Family and households in the Old Testament
A brief overview

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Families and households from creation to exile
The 'house of the father'

Families and family talk are ubiquitous in the Old Testament: right from the start of Genesis, we see bonds between people emerging and forming kinship networks, and we follow the lives of people linked by shared lives, shared blood and shared destinies. The people of God are often called children or sons of God, and family lines and linked generations form an integral part of the story. And yet, for all its presence in the story and laws of Israel, the 'family' is not an easy concept to pin down. First, there is no Hebrew term that neatly maps against our current English word for family. Rather, there are clusters of related terms that denote links between people and group, in ways analogous but not identical to contemporary families.

The main term related to families is '*beth-av*', the house of the father: in practical terms, the *beth-av* was a male-headed, multigenerational household which functioned as a basic kinship unit – though its composition was not limited by blood or strict family relationships but could include servants, prisoners of war and occasionally 'aliens': 'the core of the compound family was an elementary unity of a senior family (spousal pair) extended downwards (children and grandchildren), with the middle generation extended laterally (siblings and their spouses). In other words, this pattern consisted of all living persons, with the exception of married females, who were descended from a person (and his spouse) still living. This basic set of kin was no doubt augmented at one or more levels by more distant kin, whose own family groups may have met disaster through disease or economic failure. Military captives, transients (sojourners), and supplementary workers, indentured from other families, may also have been included in the compound family' (Meyers 1997:17). Metaphorically, the 'house of the father' represented a place of interconnection between an individual and their kin, both

horizontally (at the present time) and throughout generations (those who came before and those yet to be born). As such, its meaning went far beyond a descriptor of social organisation and functioned as an essential marker of social, economic, religious and political positioning. The *beth-av* was then part of a wider unity, the *mishpahat*, sometimes translated as clan. This was a grouping of several households often living in close vicinity; a group of clans then formed a tribe (*shevet*), and the tribes then form the whole of Israel. Families or households are therefore not discreet units but rather part of a much broader tapestry of interdependent relationships. The *beth-av* has a strong socio-economic aspect as it includes land and possessions: the different nuances of 'family' and 'household' are therefore combined here. The differences from today's words and concepts are closely linked to different sociological and geographical contexts; it may be worth however asking whether the aspects of interdependence with others, of inclusion of more than those closely related by blood, and of organic belonging with one's surroundings may enrich and challenge contemporary incarnations of the family/household.

The fluidity of family structures

This very short summary of Hebrew terms can be misleading. The family/household was not monolithic, nor was its shape and significance static over the history of Israel in the course of the Old Testament. As we go through the stories of Genesis-Esther, we meet many families/households that do not quite fit this picture of the *beth-av*, whose boundaries are porous and changeable, and in the more 'traditional families', we often see more of their dysfunctional patterns than an ideal configuration. This not a problematic aspect of Scripture, but rather one that points to Scripture being both real and realistic: families and households struggle, most of them are far from ideal, and the way things are done and organised change with circumstances and over the course of history. Furthermore, this fluidity and at times brokenness is not a bar to the activity of God, but part of the story of God's patient and gracious walk with his people. God works within and with real human beings, with the whole gamut of real configurations of relationships that come to be. Families/households are always and everywhere in a state of flux and change, as new members arrive – through marriage, birth, adoption, simple living with others, economic or conflict migration etc – and others

depart – through death, marriage, for economic reasons, as a result of disputes etc. As Meyers (1997:1) puts it, 'Families are in constant flux – as members are born, grow to maturity, and die. And the quality and character of family life are always changing – in dynamic relation to the internal and external factors that affect the way the family encompasses the interlocking life courses of its constituent members.' This is true of families everywhere and throughout history; they are all different, yet family is ubiquitous in all human societies, a 'fundamental collective' (ibid.).

Within Scripture itself, we see changing patterns of family groups. Material depicting earlier, agrarian lifestyles usually show larger extended households, central for protection, while later material (exilic and post-exilic), particularly those depicting more urban settings, show smaller households and 'domestic units … more varied in their special aspects and economic functions' (Meyers 1997:13). There is a close relationship between landscape, work and household configuration. By the time of the exile, the household is slimmed down (though not nuclear) but takes on increased importance in religious and ethnic identity. As we read the Old Testament, we also need to bear in mind that its material is not an ethnographic record; it was written largely by elite males, and therefore we lack a window into many parts of real Israelite families: there is little space for the perspectives of women, children and servants, for instance. There is little portrayal of domesticity and daily life, and more concern with political and public events. The families portrayed are often those of significant people – rulers, kings, military chiefs, patriarchs – and therefore cannot be taken as representative of all the people, and, sometimes, may be more dysfunctional than average households (think of the House of David and the ongoing wars of succession). It may be worth asking, in thinking of family today, how do we avoid this 'top-down' vision – starting with a normalised picture of the well-to-do or educated?

