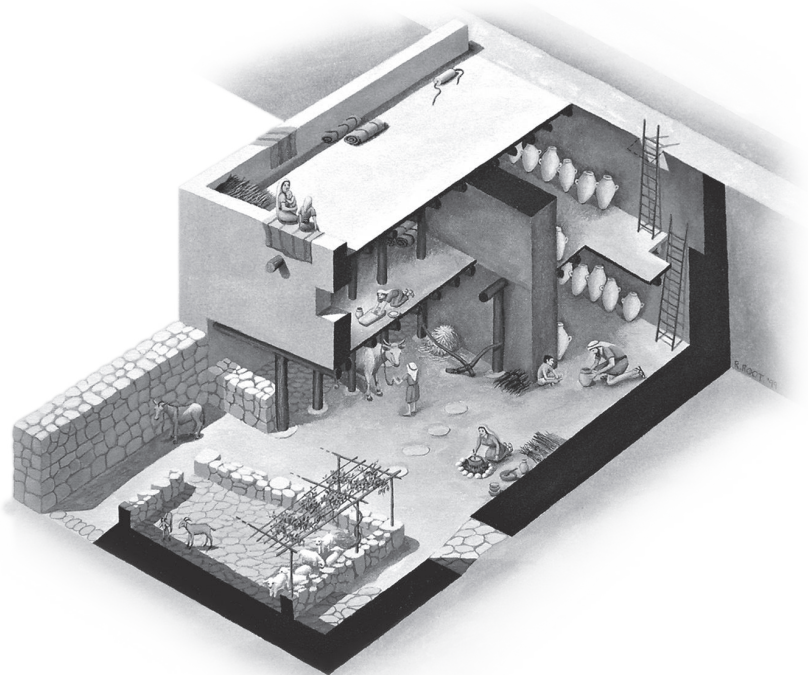


Figure 1.3. Israelite four-room pillared house (Courtesy of the Madaba Plains Project excavations at Tall-al-'Umayri, Jordan. Artist: Rhonda Root ©2001)

which spanned the back of the house. The house was constructed of a mixture of field stone and mud brick, sealed and plastered.²² 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).²³ 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.²⁴ 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).²⁵

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.²⁶ 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, Rebecca, 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—the family buried on a plot of ground owned that plot of ground.²⁷ 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 *bēt ’āb* 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 'āb. 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."

JESUS AND PATRILOCAL CULTURE: JOHN 14:1-2

The basic patrilocality of Israelite culture and the concept of the family compound survived into New Testament times and serves as a backdrop to many of Jesus' stories and teachings. Consider John 14:1-2. Part of Jesus' "Farewell Discourses," the scene is a private one—Jesus' closest friends have gathered for one last meal together. Just after the meal, Jesus begins telling his disciples about his impending departure and the troubles that will follow. Of course, the disciples are confused and upset. Peter asks the question on everyone's heart: "Where are you going . . . and can we go with you?" (Jn 13:36-37). Jesus responds as follows:

Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places,²⁸ if it were not so I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. (Jn 14:1-3)

Did you notice Jesus' vocabulary? "In my *father's house* there are many *dwelling places*." For generations we in the West have imposed our cultural lens upon this passage such that we have whole songs dedicated to the "mansion up over the hilltop" that is awaiting us in heaven. But what Jesus is saying to his disciples and to us is so far superior to the objectives of a consumer culture that it takes my breath away—our ultimate destination as the newly adopted children of the Father is the family compound! And Jesus, the firstborn of his Father's household, is going back to heaven to get your four-room pillared house ready. Why? "So that where I am, there you may be also." The goal of redemption is not a marbled mansion, but reincorporation into the *bêit 'āb* of our heavenly Father.

In sum, in Israel's earliest culture the tribe and the family were the most important and influential elements of society. Within this tribal system the oldest, closest living male relative held the greatest authority in one's life and the greatest responsibility for one's well-being. And although their culture morphed over the generations with the effects of urbanism, exile, Hellenism, etc., this basic value system endured.

REDEMPTION IN THE BIBLE

So now for the question most central to our chapter: how do these insights into Israelite culture help us in our quest to understand the term *redemption*? As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, whereas we the church have adopted the word redemption from the biblical writers, they adopted it from their everyday, secular world. And rather than entering biblical vocabulary as a theological term as we might expect, the word and concept of redemption actually entered the Bible through the laws and mores of Israel's patriarchal, tribal culture. Specifically, the idea of redemption was intrinsically linked to the familial responsibilities of a patriarch to his clan.

Ruth and Boaz. Consider the story of Ruth and Boaz recorded in the book of Ruth. During the era of the judges, an Israelite woman named Naomi marries a certain Bethlehemite named Elimelech to whom she bears two sons. In her world, Naomi was a blessed woman—a husband and two sons! A local famine, however, prompts Elimelech to abandon their patrimonial estate and relocate to Moab (a neighboring country just across the Jordan River). While in Moab, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi a widow. This is a grievous event for Naomi, but not a disastrous one as she still has two healthy sons, who subsequently take Moabite women as wives. Naomi's world is stable. Her husband is dead, but her two adult sons are married and the hope of grandchildren (and thus the continuation of her *bêt 'āb*) cannot be far off. But ten years pass and there are no children. Far worse, the men die. Naomi is left far from the patrimony of her husband's family, with no husband, no sons and no grandchildren. In the Israelite mind this family has become an “un-family,” and this woman is in dire straits.

