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## The Wisdom of Israelite Mothers: Technical Training and Life Lessons\*

Carol Meyers<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*The two major components of motherhood are biological and social reproduction. The former is examined extensively in biblical studies, while the latter is virtually ignored. This essay focuses on the social dimension of motherhood by considering two kinds of wisdom associated with the role of mothers in socializing and educating their offspring. The first is imparting technical knowledge, mainly to daughters, who must learn the technologies of the various household maintenance tasks they will need when they have their own households. Included in these technologies are food-processing and food-preparation activities, textile and crafts production, and also health-care techniques, food-related religious rituals, and certain specialized skills. The second is the socializing component of mothers' wisdom, which involved instruction in the social and moral values of the household. That instruction was modeled as much as it was explicitly taught. Teaching life skills and*

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Meyers, Duke University, United States. E-mail: [carol@duke.edu](mailto:carol@duke.edu)

*inculcating life lessons both contributed to maternal authority in Israelite households.*

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## **Introduction**

Motherhood may be a universal aspect of human life, but it is not a unitary feature. Reproduction, which is an essential and central aspect of communities everywhere, has two major components. One is biological: the physiological process of conceiving, gestating, and giving birth. The other and less often acknowledged component is social: the reproduction of the society in which mother and child live. Certain features of the biological component—the way pregnancy is managed or parturition achieved—may differ across cultures, but the physiological process of giving birth is the same everywhere. However, this is not the case for the social component, the reproduction of culture. A mother’s interaction with her child is not a fixed experience but rather varies from society to society. It is socially constructed rather than biologically determined.<sup>2</sup>

The image of mothers in the Hebrew Bible has attracted considerable attention.<sup>3</sup> This attention usually focuses on the biological component of motherhood: fertility (and barrenness),

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<sup>2</sup> See Evelyn Nakano Glenn, “Social Constructions of Mothering; A Thematic Overview,” in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie-Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1–29.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., inter alia, Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).



parturition, and the feeding and care of newborns and infants.<sup>4</sup> This is especially true for poetic passages featuring the mother metaphor for God.<sup>5</sup> The scholarly emphasis on biological reproduction follows the biblical emphasis; in so doing it obscures the equally important role of mothers in cultural/societal reproduction.

Considering motherhood only in terms of giving birth and providing physical nurturance arguably succumbs to the essentializing idea that foregrounds female fertility.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it means ignoring aspects of motherhood that are equally important for the survival and continuity of family and community. As a social as well as a biological process, motherhood involves raising and socializing children as well as bearing them. Yet, although mothers are an intrinsic part of the development of children, this central feature of women's lives—the social aspects of motherhood—has been neglected. The “Mother” entry in the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* puts it succinctly: “A well-rounded understanding of mothers in the

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Monographs on this topic include Sarah Dille, *Mixing Metaphors: God as Mother and Father in Deutero-Isaiah* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Hanne Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender? The Interpretation of Gendered God-Language in the Hebrew Bible, Exemplified in Isaiah 42, 46 and 49*, *Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2/32* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); and Christl M. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Stefanie I. Budin, “Finding a World of Women: An Introduction to Women's Studies and Gender Theory in Biblical Archaeology,” in *The Social Archaeology of the Levant: From Prehistory to the Present*, ed. Assaf Yasur-Landau, Eric H. Cline, and Yorke M. Rowan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 530.

Bible and biblical world is elusive.”<sup>7</sup> The many reasons for this neglect include the scanty biblical information, the tendency to accept meager biblical materials as normative, our distance in space and time from ancient Israel, and the dearth of women’s writings.<sup>8</sup> Even iconographic data, such as *kourotrophoi* (images of humans or deities holding or nursing infants or small children), are virtually nonexistent in ancient Israel despite their frequent appearance elsewhere in the ancient Near East.<sup>9</sup>

If little information about mother-child interactions appears in the Hebrew Bible, information about mother-daughter relationships, which are especially important in understanding Israelite motherhood, is virtually absent. The remedy for this biblical insufficiency is an interdisciplinary approach.<sup>10</sup> To put it

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Tull, “Mother,” *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), Vol. 4:154.

<sup>8</sup> The paucity of information is especially true for mother-daughter relationships. Thus Kimberly D. Russaw’s book on *Daughters in the Hebrew Bible* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018) contains no discussion of the relationship of daughters with their mothers.

<sup>9</sup> Beth Alpert Nakhai, “Mother-and-Child Figurines in the Levant from the Late Bronze Age through the Persian Period,” in *Material Culture Matters: Essays on the Archaeology of the Southern Levant in Honor of Seymour Gitin*, ed. John R. Spencer, Robert A. Mullins, and Aaron J. Brody (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 175–80. Budin’s suggestion (“Finding a World,” 529–30) that the paucity of mother-and-child images in the Levant indicates a lack of interest in maternity is questionable.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion of this approach, see my *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 17–38. Interdisciplinary methods for the study of children in the biblical world include Kristine Garroway’s *Growing Up in Ancient Israel: Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts*, *Archaeological and Biblical Studies* 23 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018); Garroway (*Growing Up*, 2 n. 2) lists other publications. See also Reidar Aasgaard, “History of Research on Children in the Bible and the Biblical World: Past Developments, Present State—and Future Potential,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World*, ed. Sharon Betsworth and Julie Faith Parker (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 14–38.



another way, investigating the social aspects of motherhood requires an anthropological perspective: drawing on archaeological and ethnographic data as well as biblical texts.<sup>11</sup>

Archaeological remains are invaluable. Artifacts may seem mute as sources of information about motherhood, but anthropologists have shown the flaws in that assumption. Artifacts are part of the physical context of daily life and thus are the “means of socialization and ... education.”<sup>12</sup> In traditional cultures where children contribute household labor (more on this below), household objects and installations involve specific actions and interactions whereby children learn from their mothers. Moreover, they “act as media for the communication and maintenance of symbolic and social values.”<sup>13</sup>

Ethnographic materials, if used cautiously, are vital supplements to textual and material sources, for they reveal otherwise invisible aspects of the family household, which, as the primary unit of society, was the locus for the socialization and enculturation of children.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, data from

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<sup>11</sup> See Michelle Walks, “Anthropology of Mothering,” in *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, ed. Andrea O’Reilly (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 64–68.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Greenfield, “Children, Material Culture and Weaving: Historical Change and Developmental Change,” in *Children and Material Culture*, ed. Joanna Sofaer Derevenski (London: Routledge, 2000), 73.