Doing theology

The Old Testament was put together and preserved as Scripture – meaning that behind it is a theological intent. How far that intent applies to the depiction of family is unclear: sometimes families and households are simply part of the furniture, as it were. Writers simply borrow from the world around them as part of their story-telling. Other times, households and

families are the theological focus of a narrative or law, and we need to discern how their portrayal is intended to feed into the picture of God's relationship with his people, and whether there is any ethical or prescriptive intent attached to the text. Discerning whether a text is descriptive, prescriptive, or a mix of both, and whether a picture is typical or normative, is key in drawing theological conclusions for today out of any part of Scripture.

For this purpose, it is crucial to understand the located nature of the family. The family in the Old Testament is embodied, interdependent, and intimately linked to its environment and socio-economic context. In order to think theologically about the family today, we need to respect this embodiedness of families: today's families are just as linked to geography and contextual factors; as a result, enabling a dialogue between the text of Scripture and today's context means taking seriously the different configurations and contexts of both, and not trying to dis-embody them, but seek to inhabit the world of Scripture and how God interacts with the people in it. When this is placed side-by-side with our own world, concerns, and awareness of how God works with us, text and context can prompt questions, challenges and affirmation. Scripture may not give obvious answers to the questions of our time, but it can help us ask better questions, reveal things we miss or willfully ignore, and help us discern patterns of how God works within the world.

The formation of family/household units

Genesis 1-3, marriage, and family

Genesis 1-3 is often referred to in theological work on marriage and family, as it offers an aetiology of the couple and family. Genesis 2 is of particular relevance, though the cultural distance between the world of Ancient Hebrews and ours makes it easy to miss the nuances of the story. Both Genesis 1 and 2 sets out a fundamentally communal and interrelated picture of humanity. Human beings are not autonomous or independent, but deeply connected: first to God and the image of God, second to the ground they are taken out of, and thirdly to one another. The image of God rests on the whole of humanity together, male and female, 'them' (Gen. 1.27). God makes human beings in his image, and later, Adam will have a son 'in his image' and so on (gen. 5.3). Human beings do not have independent

existence – only God does. Human beings are always profoundly dependent on others. It is not individuals who are created, but a community.

As Genesis 2 gives a more detailed, narrative account of the creation of humanity, the first human's status, without someone like them, is clearly portrayed as problematic – connection with God and the natural world is good, but not enough. The creature created from the ground needs to be related to others who are like them but different, a likeness and difference symbolised in the creation of gendered difference in chapter 2. Autonomy and independence are not portrayed here as conducive to human flourishing: it is embeddedness within a social, ecological and spiritual system that enables human beings to find meaning and fulfilment. Social embeddedness is further underlined by the words 'flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone' and 'become one flesh'; while these have often been taken to refer to sexual union, in Hebrew, they actually refer the joining of two families (Dearman 1998:119), as we find for instance later in Genesis 29.14, when Jacob meets his uncle Laban, who tells him 'you are my bone and my flesh!'. The two humans are now becoming part of each other's family and forming an extended kinship system.

Genesis gives a nuanced picture of this 'original joining'. Adam and Eve cannot be construed as the ultimate nuclear family given the Hebrew background. However, the narrator clearly states, 'a man will leave is father and mother…' In a world where respect and obedience for parents was paramount, and where, in all likelihood, the newly joined couple would live with the parents of the young man, this verse highlights the importance of the new family unit, as both connected and distinct.