Naomi chooses the only course of action left to her, to return to Bethlehem with the hope that a family member will take her in. So she instructs her daughters-in-law to return to their households of origin,²⁹ hoping that they will find the opportunity to marry again, bear children and secure their own futures. Weeping, the girls beg to stay with her, but knowing that she has nothing to offer them, Naomi says,

Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my

womb, that they may be your husbands? Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? (Ruth 1:11-13)

Without some knowledge of Israel's tribal culture, the reader would have absolutely no idea what Naomi is talking about. But knowing something about patrilinealism, it is obvious that what Naomi is referring to is the levirate law of Deuteronomy 25:5-10. Naomi is reminding her daughters-in-law that she has no means by which to provide for them. She has no sons, and she is too old to have more. And even if by some miracle she found a husband and conceived that very night, would her daughters-in-law wait the twenty-plus years it would take for these unborn sons to come to maturity? Of course not.

No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me. And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. (Ruth 1:13-14)

Naomi again instructs Ruth to take the prudent road and follow her sister-in-law. There was no shame in leaving Naomi; they all knew that. But Ruth, as an attestation of her remarkable character, refuses:

Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. (Ruth 1:16-17)

We often hear Ruth's words quoted in marriage ceremonies—which is in some ways appropriate—but these words are in reality plainspoken statements of tribal solidarity. Ruth is announcing that her tribal affiliation is with Naomi. Regardless of the patrilineal mores of their society, Ruth has chosen Naomi as her kin, and she's not leaving.

So the women return to Bethlehem. Here Ruth takes advantage of the local gleaning laws to support them, and her diligent work ethic and tender care for her widowed mother-in-law earn her the attention and kindness of a certain local landowner. Note the subtle aside of the narrator regarding this wealthy (and surely handsome) man: "Boaz, who was of the family

[lineage or clan] of Elimelech” (Ruth 2:3). “Aha,” the reader says, “I wonder how Boaz will play into all this?” When Ruth returns from her work, she tells Naomi of Boaz’s kindness and Naomi responds excitedly, telling Ruth that this man is “one of our relatives,” in fact, “he is one of our closest relatives” (Ruth 2:20). At last we begin to see the secular origins of our term. As the story reaches its climax, Naomi instructs Ruth to carry out a daring (and in her day, risqué) plot. Under the cover of darkness, far from town in the harvest fields, after Boaz had enjoyed his fill of wine, a dressed and perfumed Ruth places herself at the sleeping man’s feet. The audience is well aware that this is the ideal setting for seduction and sin, and the question in everyone’s mind is if Ruth and Boaz are indeed the people of excellence that we have been told they are. Apparently, the answer to that question is yes because rather than the sordid scene we expect, Ruth uses this moment to ask Boaz to “redeem” her. Not only does Boaz generously agree to do all she asks, concerned for her safety and reputation, he sends her home before dawn with a wealth of grain for her mother-in-law.

So what are the practical expressions of Boaz agreeing to redeem this young woman? As the story unfolds, we see that “to redeem” in this situation means that Boaz will marry Ruth, buy back the patrimony of her deceased husband (cf. the inalienable land law of Lev 25), take both Ruth and Naomi into his household, and father a child in Mahlon’s name, thereby giving Elimelech an heir to whom the family inheritance will pass (cf. the levirate law of Deut 25). We also learn in chapter four that a relative closer in kinship refuses to do this for Ruth “because I would jeopardize my own inheritance” (Ruth 4:6). This exchange makes it obvious that what Boaz was asked to do was costly. His generous actions put his own resources on the line. But in his integrity, Boaz chooses to embrace the responsibility of a patriarch and become Ruth’s *gō’ēl*—her “kinsman-redeemer.”

From this story we learn that the tribal law of “redemption” had to do with a patriarch rescuing a family member who, due to crippling life circumstances, had been lost to the kinship circle, to protect their legal rights. The law demanded that the patriarch protect the individual’s legal rights and resolve her debts. Here is a reconciliation of family ties that costs the redeemer. And it is the oldest, closest male relative to whom one looks for help and hope.

Lot and Abraham. A second story illustrating the expectations of tribal law is found in Genesis 14. Lot and Abraham have parted company, and Lot's newly formed *bēt 'āb* is residing in the Jordan Valley, in close proximity to the urban centers of Sodom and Gomorrah. A coalition of kings from Mesopotamia invades the region, and in the process of looting Sodom, takes Lot and his household captive (most likely in order to sell them as slaves). But one of the populace escapes and hurries to Hebron to report to Abraham that a member of his clan has been taken as a prisoner of war. Immediately, Abraham musters the local sheiks as well as the men of his own household to pursue his brother's son. (In case you are picturing a band of ten or twelve, note that there were 318 "trained men" born in Abraham's household [Gen 14:14].) So, Abraham pursues the forces of the eastern kings past the northern boundaries of Canaan (i.e., past the city of Dan), defeats the invaders and rescues his relative and his relative's possessions. Does Abraham do these things simply because he is a good man? Yes and no. Yes, Abraham was a good man, but more significant to our discussion are the mores embedded in his society. A patriarch had responsibilities. If a member of his lineage found himself in need of ransom or rescue, as had Lot, that patriarch was expected to do something about it. So Abraham puts his own household on the line, his own life on the line, in order to rescue his brother's son from a strong enemy against whom he had no defense. This is another expression of "redemption" in Israel's world.