<sup>13</sup> Jo Sofaer Derevenski, “Where Are the Children? Accessing Children in the Past,” *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 13 (1994): 14.

<sup>14</sup> See Richard R. Wilk and Robert M. Netting, “Households: Changing Forms and Functions,” in *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group*, ed. Robert M. Netting, Richard R. Wilk, and Eric J. Arnould (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 4.

Mediterranean and Middle Eastern communities gathered before the impact of modernity are often helpful, especially because ethnographies focus on life in small villages similar to the farming communities of ancient Israel.<sup>15</sup> Because ethnographic analogy inevitably has a subjective element, anthropological theorists have identified criteria for inferring the function and meaning of archaeological materials and have established guidelines for using ethnographic analogy.<sup>16</sup>

Mothers across cultures are their children's first teachers, and in traditional societies they teach and model the activities and values of their households and communities.<sup>17</sup> This article examines the mother's role in the two main components of household education: (1) technical training, whereby children learn the processes of daily life for which they will ultimately be responsible in their own households; and (2) the inculcation of life lessons—the essential social skills, values, and traditions of their family and community. The first is largely gender specific, with mothers teaching daughters how to use household artifacts and installations to perform women's household activities. The second involves a mother's interactions with both female and

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<sup>15</sup> In contrast, most data from ancient Near Eastern texts are of dubious value, for those texts were written by and/or directed to urban elites, whose family dynamics and activities were arguably different from those of the subsistence farmers who comprised the majority of the population in ancient Israel.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., John Bower, *In Search of the Past: An Introduction to Archaeology* (Chicago: Dorsey, 1986), 379–80.

<sup>17</sup> Song 8:2 refers to “my mother ... her who taught me.” In an unnecessary and perhaps sexist emendation, some would change “taught” to “bore” (following Song 6:9; 8:5).



male offspring. Both components of household education are aspects of wisdom (*ḥokmâ*), which can mean technical skill or expertise (e.g., Exod 28:3; 35:26) as well as sapiential knowledge (e.g., Prov 1:2).

Not only did mothers educate their daughters and young sons but also often taught their daughters-in-law. Israelite families were patrilocal, with women moving to the households of their husbands. Although there is no mention of marital age for girls in the Hebrew Bible, it is generally assumed that—because of their relatively short average life span (twenty to thirty years)—girls became wives soon after puberty, in their early teen years.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, teen-age girls entered their husband’s household, and authority over them shifted from their biological mother to their husband’s mother. As one ethnographic report puts it, “The mother-in-law takes [the] mother’s place and the young wife must obey her orders and work under her direction.”<sup>19</sup> A daughter-in-law thus learns from her mother-in-law the economic and cultural practices of her affinal household, which may differ somewhat from that of her natal household.

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<sup>18</sup> Jennie Ebeling, “Infancy, Childhood, Adulthood, Old Age, Bronze and Iron Age,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Archaeology*, ed. Daniel M. Master, 2 vols. (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Vol. 1:546. Various estimates of women’s lifespans, which were considerably shorter than men’s because of risks of death in childbirth, are discussed in Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 98–100.

<sup>19</sup> Hilma Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood among the Arabs: Studies in a Mohamadan Village in Palestine* (Helsingfors: Söderström, 1947), 155.

## Technical Training

A mother's role in the technical education of children is gender specific because of the division of labor by gender that characterizes traditional societies; that is, most household tasks are typically the responsibility of one gender, although sometimes tasks are shared.<sup>20</sup> Children in these societies have important economic roles; they take on food-processing tasks and assist in making household textiles and implements.<sup>21</sup> This was surely the case in ancient Israel, where agrarian households were the setting of production and consumption for most people.

Children were primarily in their mother's care, as ethnography suggests, at least until they were weaned.<sup>22</sup> A biblical text conveys similar information; Hannah notably cares for her son Samuel as long as she is nursing him and hands him over to serve God at the shrine at Shiloh only when he is weaned (1 Sam 1:22-24).<sup>23</sup> From a young age, children were an integral part of the family labor force. Already at the age of five, small children of

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<sup>20</sup> Gerhard Lenski, *Ecological-Evolutionary Theory: Principles and Applications* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005), 55.

<sup>21</sup> Roberta Gilchrist, "Archaeology and the Life Course: A Time and Age for Gender," in *A Companion to Social Archaeology*, ed. Lynn Meskell and Robert W. Preucel (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 151.

<sup>22</sup> Abdulla M. Lutfiyya (*Baytīn, A Jordanian Village: A Study of Social Institutions and Social Changes in a Folk Community* [The Hague: Mouton, 1966], 158) reports that the care of children, is "totally entrusted to women," who both train and discipline their young offspring.