I have talked of a couple being 'joined' since the word marriage does not occur in the Genesis text. The nature of marriage and its connection to family in the Old Testament is also fluid, and the picture we get of marriage is influenced by perspective and the position of the writer: we know a little of the marriages of those of rank and influence (e.g. the sons or daughters of the head of the family, that is those for whom a formal social contract is needed to establish property and land rights), but little about servants, the poor, foreigners, slaves etc. The Old Testament largely fits in with the wider social practices of marriage in the Ancient Near East, with a pragmatic, contractual view of marriage, sometimes formalised, sometimes ratifying a de facto union (Collins, 1997:112). There is increasing evidence of marriage as a contract in

the Second Temple period; it is a contract with human (not divine) witnesses with the pragmatic aim of securing rights to land and inheritance. There is no evidence of marriage contracts before the Exile, though bills of divorce are mentioned. The pragmatic and non-sacramental view of marriage of the Old Testament does not diminish its value. Marriage on the contrary was crucial to social relationships precisely because it was embedded into socio-economic practices, and was not thought of as merely the union of two individuals, but as the establishment of kin relationships and mutual obligations, including financial and at times military obligations to protect one another.

In addition, the practical picture of marriage in the Hebrew Bible is hugely varied, and rarely (if at all) idealised, from the wrangling of polygamous households to the adulterous adventures of King David. This variety however needs tempering by one of my earlier observations: wealthier households may have been polygamous, but average households less likely so; kings may have had harems and concubines, but not ordinary Israelites. This comes back to the distinction between what is and what should be: the lives of the people of the text are depicted in their brokenness, fallibility and glimpses of beauty, but they are not necessarily models to imitate. Their marriages and families form the background to stories of God and God's people, but are not timeless exemplars (fortunately).

Family, economics and survival

At this point, it is worth considering in more detail how economics and physical environments are interwoven with the shape of families and households. Within the life of Early Israel (both as depicted and in what can be historically reconstructed), the *beth-av* functions as the basic economic unit in Israelite life. Households were organised in the way that most facilitated survival in a harsh environment where subsistence agriculture was practiced. This defined the size of the household – big enough to produce what was needed, but not so large as to exhaust the physical yield of a land area. Every household member was needed and contributed to the welfare of the group. The laws and practices we encounter in the Torah aim to protect this household as a basic unit: tensions in the household, inappropriate relationships, internal conflict, conflict with other households, all of these not only threatened harmony and wellbeing, but threatened actual physical survival. In thinking across the cultural divide between the people of the text and the 21st century, we may how survival is ensured

today, through what structures, and how the family/household is changed by different parameters and expectations regarding survival.

Households are not extended households in the OT because a bigger family is somehow morally better; rather, extended households are a necessity where producing enough food and shelter needs the labour of more than one conjugal pair and their offspring. Because the labour of each person was essential to survival, there was little room for individual ventures; the welfare of the group was paramount and gave every member their identity through their place within the household. The welfare of the group and the welfare of the individual were indissolubly linked (Meyers 1997:21). Men and women each had highly specialised tasks essential to the group: women and men both worked and contributed highly skilled labour. Men tended to work outside in crop farming and herding, while women worked nearer the home in technical activities such as textiles, pottery, weaving etc. As a result, male skills were linked to local environments and micro-climates, whereas women's skills were more easily transferable, so that in marriage, women usually moved away from their own families and joined their husband's, whereas men remained in or close to, places whose agricultural landscapes they were familiar with. Land and social organisation were intimately linked.

Children and childhood

Children were similarly needed in the survival of the household; child-rearing was not the primary responsibility of women but all the adults', as they brought children up to learn key lifeskills. Unlike in the contemporary West, where children are considered 'dependents' to be cared for, in Early Israel there was a high degree of intergenerational dependence, and as such, a different conceptualisation of 'childhood' and intergenerational relationships. This is not to say that children did not have a special place; throughout Scripture, children are considered a gift from God, and their absence causes distress. Children's direct perspectives are not recorded in Scripture, and they are primarily viewed through the gaze of adults, and adults' responsibilities towards them. The books of Deuteronomy and Proverbs in particular dwell on the responsibility to form children into people of God through family instruction and example.

Proverbs has a strong emphasis on respect of parents, and on appropriate guidance and discipline of children. Parents are to model godly living. Most of the material in relation to

children concerns the importance of the transmission of faith and the shaping of the spiritual, ethical and social imagination of the community for the next generation, both in positive instruction (Deuteronomy) and in reflection on how the failings of parents, individually, and of the nation, corporately, lead to the consistent deterioration of the social fabric of the nation (Judges, 1 Samuel). Children are portrayed as at risk in a society if they are not nurtured into the ways of life. Other texts, in the Psalms and the Prophets shed light on the emotional aspects of parenting. Images of parental love include the repeated image of the she-bear defending her cubs (Psalms, Isaiah). Parental love is portrayed as irreducible, deeply instinctual, as intense attachment and loyalty. This image is applied to God repeatedly, so that parental love is both engraved in nature, and imitated from the love of the God of the covenant.

