

Review of Cynthia R. Chapman, *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry*

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Chapman's meticulously researched monograph is astutely focused on concise research questions (18) and investigates the complex structure of biblical "houses;" more especially, the "nested" family sub-units marked by women and maternally identified kin. It combines careful examination of select biblical Hebrew lexemes and passages, comparative illumination from Ugaritic, Akkadian and (much more peripherally) Egyptian texts and anthropological scholarship. The result is beautifully crafted and persuasive.

The introduction provides a nuanced overview of kinship studies in the academic contexts of both biblical studies and cultural anthropology. This takes into account also important developments and turning points within these fields. Chapman also demonstrates how a "male-favouring society" (8) is not in contradiction with a society in which maternal ties are central to "internal and multi-group hierarchies" (11). She uses ethnographic data both for illumination of biblical texts and to "remove cultural blinders" (15) without either falling into the referential fallacy – that is, without claiming that these data provide "a direct window into the lives, values, and beliefs of average ancient Israelites from a particular time period" (12–13) – or drawing over-stated conclusions, e.g. that centrality of maternal houses is an indication of matriarchy (cf. Reed 1975).¹

Chapter one contains a careful and full examination of the word *bayit* ("house") and explains also related terms that construct a patrilineal ideal and dogma (28), as exemplified by the expression *bet 'av* ("house of the father"). In accordance with this ideal, select descendants are depicted as tracing their "begetting" directly to a founding father. Hence, following the typical *toledot*, or "(patrilineal) genealogy" pattern, Isaac, for instance, is identified as a son of Abraham.

Next, the kinship ties forged through women are fully explored, and Chapman demonstrates persuasively that, in the Hebrew Bible, inheritance is not conceived of in monogenetic terms. Reference to Joseph's good looks, for example, echoes praise of his mother's appearance (45). Joseph may have been begotten by Jacob but his mother is also formative and significant. Not only are mothers and offspring closely associated, so are uterine siblings who share a mother. Where a

¹ Reed's important monograph uses social anthropology to build a case for social evolution from small-scale matrilineal societies of women and children to patriarchal societies that subjugate women. Reed is careful to state that "matriarchal" is not to be understood in Utopian terms (xviii) and specifies that she is using the term to refer to communities that excluded rather than subjugated men. She also refers, however, to belief in women's superior magic in these matriarchal communities (108), suggesting hierarchy. Chapman is considerably more circumspect, nuancing rather than rejecting the notion of "patriarchy."

man has children with several women, hierarchies emerge. The book contains a number of very effective diagrams to illustrate in striking and accessible ways these various complex kinship structures.

Chapter two explores fully the four biblical references to the house of a mother, which constitute "a social and special subunit" of a uterine family "distinct within yet supportive of the house of the father upon which it depends" (51). This investigation, much of it focused on Song of Songs, where two of the four references are located, again confirms the significance of uterine siblings: hence, it is brothers who are sons of the same mother who act as protectors of the woman in this biblical book. At this juncture some discussion of the classical sources and of such vocabulary as *homomatrioi* and *homopatrioi* (Greek for "same mother" and "same father") would have been apt but – to be fair – Chapman's book is already multifaceted and does provide a wealth of analogies from Ugaritic and Akkadian literature.

Chapter three develops the theme of gendered space, closely focusing on the mother's house as a physical and symbolic entity, with careful analysis of the words *heder*, "chamber," and *'ohel*, "tent," and their association with female sexual activity. One scholarly text with which I was missing engagement in this discussion is Christopher Meredith's subtle analysis of Song of Songs (2013), informed as it is by theory of space and gender. Again, however, no one book can do it all.

Chapter four focuses yet more closely on the important bond between uterine siblings, exploring closely the stories of Dinah's and of Tamar's rape. Dinah's full brothers Simeon and Levi lead the revenge for her dishonour. Similarly, Absalom, the full brother of Tamar is distinguished from Amnon, their half brother, and it is he who champions vengeance for his sister's rape.

Chapters five and six continue to explore uterine bonds and hone in on Hebrew vocabulary for "womb" and "breasts." For me these were the strongest chapters in a consistently stimulating and engaging book. The preceding chapters built a careful foundation for this truly compelling analysis of Jacob and Esau's relationship, as well as of "milk kinship," or the transmission of ethnicity and status through breast milk. I completely agree with Chapman that most of biblical scholarship has "a blind spot" when it comes to the tremendous significance of breast milk and nursing. Chapman's reading of biblical texts in the light of anthropological data reveals this to the full, and her section on the relevance of Sarah's nursing of Isaac was a revelation for me and utterly compelling (138–41).

Chapter seven analyses carefully the references to *peter rehem* ("womb opening"), which again acknowledge that both a father's and a mother's firstborn have honorific status as house establishers. Chapter eight examines allegiance to the father's versus the mother's house, and the final chapter extends the significance of houses from the domestic to the national scale.

I have tremendous admiration for this book. I admire the attention to detail and the deft way extremely complex matters are examined at the micro and macro scale. While much of this book covers an area in which I have conducted extensive research, I learned much that was new to me. The book is thorough in its treatment of kinship themes in the Hebrew Bible, engagingly written and beautifully crafted, leading the reader from the familiar to the less familiar and navigating a number of sub-disciplines (Hebrew semantics, comparison with Akkadian and Ugaritic texts, archaeology, cultural anthropology) with remarkable

authority and dexterity. I also want to commend the spirit of collegiality and scholarly goodness that shines through. Chapman is respectful when disagreeing with scholars and generous in her attribution of ideas – acknowledging throughout how graduate students and colleagues inspired or guided her development of ideas.

The only matters I would like to see improved or changed have to do with editing and design. The index is incomplete and numerous references to authors are missing (e.g. Milgrom and Noth are mentioned in the text but not in the index; Brenner is mentioned more often in the text than is indicated in the index). I would also have found a separate subject index and author index helpful. Another tool to which I would have liked access is a full bibliography at the end of the text – not only bibliographic references in endnotes. I mention this above all because the book provides such a wealth of valuable information and such tools would ensure better utility and functionality. None of this detracts from my admiration for the book's thesis. This is a book I will recommend widely and to which I will return often.

Bibliography

Meredith, Christopher. 2013. *Journeys in the Songspace: Space and the Song of Songs*. Sheffield: Phoenix.

Reed, Evelyn. 1975. *Women's Evolution: From matriarchal clan to patriarchal family*. Atlanta: Pathfinder Press.



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