<sup>23</sup> The biblical narrative calls Samuel a *na'ar* (translated "child" in the NRSV), which is notoriously difficult to associate with a specific age. A range of birth to twelve years has been suggested by Stephen M. Wilson (*Making Men: The Male Coming-of-Age Theme in the Hebrew Bible* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 47-52, 84-86). No biblical texts specify the age of weaning, but data from ethnography and from other ancient Near Eastern texts suggest that women nursed their children for two to three years. See Garroway, *Growing Up*, 95-100.





both genders might fetch fuel (cf. Jer 7:18), take messages to nearby households, or help care for younger siblings.<sup>24</sup> Otherwise, boys and girls might play together or sometimes separately.<sup>25</sup> But eventually female children stayed with their mothers, whereas male children began to spend time with their fathers. Note that in 2 Kgs 4:18 the Shunammite's son goes into the fields with his father. As an elderly Palestinian woman put it, "The father trains the boy and the mother trains the girl."<sup>26</sup>

When did this happen? Phases of childhood cannot be linked to specific ages. People in the biblical past were unlikely to remember exact ages, and in any case children develop differently. Moreover, the number and gender of children in a family might influence when boys joined their fathers and girls stayed with their mothers. The Hebrew Bible has a large vocabulary for different stages of childhood, but biblical terms cannot be firmly linked to chronological age.<sup>27</sup> Ethnographic evidence suggests that people did not reckon children by age but rather by what work the child could do. A small child, for

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<sup>24</sup> For a list of tasks boys and girls were expected to perform, beginning at the age of three, in a traditional Middle Eastern farming household, see Hamed Ammar, *Growing Up in an Egyptian Village: Silwa, Province of Aswan* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), 30–31.

<sup>25</sup> Patty Jo Watson, *Archaeological Ethnography in Western Iran* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979), 210. See also Elihu Grant, *The People of Palestine*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1921), 68.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood*, 140.

<sup>27</sup> See Naomi Steinberg, "Words for Children in the Hebrew Bible," in *The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 51 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 26–41. Julie F. Parker (*Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially the Elisha Cycle*, Brown Judaic Studies 355 [Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2013], 46–73) mentions twenty-eight biblical words for children, but only Joseph's age is given (Gen 37:2). See also Garroway, *Growing Up*, 6–8, and Wilson, *Making Men*, 47–72.

example, might be called “woodgatherer”; or “drawer of water”; or one who “chases the animals,” that is, keeps sheep or goats from running away or trampling vegetable plants.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, although ethnography suggests that children were likely designated by socioeconomic rather than chronological markers, several reports indicate that boys remained with their mothers until they were about seven.<sup>29</sup> Thus mother-child technological training, which pertains mainly to female children, is considered here. However, the mother would be involved in life lessons for both male and female children of all ages (see below).

The term apprentice, which designates someone learning a craft or trade under the tutelage of a skilled practitioner, is arguably applicable to the technical training Israelite daughters received from their mothers. This training enabled them to contribute to their natal household while also preparing for their future roles in their affinal household. Daughters were apprentices in the “prolonged and intimate relationship” by which a mother’s technical skills “were transferred from one generation to the

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<sup>28</sup> Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood*, 130, 138.

<sup>29</sup> See Josef Henniger, *Die Familie der heutigen Beduinen Arabiens: Und seiner Randgebiete: Ein Beitrag zur Frage der ursprünglichen Familienformen der Semiten* (Leiden: Brill, 1943), 103; Watson, *Archaeological Ethnography*, 210. Because a child acquires most language skills by age seven, the mother-child pair was the primary site of language acquisition; see Neh 13:23–24 and Walks, “Anthropology of Mothering,” 64, 66.



next.”<sup>30</sup> Those skills are not to be underestimated. They were not simply memorized bodily movements; rather, they were an extension of mental and physical processes entailing constant judgment and adjustment according to changing conditions.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, technological training was a socialization process as well as a technical one, with daughters acquiring gender-specific household management skills and demeanors along with gender-specific tasks.<sup>32</sup> As one ethnographer notes, “The work of a growing girl is a grown-up woman’s work in miniature.”<sup>33</sup>

### Food Processing and Preparation

Processing foodstuffs and preparing comestibles were probably the most important tasks that mothers taught their daughters.<sup>34</sup> How exactly women transmitted the proper techniques for these

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<sup>30</sup> Stephen D. Salamone and Jill B. Stanton, “Introducing the Nikokyra: Ideality and Reality in Social Process,” in *Gender and Power in Rural Greece*, ed. Jill Dubisch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 107. See also Grant, *The People of Palestine*, 68.

<sup>31</sup> David Sutton, “Cooking Skill, the Senses, and Memory: The Fate of Practical Knowledge,” in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. Ruth B. Phillips, Chris Gosden, and Elizabeth Edwards, Wenner-Gren International Symposium Series 5 (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 91. Sutton elsewhere applies the apprenticeship rubric specifically for daughters learning household activities: David Sutton, “Mothers, Daughters, and Others: Learning, Transmission, Negotiation,” in *Secrets from the Greek Kitchen: Cooking, Skill, and Everyday Life on an Aegean Island* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 104.

<sup>32</sup> Ethnography, iconography, and biblical texts together help determine which tasks were women’s responsibility. For the gender identification of food preparation activities, see Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 128–32.

<sup>33</sup> Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood*, 139.

<sup>34</sup> Note that women and young children of both genders likely participated in growing and gathering crops. See, inter alia, Grant, *The People of Palestine*, 138, 140; Charles T. Wilson, *Peasant Life in the Holy Land* (London: Murray, 1906), 205; James Reilly, “The Peasantry of Late Ottoman Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10 (1981): 88.

activities to their offspring is elusive. Although maternal instruction in the different steps of food production was probably fluid, differing somewhat from mother to mother, it likely took place “through ‘embodied habits’ rather than western modes of explicit instruction.”<sup>35</sup> Children watched their mothers and imitated their movements, which perhaps were accompanied by verbal directions. This form of embodied education would pertain to all the technical and technological training mentioned here.