The portrayal of extended households

The picture of the extended household we get, particularly for Early Israel and rural Israel, is therefore largely shaped by necessity in its specificity, but still remains anchored in a theologically articulated belief that 'it is not good for man to be alone'. There is an ethical component to the idea of interdependence and mutual obligations that jars and contrasts with contemporary configurations and understandings of individuals and households that tend to be more associative and oriented towards individual flourishing. The household in Ancient Israel was also a place of hospitality: where travellers would stay, and a place whose boundaries were porous, so that distant kin, sometimes strangers, could be incorporated and given a place of belonging and connection to the wider clan, tribe and nation.

Beyond economics, the household was also bound by a thick web of mutual needs and obligations. In a world with no social care or social security, the family was the place of care for the sick, and the place where older generations could gradually withdraw from more demanding physical labour, and be looked after (though life expectancy was short); where immediate family failed, the kinship network would pick up obligations to care. Those obligations make their way into laws and instructions in Scripture: the expectation of loving care and respect for older generations is repeatedly highlighted. Care however is not limited to the in-group – in a harsh world, the Torah shows consciousness that those without a link to a *beth-av* or strong kinship group are at risk, hence the high volume of laws and commands

about caring for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. All three categories represent those who do not fall under the automatic care of a *beth-av*, so that a wider framework for their care is established as a moral and religious obligation. Households based on survival and kinship always run the risk of becoming inward looking and turned into closed systems that look after their own survival only; the downside of close-knit family structures is identified and challenged through religious instruction, consistently backed up by the assertion that God himself is the protector of the vulnerable, and to care for them is to imitate God.

Relying on households as units of survival also presents challenges when things go wrong within the household and risks keeping household members in places of abuse or danger when the alternative is to be household-less. The narrative of Hagar's treatment in Genesis 16 and 21 illustrates how someone at the bottom of the pyramid of power is treated, and has no option but to either stay with mistreatment, or risk starvation for herself and her child.

Extended families therefore are not idealised. Indeed, much of the narrative material about families in the Old Testament is devoted to the troubles of extended households: strife between siblings and multiple wives in the case of polygamous marriages, tension between older male heads of households and their younger sons eager to step into leadership; mistreatment of servants; intergenerational hostility and differences... Yet underlying the strife and challenges is the constant drumbeat of the covenant: God works with these difficult, fractious families and consistently cares for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged within and without.

Laws and realities

Precisely because families/households are not perfect, the Old Testament helps shape a vision for what households could or should be like, and regulate their functioning to protect the vulnerable, within the specific historical and geographical location of Ancient Israel. It is not helpful to think of the family laws (or other laws) as timeless prescriptions; rather they are embedded within their context, make sense for the people whose lives are organised in a certain way, and often limit and circumscribe what can or cannot be done rather than change it completely in order to put in place an ideal (and unachievable) system in place. Thinking of

how ancient laws can speak today involves looking at what type of relationships are set up, what patterns are consistent, what contextual practices are challenged or limited, what kind of character is being developed in imperfect people, and how God chooses to walk with humanity.

Laws around the household in Leviticus and Deuteronomy are aimed at reinforcing stability and longevity, two essential concepts in a harsh and hostile environment; they codify relationships but also prescribe limits for those with power, and consistently encourage a higher degree of care for the most vulnerable than was the case in ANE culture. The same movement will be found in the household codes of the New Testament, and the way in which they transform traditional Roman household codes and suffuse them with alien values of humility and mutuality.

There is huge concern in the OT with building up the in-group, yet a constant consciousness of the 'other' who lies on the horizon of faith. At the level of nation, of tribe, and of household, all are tasked with caring for orphans, widows and strangers (and sometimes, added to this, the poor). All those covered by the law, but in particular, those who will enforce it and its primary addressees – heads of households – are given a consistent focus on their obligations to children and people other than their own, rooted in the very character of God. God is 'father of the orphans' and 'protector of widows' (Ps. 68) – the very character of God contradicts the social definition of orphans (no father) and widows (no male protector). The same logic applies to the care of strangers: the ethical vision in Deuteronomy is for the displaced, vulnerable person without a centre of belonging, to be incorporated into the social life of the nation via clans and the kinship system. The household is therefore meant to be a centre of hospitality, with porous boundaries that do not limit care to those within, or those with power.

