

Bible - Kinship, Family, Marriage, Rites of Passage, Sexuality, Taboo

- Ancient Israel: a patriarchal system, presented only descendants along the male line – as attested by genealogies recorded in the Bible
- Some trace of matriarchy in the Bible: as attested by the fact that maternal uncles (brothers of one's mother) hold more authority than the father. E.g. Laban in the story of Jacob. In some societies in PNG, South Asia & South East Asia, it is the maternal uncle who plays a more prominent role than the father. E.g. Khasi people in N-E India.
- In patriarchy, women have no status, are dependent on their father or brothers, and after marriage on their husbands or sons. The worse is women were treated as objects, possessions, property items. They were treated inhumanely and cruelly, or even criminally, according to today's value system.
- Story of Noah entering the arch: Wife is listed after sons and before daughters-in-law GEN 6.18. In Nehemiah's time, listed after sons and daughters NEH 4.14.
- Since women were considered as property, rape was seen as property violation. The victim was not the woman, but the man who owned. So the legal remedy was the transfer of ownership – the rapist was required to pay a bride price, the woman became his property. DEU 22.28-29a
- In this light we can understand the stories: Lot and his 2 daughters, the Levite and his concubine in JDG 19, the way Amnon treated his half-sister Tamar 2SA 13.14-15.
- KINSHIP: Strong kinship system in the middle east and family solidarity in a pastoral, nomadic society: E.g. Abraham helped his nephew Lot; Jacob fled to his uncle Laban
- Matrimonial system: endogamy is more common than exogamy – to maintain ethnic / blood purity and to safeguard ancestral faith against foreign religion.
- EZR 9-10 Prohibition of intermarriage with foreigners (wives). King Ahab of Israel married Philistine (Sidonian) princess Jezebel and misled the whole kingdom into idolatry. 1KI 16.30-31
- In the creation story the ideal is monogamy – one husband and one wife. In reality, as soon as there is record, it is polygamy (polygyny) – one man marrying more than one wife. GEN 25.1: 26.34: 28.9
- Jacob had 4 wives – probably inspired the Muslims that it is permitted to have up to 4 wives.
- In history, the elite (men) with wealth and authority usually were / are polygynous. Ancient Israel is no exception. Kings might need to marry foreign princesses for political purpose.
- About King David 2SA 5.13; about King Solomon 1KI 11.1-3.
- This is not to justify polygamy; but we need to put the OT narrative in its historical and cultural context and perspective.

- The only case in ancient Israel is “serial fraternal polyandry”, in the case of a man’s death without offspring, his another brother had to marry the widowed sister-in-law. Still practiced in Jesus’ time (MAT 22.24-28: The “levirate” in the Laws of Moses).
- Bride price: The groom or his family has to pay a handsome price or gifts to the bride’s family - common in agricultural and pastoralist societies. E.g. Jacob worked 7 years to get one wife.
- Dowry or groom price: transfer of goods or money from the bride’s family to the groom’s family or to the couple – a common practice in farming societies. 1KI 9.16
- RITE of PASSAGE: to mark different stages in one’s life, important and necessary (imperative) in many ethnic groups and cultures.
- Example in OT: circumcision as a religious rite, a ceremony to seal an alliance with God in the flesh. GEN 17.10-11 First time mentioned as a solemn request by God in a covenant with Abram.
- Might originate in ancient Egypt, since Abram spent some time in Egypt. The Egyptian elite and the priests practiced circumcision, as attested on some bas-relief. They might be inspired by the Nubians and Africans who practiced it since time immemorial.
- NT: Baptism, originally as a rite of purification prescribed by the Laws of Moses, now took on the symbol of repentance and remission of sins.
- The ruins of cisterns and pools in Qumran attest the practice of ritual washing in Jesus’ time.
- Modern rites of passage: baptism, confirmation, bar-mitzvah, hajj (pilgrimage)
- The regulations of the Nazirite in NUM 6, are also rites of passage for the purpose of one’s consecration. Here the notion of taboo is strong.
- “Taboo” comes from Polynesian language “tapu” – forbidden, restricted. In some of today’s Pacific languages, the word is used to denote “holy”, “sacred” – te Tohi Tapu = the Holy Bible
- Taboo mostly has to do with food, land, period of time and sexuality, particularly incest. The Laws of Moses devote a large part to taboo and sexuality, to regulate.
- From time immemorial, people found out that incest and consanguinity lead to degeneration and hereditary defects. First record in Bible: GEN 19.30-38; prohibited in LEV 18 & 20
- Other major concerns about purity – menstruations, hemorrhage, night emission, sexual intercourse, postpartum emission, etc.
- Food taboo in the OT: LEV 11 & DEU 14; blood, strangled animals and offerings sacrificed to idol in the NT: Acts 15.20
- Land taboo: Eden after expulsion of Adam & Eve; the burning bush; the Holy and the Most Holy in the temple; cities of refuge