Most agricultural products, especially grain, require several stages of processing to become edible. The many grinding stones and ovens found at Iron Age sites are witness to the embodied education provided by mothers teaching daughters how to prepare grains, which were the major component of the Israelite diet (more on this below). The nuances of using these tools correctly—for example, how to produce the optimal fineness of flour, or bake bread until it is done but before it burns—were imparted to children over time. Daughters would gradually take over one or more steps in these procedures and related ones (e.g., kneading dough) as they grew older. In one Palestinian village, mothers preparing bread dough give small pieces to their daughters so they could practice kneading.<sup>36</sup> These physical processes also had a social dimension, for both grinding and baking were often “collective” activities performed by women

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<sup>35</sup> So David Sutton, “The Mindful Kitchen, the Embodied Cook: Tools, Technology and Knowledge Transmission on a Greek Island,” *Material Culture Review* 70 (2009): 64.

<sup>36</sup> Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood*, 156. See also Ammar, *Growing Up*, 30.



working together.<sup>37</sup> The attendant interaction among adult women modeled the behavior that daughters themselves would one day exhibit, behavior that not only made onerous tasks more enjoyable but also contributed to the welfare of the community.<sup>38</sup>

Similar dynamics can be posited for food-processing activities represented by various ceramic forms—notably cooking pots—ubiquitous at Israelite sites as well as for activities for which material remains have not survived. For example, ethnography reveals that women: sifted grain before grinding, a process requiring “much skill”;<sup>39</sup> crushed olive residues in a basket, with children watching closely; and churned milk in skin bags to produce curdled milk, something like yogurt.<sup>40</sup> Neither sieves nor baskets nor skin containers have survived. What are extant are mortars and pestles in which women prepared herbs and other condiments (more on these below), showing their daughters how finely to pulverize these materials and how much to use in cooking. Education provided to daughters in these processes was embedded in a household’s myriad food-processing activities.

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<sup>37</sup> “Collective” is a term used by Sarah Graham-Brown (*Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East 1860–1950* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], 152) for the tasks women performed together.

<sup>38</sup> See Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 131–32, 139–46.

<sup>39</sup> James Neil, *Peeps into Palestine* (Guildford, UK: Billings & Sons, 1915), 58, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Suad Amiry and Vera Tamari, *The Palestinian Village Home* (London: British Museum, 1989), 89.

## Textile and Crafts Production

Women made fabrics, utensils, and installations essential for household life in ancient Israel, and the requisite techniques were transmitted from mothers to daughters using the same embodied processes noted for food production. Village weaving techniques have been largely the same for millennia.<sup>41</sup> Girls apprenticed with their mothers, who taught them the spinning, weaving, and sewing skills necessary for making clothing and other household textiles.<sup>42</sup> The loom weights, spindle whorls, and needles recovered in excavations attest to these steps in the Iron Age textile-production process, whereas other aspects—for example, washing the wool—are not visible. Weaving was often practiced by women working together and thus provided the same social enculturation noted for bread production.<sup>43</sup>

Making pottery also was a craft practiced by women working together, as indicated by ethnography and archaeology.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For textile production as a woman's task in biblical antiquity, see my "Material Remains and Social Relations: Women's Culture in Agrarian Households of the Iron Age," in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina*, ed. William G. Dever and Seymour Gitin (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 432–34. Men were likely the weavers in urban workshops; see Mag Abu Hamdan, *The Crafts of Jordan* (Amman: Al Kutba, 1989), 6.

<sup>42</sup> Hamdan, *Crafts of Jordan* 8, 12, and photo opposite p. 24.

<sup>43</sup> For depictions of women in the ancient Near East and the Aegean working together in textile tasks, see Elizabeth W. Barber, *Women's Work: The First Twenty Thousand Years; Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: Norton, 1994), figs. 7.4–5, 8.2, 9.4–5.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., Hamdan, *Crafts of Jordan*, 23; Amiry and Tamari, *Palestinian Village Home*, 43; Grant, *People of Palestine*, 92. Men likely produced pottery in large settlements (as Jer 18:3–4), but women made



Consequently, motherhood involved instructing daughters in the steps—including digging and levigating clay, forming and firing vessels—needed to produce essential household wares. Women especially skilled in these processes might also instruct girls or young women from other households.<sup>45</sup> Women’s ceramic production embodied relationships as well as techniques. The same can be said for making clay ovens of the kind still used in remote parts of the Levant and Anatolia. Oven construction was a collaborative effort; older women worked with daughters and daughters-in-law, who both assisted and learned.<sup>46</sup> An ethnographer witnessed several women working together “with great skill and speed” to build a clay brazier while one woman’s daughter, her fingers covered with wet clay, watched closely, “intent upon catching every detail of the women’s work.”<sup>47</sup> A similar dynamic—expert mothers, working with and simultaneously teaching daughters—has been ethnographically recorded for the production of baskets and woven trays used for storage and food preparation.<sup>48</sup> Baskets are

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their own wares in village settings. Fingerprints of women and adolescent girls have been identified on Bronze Age wares from Tell eṣ-Şafi/Gath, with a similar study planned for Iron Age pottery (personal communication, Kent Fowler, May 24, 2019).

<sup>45</sup> See Hamed J. Salem, “Implications of Cultural Tradition: The Case of the Palestinian Traditional Pottery,” in *Archaeology, History and Culture in Palestine and the Near East: Essays in Memory of Albert E. Glock*, ed. Tomis Kapitan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 70.

<sup>46</sup> Bradley J. Parker, “Bread Ovens: Social Networks and Gendered Space: An Ethno-archaeological Study of Tandir Ovens in Southeastern Anatolia,” *American Antiquity* 76 (2011): 603–27.

<sup>47</sup> Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood*, 157. A photo of this scene appears in Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, 144.