It is also worth noting that laws that may seem odd or offensive today, particularly around sexual conduct, are aimed in particular at restricting the sexual access of the head of the household. The 'you' of the laws of Leviticus is primarily the 'paterfamilias', the head of the *beth-av*; we see this in that others are defined through their relationship to the head of the household, 'your wife, your daughter, your son, your servant, your slave' (see for instance Lev. 18). When all are concerned, the text tends to use 'if a/any man/woman…'. What then

emerges is a pattern of instruction to the most powerful to care for those who have less power, and, in particular, in the case of sexual relations, the most powerful men are not allowed automatic access to any member of the household they choose (male or female), but are restricted to their own marriage partner. This tendency fits within a broader movement in the Law, one that concentrates on the 'enemy within', the way in which insiders to the household, to the nation, can prove a greater threat to its health, good and survival than those who attack from without. Hence the Law seeks to care for families both through instruction on its inner life, and through cross-household social commands about care and hospitality.

There is a constant double movement in Scripture, that on the one hand affirms the goodness of family, and gives guidance on its life, and on the other acknowledges its fragility, limitations and temptations; families are both gift and places of curse; in the same way we see a movement for exclusion and control of boundaries, as well as a movement that broadens it and emphasises inclusion and wider belonging.

A note on patriarchy

There has been debate within the biblical scholars' community, and much more widely, about whether the Bible prescribes patriarchy, and therefore whether the laws and narratives of the OT have anything to offer, particularly within the area of social, household and sexual mores.

A strong strand of scholarship currently argues that to talk of 'patriarchy' is actually unhelpful with regards to the OT. Meyers (1999:36) argues that in the agrarian framework of early Israel, people were not seen as autonomous entities but rather experienced identity relationally. As everyone was needed for survival, it is unlikely that one group (women) was systematically disparaged. Gender-based tasks ensured the development of expertise and efficiency. Power lay at the level of the household, which led to different relationships than in a hierarchical (monarchic) society. Many narrative texts exhibit the way in which both men and women are subjugated to the will of the household and wider social expectations of how both men and women should organise what would today be considered their 'personal' lives. In terms of women's lives, a recent study by García Bachmann (2013) traces the huge amount

of activities and occupations undertaken by women in the Biblical text, which paints a picture far removed from an idea of women being confined to the domestic sphere and rearing children, but rather shows their involvement in highly skilled crafts and profession in multiple aspects of Israel's life. These observations do not, however, take away from the fact that men clearly have more power and status within the texts, and that they have the ability to exert greater direct pressure, action and influence over others.

While it is undeniable that men clearly have more power and status than women in the Biblical text, it is far from clear that the text *prescribes* this phenomenon, rather than simply *reflect* the society within which the story/events are taking place. To discern the ethical and moral direction of the text requires listening to the whole of the canon, paying attention to the literary dynamics of the story and the voice of an often subtle and unobtrusive narrator, at which point they will discover a more complex and inspiring text than one caricatured through anachronistic broadbrush judgements – though this kind of analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

Households, identity and faith

It should be clear by now that the terms 'household' and 'family' refer to a reality that connects and interweaves multiple aspects and Ancient Israel's life. Individual Israelites located themselves within this wider framework; identity was not conceived in autonomous ways, or in terms of individual choice and delineation, but primarily as a relational category. Identity is expressed in relationships and connections with people, land and God. Individuals are shaped into who they are through their household relationships, horizontally in space and vertically through time. Honour in community and family security were valued more than individual happiness or pleasure, and family identity and privilege became ways to talk about fidelity, responsibility, judgement and reconciliation (Dearman 1998:127).