Gomer and Hosea. A final biblical illustration comes from the story of the prophet Hosea and his wayward wife, Gomer. Hosea was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel and had the unenviable privilege of being commissioned by Yahweh to live his life as an ongoing visual aid of Yahweh's relationship with Israel. Thus we are introduced to Hosea when he is instructed to "take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the LORD" (Hos 1:2). Whether Gomer was a woman with a reputation for promiscuous behavior or a woman professionally employed as a prostitute has been hotly debated over the years.³⁰ But regardless of how Gomer earned her reputation, we are left with the tale of a local holy man heading down to the "other side" of the tracks (quite possibly the local brothel) to pick

out a wife. Pause for a moment to picture this scene. These little Israelite villages rarely numbered more than 250 people. The trip alone would have made the morning gossip column. The fact that this *prophet* returned with a *bride* . . . ? Can you imagine the scuttlebutt in Hosea's village, and the emotions swirling around his soul as he began his life as the husband of a woman he knew had been available to his neighbors . . . possibly for hire? From start to finish, this is a story that grates upon the soul.

And what of Gomer's perspective in all of this? I can assure you that no ten-year-old girl from any culture in any era wakes up one morning and says, "I want to grow up to be a prostitute." Nor have I ever met a young woman who *wanted* the reputation of "tramp." Rather, there must have been some agony in Gomer's history or that of her family that had left this girl in a very bad place. And in Israel's tribal culture, that agony would be ongoing. Gomer had no *bêt 'āb*. As a woman with a sexual past, she would never have a husband. And whatever children she might bear would be shunned forever by her community. This is Gomer's fate. But then one morning a miracle happens. Hosea, a man of stature and means, asks her to be his wife. Can you imagine the reversal this represented for Gomer? This woman with a past became a woman with a future. Then, blessed be Yahweh, she conceives, and the child that opens her womb is a son! And then she conceives again and again—three children. Gomer's life is transformed, and her world filled with good things.

But chapter two makes it clear that the brokenness of Gomer's soul was not so easily fixed. Rather, this young woman who had gone from nothing to everything repeats the crimes of her past. Consider Hosea's anger and humiliation when he finds that his wife is cheating on him, that in her mind a life of promiscuity is superior to life as his wife (Hos 2:12; 3:1). Although the Bible reports these things in a very restrained fashion, by the opening verses of chapter three it is clear that Gomer is bouncing off of rock bottom, and Hosea's heart is broken. Whereas she had previously enjoyed some measure of income and autonomy, now Gomer is up for sale. Apparently she is now being forced into slavery, auctioned off in the city gate.

So God speaks to Hosea again. "Go and buy her back" (Hos 3:1).³¹ Think again of who Hosea is—a holy man in a small town. Think again of what he has given Gomer—a home, children, his bed and probably his

heart. And now Hosea finds himself in the public square, in the presence of his neighbors, bidding on the mother of his children . . . his *wife*. “Fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a half of barley” for his wife (Hos 3:2). This is “redemption.”³²

CONCLUSIONS

So now we have come full circle and are ready to define the word redemption. We are also ready to understand why this word was chosen by the Old Testament writers to describe Yahweh’s relationship with his people. In Israel’s tribal society redemption was the act of a patriarch who put his own resources on the line to ransom a family member who had been driven to the margins of society by poverty, who had been seized by an enemy against whom he had no defense, who found themselves enslaved by the consequences of a faithless life. Redemption was the means by which a lost family member was restored to a place of security within the kinship circle. This was a patriarch’s responsibility, this was the safety net of Israel’s society, and this is the backdrop for the epic of Eden in which we New Testament believers find ourselves.

Can you hear the metaphor of Scripture? Yahweh is presenting himself as the patriarch of the clan who has announced his intent to redeem his lost family members. Not only has he agreed to pay whatever ransom is required, but he has sent the most cherished member of his household to accomplish his intent—his firstborn son. And not only is the firstborn coming to seek and save the lost, but he is coming to share his inheritance with these who have squandered everything they have been given. His goal? To restore the lost family members to the *bêt ’āb* so that where he is, they may be also. This is why we speak of each other as *brother* and *sister*, why we know God as *Father*, why we call ourselves *the household of faith*. God is beyond human gender and our relationship to him beyond blood, but the tale of redemptive history comes to us in the language of a patriarchal society. Father God is buying back his lost children by sending his eldest son, his heir, to “give His life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28), so that we the alienated might be “adopted as sons” and share forever in the inheritance of this “firstborn of all creation.”

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (Col 1:13-15)

Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. (1 Pet 1:18-19)