<sup>48</sup> Hamdan, *Crafts of Jordan*, 30–31; Amiry and Tamari, *Palestinian Village Home*, 42–43; Grant, *People of Palestine*, 92.

mentioned several dozen times in the Hebrew Bible, but who made them is never specified. Note, however, that *ṭene'*, one of several biblical words for “basket,” appears with “kneading bowl” (*miš'eret*), a woman’s utensil, in Deut 28:5, 17. This supports ethnographic evidence that women made baskets and thus taught their daughters basketry.

### **Health Practices and Household Ritual**

Both health practices and household ritual involved women’s technological wisdom and can be considered religious activities. However, because they have material correlates, they are best discussed here rather than in the next section.<sup>49</sup>

Health practices entailed both preventative and restorative measures. The former included customs meant to avert maladies thought to be caused by divine will, demonic forces, or the evil eye.<sup>50</sup> Protecting expectant mothers, newborns, and vulnerable young children was chief among the preventative efforts, and mothers practiced a variety of apotropaic measures, using amulets and other devices, probably with accompanying incantations.<sup>51</sup> Motherhood involved protecting the youngest

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<sup>49</sup> For archaeological correlates of household religion, see Kristine Garroway, “Children and Religion in the Archaeological Record of Ancient Israel,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 17 (2017): 122–39.

<sup>50</sup> These three “causes” of maladies are discussed in Carol Meyers and Laura Zucconi, “Illness, Injury, and Infirmary in Ancient Israel,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Households in the Biblical World*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald, Carol Meyers, Eric M. Meyers, and Chris L. de Wet (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>51</sup> See *my Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 13–17, 31–34, 39–47, 49–56.





offspring and teaching older girls how to make and use the requisite devices or materials. In addition, because the household was the primary locus for caring for the ill and injured, women were no doubt adept at using a variety of traditional restorative practices. Their role as healers was a function of their familiarity with the herbs, many of which may have had medicinal properties, processed in the mortars mentioned above.<sup>52</sup>

Additional evidence for women as healers is found in 1 Sam 8:13, in which Samuel warns the people of the possible exploitative aspects of a monarchy, including that a king would take “daughters” to work in the palace. One of those jobs (*raqqāḥot*) is commonly translated “perfumers” but is better rendered “ointment-maker” or “compounder,” for the root *rqḥ* in the Hebrew Bible refers mainly to the preparation of oil-and-herb mixtures for culinary (e.g., 2 Kgs 4:39) or cultic (e.g., Exod 30:25) purposes. Such ointments or unguents arguably had medicinal uses too. In any case, “daughters” are the ones who will take on this role, along with that of cooks and bakers, in the palace. The “daughters” label implies that they learned these three household skills from their mothers.

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<sup>52</sup> Carole Fontaine (*Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 356 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 76, n. 131) lists several dozen natural substances comprising the *materia medica* of Israelite households. Hyssop, e.g., was both a flavoring and a purgative (Ps 51:7). See also Meyers and Zucconi, “Illness, Injury, and Infirmary.”

Also instructive is the maternal imagery for God in Hos 11:3–4, where God teaches the people (Ephraim) how to walk. God also feeds and “heals” them—that is what mothers do. Ethnographic evidence provides similar information: “medicinal remedies” were “well known to, and used by, all village matrons.”<sup>53</sup> Motherhood thus meant teaching daughters multiple uses of natural substances.<sup>54</sup> In their preventative and restorative acts, women were ritual experts, and this technical wisdom was transmitted to their daughters, the next generation of mothers.<sup>55</sup>

Other household rituals were associated with women’s role in preparing food. Both daily meals and feasts had a sacral aspect, and food preparation was thereby ritualized.<sup>56</sup> In learning to prepare food, daughters also learned about household offerings for festivals or for ancestors.<sup>57</sup> Especially important was the

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<sup>53</sup> Winifred S. Blackman, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt: Their Religious, Social and Industrial Life To-day with Special Reference to Survivals from Ancient Times* (London: Harrap, 1927), 42.

<sup>54</sup> Sharon A. Sharp notes the abundance of “studies that mention ... mothers, grandmothers, other female relatives, or female neighbors as the persons who used and passed on knowledge about remedies”; see her “Folk Medicine Practices: Women as Keepers and Carriers of Knowledge,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 9 (1986): 245.

<sup>55</sup> Susan Starr Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>56</sup> For the archaeological evidence of household meal rituals, see James W. Hardin, *Households and the Use of Domestic Space at Iron II Tel Halif: An Archaeology of Destruction*, Lahav II (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 133–43. For ethnographic evidence, see, e.g., Jill Dubisch, “Culture Enters through the Kitchen: Women, Food, and Social Boundaries in Rural Greece,” in *Gender and Power in Rural Greece*, ed. Jill Dubisch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 207.

<sup>57</sup> See my “Feast Days and Food Ways: Religious Dimensions of Household Life,” in *Family and Household Religion: Toward a Synthesis of Old Testament Studies, Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Cultural Studies*, ed. Rainer Albertz, Beth Alpert Nakhai, Saul M. Olyan, and Rüdiger Schmitt (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 239.



ritual treatment of bread, which was literally the staff of life, comprising nearly three-fourths of an adult's daily caloric intake. Its sanctity was manifest in how it was handled. Ethnographic observations reveal a millennia-old custom. In the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East, Anatolia, central Asia, even southeastern Europe, dropping a piece of bread is still considered profanity; one immediately would pick up the fallen morsel and kiss it.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, bread's sanctity appears in the biblical reference to a donation of dough (Num 15:17–21) to secure “a blessing ... on your house” (Ezek 44:30b). Again, mothers were ritual experts as they carried out these practices and taught them to their daughters.