This vision of the family means that faith, history and events affects families/households as a whole, rather than individuals: blessings and curses on entire family reflect this idea of corporate personality and corporate responsibility. Individual choices are never just individual, but affect all those related in a domino effect, for good, or for bad. This then affects

the way in which ethical and moral decisions are made and implemented. It is not so much that there are no individuals or individual identity, but that the links between individual and community are constantly present, stressed, and made apparent. Every family carries the identity of an individual, and every individual is the embodiment of their community. Atkinson puts it this way:

> In the Semitic worldview, the whole of one's past was vitally determinative of each person and it considered the personal and the corporate dimensions as inseparable. One is not an isolated individual but a person who emerged out of a context. It is this totality which the person embodies, but the historical context also now takes on a personal embodiment. Pedersen makes this point clearly: "This is the relation between the individual and the family. The individual Moabite is not a section of a number of Moabitic individuals, but a revelation of 'Moabitehood.' " The distinctive essence of the Abrahamic family was the covenant. Thus, each member of that family carried the covenant, which was impressed upon his *nephesh* (soul). He is the manifestation of the covenant. (Atkinson 2014:176)

The physical reality which shapes the interdependence of the household and their wider kin, also shapes their understanding of who they are, and yields norms of how they should relate: in ways that prioritises responsibility to the group and acknowledges the profound impact of any individual decision or action onto those around them.

The identity shaped by belonging to the Israelite household however was not simply social and economic but deeply, profoundly, covenantal. Israel was the covenantal people of God, and the covenant was expressed, nurtured and transmitted in and through the household. As Chris Wright (2004:340) points out, 'it was by belonging within such a family that an individual could claim membership of the covenant people, whether by birth or (as in the case of slaves or resident aliens) by residence.' Parental teaching was supposed to be shaped around teaching the covenant in word and action. Faithful handing over, not just of a sense of belonging, but of the ethos of the covenant was crucial, and dictates the required shape of households through the law and commandments. Shaping the people of God was not just

about giving religious instructions, but about shaping an entire alternative community, one that would stand in contrast to those around them, so others could see what life with God was like. This had implications in every part of life: in how the family approached the balance of its life and use of time (with the hallowing of the Sabbath as a sign that productivity, work and survival were not overriding concepts but part of a bigger reality within which God provided in generosity); family was a place where worship happened and significant moments took place (circumcision, redemption of the firstborn, Passover); and, as seen before, family and households were commanded to look beyond their own welfare and attend to the less powerful, the vulnerable, dispossessed and destitute. Nurturing children in the faith ensured that they, in turn, would (hopefully) cherish and protect children other than their own. Family nurture was not a narrow and self-centred enterprise, but an act of 'radical social imagination' (Brueggemann, 2008).

Family and Household in the Old Testament: some theological avenues for thinking

One more type of text needs considering as we conclude this brief survey of family and household in the OT: texts that use family and kinship language metaphorically, to speak of Israel, God and their relationship. We find kinship terminology widely applied to Israel as a way to describe their corporate identity and social and political relationships, as was common in the Ancient World: sons of Israel, children of Israel, related nations said to be 'Israel's brother' (e.g. Edom, the descendants of Esau, see Obadiah for instance), the sons of Joseph's names used to name the different tribes of Israel, who are then consistently depicted as 'brothers'. This habit was then transferred to the theological realm and relationship with God. The Prophets in particular use the imagery of marriage and adultery, and of Israel as children of God, as a striking and at times shocking, way to speak of the vicissitudes of the Israel-God relationship. We have to be careful not to read the metaphor in the wrong direction: this is an image taken from (imperfect) human life and applied as a description of life with God; it is not an image of life with God to be applied in human settings. This is particularly pertinent for books like Hosea, or similar passages in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The brokenness of the

relationships described are not there to give us an image of 'real families', nor do they endorse patterns of human relationships; they do not tell exactly what God is like, either; rather, they use well-known experiences of the brokenness of human families as a vehicle for Israel to begin to understand the impact and meaning of their own actions, precisely because families are so fundamental to the social, psychological, spiritual and economic wellbeing of the people of Israel.

The picture of families and households we get from the Old Testament is therefore mixed, at times troubling and disturbing, at others hopeful and inspiring. Underneath the particularities of historical settings, lie a number of essential theological themes: the fundamentally interdependent nature of human beings, whether they acknowledge or welcome that interdependence, or not; the enormous potential for households to be agents of social transformation, both in how they act today, and how they shape the adults and households of tomorrow; the pattern of God's work with communities, as it is people-in-relation who are called to imitate the image of God and be transformed, so that they may make God known; the call to hospitality and a basic orientation towards the 'other', the one who does not belong, who does not have power, who is vulnerable and disconnected; and, finally, the sense that 'families' can never be closed systems, but are called, whatever their particular configuration, to be agents of grace and transformation for all around them.

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