### Specialized Skills

Virtually every mother taught the technical skills noted above to their daughters. But there were other skills that required a level of expertise and knowledge that not every woman possessed. Thus, a village or town might have one or two of these especially skilled women, who perhaps can be deemed “professionals” in that their skills served people in their community in addition to their own households.<sup>59</sup> In traditional societies, such expertise is

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<sup>58</sup> *Inter alia*, Anna Ciezadlo (*Day of Honey: A Memoir of Food, Love, and War* [New York: Free Press, 2011], 243), who describes a Lebanese custom. See also Gina Ochsner, “Latvian Bread Is a Breakfast and a Blessing,” *Extra Crispy*, February 6, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/SBL2641a>.

<sup>59</sup> As “professionals” they may have been paid. There is no biblical evidence for this; but a rabbinic text (M. Ketub 4:4) indicates that women were remunerated for one of the professions noted below, keening; and payment in kind for another profession mentioned below, midwifery, appears in ethnographic sources (e.g., Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood*, 102–4; Blackman, *The Fellahīn of Upper Egypt*, 89).

typically passed down by these skilled women to their daughters, who became their professional successors. As one observer comments, “technical skill required for specialized occupations is transmitted through the kinship lines.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, for relatively few women, motherhood also involved teaching their daughters specialized techniques or skills.

One example would be specialists in mourning or lamenting the dead. Texts and iconographic materials from the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world, and also ethnographic reports from the Middle East and Mediterranean area, all indicate that the reciting of laments was a women’s performance genre.<sup>61</sup> Biblical evidence for mourning women as a skilled group in ancient Israel appears in Jeremiah: “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider, and summon the dirge chanters that they may come; send for the skilled women that they may come” (Jer 9:17 [Hebrew 9:16]; cf. Ezek 32:16).<sup>62</sup> Those women were enjoined by the prophet to teach their skills to their daughters or even to daughters of other households: “Hear, O women, the word of the LORD, and let your ears receive the word of His mouth; and teach your daughters wailing, and each to her neighbor a lament” (Jer 9:20 [Hebrew 9:19]).

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<sup>60</sup> Ammar, *Growing Up*, 20

<sup>61</sup> Evidence from the ancient Near East and Aegean world are summarized by Susan Ackerman, *Women and the Religion of Ancient Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 242-48.

<sup>62</sup> Translations of biblical texts are the author’s unless otherwise specified. Note that the Hebrew word translated “skilled women,” *ḥakāmôt*, can also be rendered “wise women,” that is, women possessing technical wisdom as noted in the introduction.



Proficiency in another performative genre, namely, playing the frame drum (*top*), was arguably taught by skilled women to their daughters. Dozens of musical instruments are mentioned in the Bible, and some (notably ceramic rattles) have survived in the archaeological record. However, there are no surviving examples of the frame drum, which appears to have been exclusively a woman's instrument in ancient Israel.<sup>63</sup> How did a woman transmit her musical skills to a younger woman? We can only speculate that, in the absence of the kind of musical education in today's world, talented mothers taught their daughters, or neighbors' daughters, the requisite skills.

Midwives, knowledgeable about the techniques of delivering an infant and the afterbirth, are another example. They are mentioned three times in the Hebrew Bible: Gen 35:17, when Rachel gives birth to Benjamin; Gen 35:8, when twins are born to Tamar; and Exod 1:15–21, when Puah and Shiphrah deliver Hebrew babies in Egypt. In traditional societies midwives were usually older women, past child-bearing age,<sup>64</sup> and midwifery was a specialized pursuit carried out in the same family for generations. Their role in delivering babies had a religious as well as a physiological dimension, for chants or incantations to ward off evil spirits likely accompanied the physical aspects of

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<sup>63</sup> See my "Of Drums and Damsels: Women's Performance in Ancient Israel," *Biblical Archaeologist* 54 (1991): 16–27.

<sup>64</sup> Jean Towler and Joan Bramall, *Midwives in History and Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 3; Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood*, 60.

helping a woman through pregnancy and parturition.<sup>65</sup> The pronouncement of Rachel's midwife has been called a "salvation oracle."<sup>66</sup>

## Life Lessons

Religious and moral education surely extended beyond maternal instruction in the ritual aspects of health care and food preparation noted above. Information about such education cannot be correlated with material culture but must be gleaned from texts and ethnography, both of which suggest that instruction in religious and cultural ideals was a parental responsibility.<sup>67</sup> Biblical texts that instruct parents to teach God's word to their children (e.g., Deut 4:9–10; 6:6–7) use masculine grammatical forms, but presumably they are gender inclusive in most cases.<sup>68</sup>

How instruction mentioned in Deuteronomy was manifest in Israelite households may be a moot issue, given uncertainty about the date of authoritative Pentateuchal texts. Even early

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<sup>65</sup> Midwives in other ancient Near Eastern cultures were religious specialists who recited appropriate blessings, prayers, and incantations; see Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Groningen: STYX, 2000), 115–16.

<sup>66</sup> Rainer Albertz, "Personal Names and Family Religion," in Rainer Albertz and Rüdiger Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 281. Albertz suggests that it was part of longer ritual text known from Mesopotamia.

<sup>67</sup> See Shawn Flynn, *Children in Ancient Israel: The Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 99–100.

<sup>68</sup> Jeffrey H. Tigay asserts that "every parent is to be a teacher of religion." See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1996), 46. Note that in Deut 17:2 both women and men are required to keep the stipulations of the covenant.



versions of those texts were unlikely to have been part of household education for most of the Iron Age, but stories of past events probably were. Psalm 78, which dates to Iron IIB, enjoins people (vv. 4–6) to teach their children about Yahweh’s mighty deeds.<sup>69</sup> Surely both parents told stories of the past, with surviving grandparents taking the lead. In traditional societies lacking general literacy, the oldest living generation—grandparents, but especially grandmothers—often take on “the narrative activities of the group,” transmitting both community and family lore to the youngest members of the household.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, old women are often the most gifted storytellers.<sup>71</sup> Children learned about the past from grandmothers if not also mothers, perhaps in the form of proverbs as well as stories (see below).

Teaching about proper behavior was surely an integral part of household life. Mother-child interactions themselves are the basis for internalizing family values and goals.<sup>72</sup> As the primary caretakers and socializers of children, mothers across cultures

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<sup>69</sup> Richard J. Clifford, “Psalms,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 846.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 39. Note that the Second Temple book Tobit has a woman teaching the “law of Moses” (1:8) to her grandchild.

<sup>71</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Vol. 1:364.

<sup>72</sup> Gisela Trommsdorff and Hans-Joachim Kornadt, “Parent-Child Relations in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *Handbook of Dynamics in Parent-Child Relations*, ed. Leon Kuczynski (London: Sage, 2003), 287.

are “guardians of morality and values.”<sup>73</sup> The strong association between women and wisdom in the Hebrew Bible arguably reflects this maternal role. The oft-cited Proverbs texts about a mother’s teaching (1:8; 6:20; 31:26) attest to maternal pedagogy in transmitting life skills and values; mothers no less than fathers would give advice to the sons who are the target audience of Proverbs. Indeed, some Proverbs passages (ch. 7 and perhaps chs. 1–9) are arguably women’s words.<sup>74</sup> Further, the personification of Wisdom as a woman in Proverbs (e.g., Prov 7:4; 8:1; 9:1) and as the descriptor of a city (Abel of Beth-maacah) as a “mother in Israel” (2 Sam 20:19) possibly indicate that personified Wisdom originated in the mother’s pedagogic role in family life.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Eve—the prototypical mother (“mother of all living,” Gen 3:20)—exhibits and seeks wisdom.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Susan Harper, “Religion and Mothering,” in *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, ed. Andrea O’Reilly (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 1056, 1057. See also Garroway, “Children and Religion,” 121.

<sup>74</sup> Alice O. Bellis, “The Gender and Motives of the Wisdom Teacher in Proverbs 7,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996): 15–22; Athalya Brenner, “Proverbs 1–9: An F Voice?” in Athalya Brenner and Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*, Biblical Interpretation Series 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 113–26.

<sup>75</sup> See Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Bible and Literature Series 11 (Sheffield: Almond, 1985); Jenni Williams, “‘Mother in Israel’: Women and Wisdom,” in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John J. Jarick (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 618; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 38–55. Michael V. Fox (*Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 18A [New York: Doubleday, 2000], 331–41) reviews theories about the origins of personified wisdom.

<sup>76</sup> Susan Niditch, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 47; Linda Day, “Wisdom and the Feminine in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster, 2006), 115–16; my “Eve in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Routledge Handbook to Eve*, ed. Carolyn Blyth and Emily Colgan (London: Routledge, forthcoming).





To be sure, the highly curated nature of Proverbs mostly reflects royal or scribal, and thus male, composition. However, some Proverbs materials likely originated in family contexts.<sup>77</sup> Powerful ethnographic evidence affirms that proverbs and sayings were a major communicative mode for conveying the rules of social interaction in daily life. They were thus instrumental in shaping and transmitting the value system of largely illiterate agrarian households. In traditional village settings they expressed “values of honesty, cooperation, [and] hard work” and were “commonly used to accentuate everyday conversation.”<sup>78</sup> These aphorisms were not learned from books but rather emerged spontaneously in the context of daily life.<sup>79</sup> Even historical knowledge was transmitted in this way: “Most knowledge of the past has been reduced to a series of sayings or proverbs in order that they might be transmitted orally with greater ease.”<sup>80</sup> Women as well as men offer rebukes and counsel in Arabic poetry related to biblical genres.<sup>81</sup> Given the role of Israelite women as educators and their association with wisdom in the Bible, Israelite mothers as well as fathers surely

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<sup>77</sup> So, *inter alia*, Katherine J. Dell, *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 88.

<sup>78</sup> Audrey Shabbas, “The Child in the Arab Family,” *Link* 12 (1979): 9.

<sup>79</sup> Afif I. Tannous, “Group Behavior in the Village Community of Lebanon,” *American Journal of Sociology* 48 (1942): 232.

<sup>80</sup> Lutfiyya, *Baytin, a Jordanian Village*, 172.

<sup>81</sup> Shelomo Dov Goitein, “Women as Creators of Biblical Genres,” trans. Michael Carasik, *Prooftexts* 8 (1988): 3, 12.

admonished and advised their offspring with well-known sayings.

### **Discussion: Maternal Authority**

By inculcating life lessons in their children, Israelite women were exercising maternal authority, for folk sayings and proverbs are considered authoritative in traditional cultures.<sup>82</sup> Thus women's use of proverbs and admonitions signifies the authority of Israelite mothers.<sup>83</sup> What may be less obvious to us modern observers is that the process of teaching daughters the techniques and technologies of daily life likewise afforded mothers household authority. Such instruction controlled the flow of skills and knowledge across generations, and this control was central to establishing and maintaining maternal authority.<sup>84</sup>

Two other aspects of Israelite motherhood signify maternal authority. The first accompanies the beginning of a child's life, when the newborn is named. Mothers give the name in over half the biblical reports of naming children. In one tally women give the names in twenty-seven instances and men give names

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<sup>82</sup> So Lutfiyya, *Baytīn, a Jordanian Village*, 172. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel," in Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 83.

<sup>83</sup> See John Barton, "Ethics in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament," in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John J. Jarick, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 618 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 25.

<sup>84</sup> See Sutton, "Mothers, Daughters, and Others," 103–4, 106.



seventeen times.<sup>85</sup> In another calculation the mother (biological and adoptive) gives the name twenty-four times and the father nine times (plus once when the mother, Rachel, dies).<sup>86</sup> In either count, the father is name giver mainly in atypical situations, as when the wife is foreign (e.g., Gen 41:50–52). These statistics clearly favor the mother as name giver, especially if the ancient versions—where the mother names the child in seven name-giving texts for which the MT has the father giving the name—are taken into account.<sup>87</sup> One more element of name giving favors the mother: mothers give all but one of the twenty-two etymological speeches.<sup>88</sup> Taken together, these features indicate that paternal naming was the exception, introduced by the androcentric interests of biblical authors, and that maternal naming was the default situation. Data from preexilic inscriptions are relevant. Of the 675 epigraphically attested Hebrew personal names, 28.4 percent of them refer to experiences surrounding the person’s birth and were arguably

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<sup>85</sup> E.g., Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 41, 163 n. 2.

<sup>86</sup> Timothy Finlay, *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 35–36. In addition, God gives the name four times, and the parents name their child together once (Gen 25:25). See also the tabulation and discussion in Edward J. Bridges, “A Mother’s Influence: Naming Children in the Hebrew Bible,” *Vetus Testamentum* 64 (2014): 389–400.

<sup>87</sup> Rainer Kessler, “Benennung des Kindes durch die israelitische Mutter,” *Wort und Dienst* 19 (1987): 25–27.

<sup>88</sup> Finlay, *Birth Report Genre*, 41, 248 n. 15. The one exception is Moses naming Gershom in Exod 2:22, perhaps as a way of deemphasizing Zipporah in favor of Miriam; so Finlay, *Birth Report Genre*, 238–40.

given by the mothers.<sup>89</sup> Name giving, which places the name giver in authority over the named, was another dimension of maternal authority.<sup>90</sup>

The other aspect of maternal authority involves adult children, specifically sons, who remained in the family household when they married, whereas a daughter moved to her husband's household. Adult sons are not usually considered in discussions of motherhood, largely because of our modern experience of adult children becoming independent of parental authority. In traditional societies like ancient Israel, mothers and fathers continued to have authority over adult sons. That this relationship was sometimes fraught is suggested by several biblical texts (e.g., Exod 21:15, 17; Deut 21:19–20), which surely concern sons still residing in the parental household.<sup>91</sup> In a more positive vein, mothers played a role in arranging children's marriages (as for Rebekah in Gen 24 and Samson in Judg 14). A mother's continued connection to grown sons is suggested by the way Sisera's mother looks for her son to return from battle (Judg 5:28) and perhaps by the woman-in-the-window motif in Iron Age iconography.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, several biblical texts indicate

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<sup>89</sup> See Albertz, "Personal Names and Family Religion," 254, 297," and "Appendix B5: Names of Birth," 582–601.

<sup>90</sup> Savina J. Teubal, "Naming Is Creating—Biblical Women Hold the Power," *Bible Review* 11 (1995): 40.

<sup>91</sup> Blenkinsopp, "Family in First Temple Israel," 71; also, most admonitions in Proverbs are directed to young adult offspring (66–67).

<sup>92</sup> E.g., "Furniture Plaque Carved in Relief with a 'Woman at the Window' ca. 9th–8th Century B.C.," Metropolitan Museum of Art, nos. 57.80.13 and 57.80.12.



that mothers had considerable influence over their grown sons: in Prov 31:1–9 a king receives forceful advice from his mother, and in 1 Kgs 2:13–20 Bathsheba guides Solomon. Maternal influence over adult sons in ancient Israel is supported by ethnographic accounts; one reports that “even after marriage the mother retains the highest place in her son’s love and respect.... His mother reigns supreme.”<sup>93</sup> Authoritative motherhood was another dimension of household power accruing to senior Israelite women because of their managerial role in Israelite households.<sup>94</sup>

### Concluding Comments

Motherhood in ancient Israel was not restricted to biological reproduction and the attendant physical care provided to newborns and young children. Cultural reproduction was also an intrinsic and vital dimension of motherhood in agrarian Israelite households. As the primary caretakers of young children, mothers played a key role in the cross-generational transmission of the practical aspects of daily life, especially for the daughters who would one day become mothers in their own households. The essential technologies required for the production of food, clothing, and certain utensils and vessels were passed from mother to daughter, as was the knowledge of healing practices and household rituals. In addition, broader aspects of culture, including language acquisition, household and community

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<sup>93</sup> Blackman, *Fellaḥīn of Upper Egypt*, 45. See also Shabbas, “Child in the Arab Family,” 13.

<sup>94</sup> See my *Rediscovering Eve*, 182–93.

values and customs, and religious beliefs and behaviors, were dependent on mother-child interactions.

In the modern world, much of a child's education is usually entrusted to educational systems and religious institutions outside the home; extensive media exposure also has a significant impact on how and what a child learns. That is, as important as families are, the acquisition of knowledge is inextricably linked to organizations and forces beyond the family. How different it was in biblical antiquity, when virtually all of a child's knowledge of technical and social skills, cultural mores, and community traditions and beliefs was the result of family interactions in household life! Both parents were primary educators, with mothers and fathers directing their instruction largely toward their same-sex offspring. Yet, until boys were old enough to accompany their fathers as they carried out the tasks characterizing male identity and responsibilities, a mother's (and perhaps a grandmother's) care dominated the lives of both girls and boys. Thus, maternal instruction in manifold aspects of family and community life was a fundamental component of a child's development. Mother-child relationships were a foundational and indispensable aspect of daily life and family continuity, and the embedded and embodied wisdom of Israelite motherhood signals women's importance and influence in the household and, in the case of specialized expertise, the community. As anthropologists have long recognized, a mother's interaction with her children teaches roles, values, and worldview—in short, culture.

