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Editorial: Parenthood in the Ancient Near East

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The mystique of the ancient Near East has captured the imagination of the Western world since archaeologists and tourists first began visiting the region in the 19th century. Archaeologists brought to life buried cities, translated cuneiform archives found within them, and strove to preserve the exotic pieces of material culture. Works combined texts, material culture, and the sciences to help uncover what public life was like in the ancient Near East. The history of various kings, priests, temples, administrative buildings, and city-plans quickly came together. It was a history of elite adult men. Around the 1980s scholars of the ANE began asking about the “lives of ordinary people,” to borrow a phrase from William Dever, turning the tide from the public to private sphere.² Chief among these studies has been the topic of the household. A household consists of three components: the physical structure, the people who live there, and the actions that took place within it.³

The study of households in the ANE is by its very nature interdisciplinary. In order to understand how households function, scholars look to anthropology, ethnography, and comparative

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² William Dever, *The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel: Where Archaeology and the Bible Intersect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

³ Richard Wilk and William Rathje, “Household Archaeology,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 25 (1982): 618.

sources to help weave together the individual pieces left behind in the archaeological record. The interdisciplinary model put forth by Carol Meyers first in *Discovering Eve* and then *Rediscovering Eve* has been instrumental in this regard.⁴ Studies from the early 2000s looked specifically at the structure of the Israelite four-room house. Comparing the layout of the four-room house and the earlier Canaanite house, Avraham Faust and Shlomo Bunimovitz pushed scholars to think about the use of space in the four-room house as egalitarian.⁵ Around the same time, an issue of *Near Eastern Archaeology* brought to the fore the impact the impact gender can have on archaeological reconstructions of the ANE.⁶ Scholarship began addressing women role's and women's spaces within the household, specifically with relationship to the work force, domestic religion, food and, textile production.⁷ Recently, more specialized studies have uncovered the sights, smells, and senses of the ancient household.⁸ We also know more now about what individuals ate, how food was

⁴ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) and *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵ Avraham Faust and Shlomo Bunimovitz, "The Four Room House: Embodying Iron Age Israelite Society," *NEA* 66 (2003): 22–31.

⁶ See specifically, Carol Meyers, "Engendering Syro-Palestinian Archaeology: Reasons and Resources," *NEA* 66 (2003): 185–97; Susan Ackerman, "Digging Up Deborah: Recent Hebrew Bible Scholarship on Gender and the Contribution of Archaeology," *NEA* 66 (2003): 172–84.

⁷ Beth Alpert Nakhai, *The World of Women in the Ancient and Classical Near East* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2000); Jennie R. Ebeling, *Women's Lives in Biblical Times* (London: T & T Clark, 2010); Brigitte Lion and Cécile Michel, eds., *The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2016); Stephanie L. Budin and Jean MacIntosh Turfa, eds., *Women in Antiquity: Real Women Across the Ancient World* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁸⁸ Annette Schellenberg and Thomas Krüger, eds., *Sounding Sensory Profiles in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019); Davide Nadali and Frances Pinnock, eds., *Sensing the Past: Detecting the Use of the Five Senses in Ancient Near Eastern Contexts: Proceedings of the Conference Held in Rome, Sapienza University, June 4, 2018* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020); Kiersten Neumann and Allison Thomas, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Senses in the Ancient Near East* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).



produced, and ancient foodways.⁹ The turn away from large scale, city-plan centered excavations towards the household has also impacted the way in which excavations are run. Current excavations now routinely include careful reconstructions of domestic structures, including the artifacts found within.¹⁰ These reconstructions and spatial analyses continue to lend new understandings of the gendered use of space within the house.

Part of this turn from the public to private sphere has also seen a rise in the number of studies dedicated specifically to the family. Lawrence Stager's 1985 article, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," is widely regarded as piece that turned scholarship in this direction. The 1990s saw a continued interest in the family as books like *The Family in Ancient Israel* presented insights into the family and kinship-based structures from early Israel through the Second Temple period.¹¹ Discussions of families and private lives became substantial entries in major ANE reference works as well.¹² More recently, scholars have started to look at the components of

⁹ Cynthia Shafer-Elliott, *Food in Ancient Judah: Domestic Cooking in the Time of the Hebrew Bible* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Max Price, *Evolution of a Taboo: Pigs and People in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Shahal Abbo, Avi Gopher, and Gila Kahila Bar-Gal, *Plant Domestication and the Origins of the Agriculture in the Ancient Near East*, trans. Halo Ben Asher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Janling Fu, Cynthia Shafer-Elliott, and Carol Meyers, eds., *T & T Handbook of Food in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* (London: T & T Clark, 2022).

¹⁰ See, for example Yuval Gadot and Assaf Yasur-Landau, "Beyond Finds: Reconstructing Life in the Courtyard Building of Level K-4," in *Megiddo IV: The 1998–2002 Seasons*, ed. Israel Finkelstein, David Ussishkin, and Baruch Halpern (Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology, 2006), 526–43; James Hardin, *Lahav II: Household and the Use of Domestic Space at Iron II Tell Halif: An Archaeology of Destruction*, Reports of the Lahav Project (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2010).

¹¹ Leo Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997). For a comprehensive overview of scholarship on the family using social scientific and archaeological data see the introduction in Patricia Dutcher-Walls, ed., *The Family in Life and in Death: The Family in Ancient Israel: Sociological and Archaeological Perspectives* (LHBOTS 504). T & T Clark, New York/London 2009.

¹² For example, Jack Sasson's four volume *Civilization of the Ancient Near East* (1995) includes private lives of ancient Hittites, Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Israelites.

the family, namely children. The last two decades have seen an explosion of offerings dedicated to uncovering hidden children within the textual and archaeological record.¹³ Despite the emphasis on children, many studies dance around those people who have raised them; parents remain in the background.¹⁴ This issue of *Avar* is dedicated to a specific subset of people who live within the household—parents—and the relationship that they have with their children.

There are many aspects to parenthood in the ANE. At its very basic level, a parent is one who raises and cares for another. While most children were likely raised by their biological families, the recorded instances of parenthood often address non-biological parents. The corpus of sale, marriage, divorce, or adoption texts, as well as myths, laws, and narratives present cases of individuals in extenuating circumstances. Mundane daily occurrences did not require documentation. The texts left behind describe both real and fictive families, and parents who are young, old, and even divine. The six articles in this volume offer insights into various aspects of a parent's life, which would be applicable in cases of real as well as fictive parenthood. They address everything from childlessness to childloss, wisdom passed to children and the frustrations of raising children, fatherhood and motherhood, and the struggles of women as adult children living within the patriarchal household structure.

The volume opens with Carol Meyers's essay, "The Wisdom of Israelite Mothers: Technical Training and Life Lessons," in which

¹³ For those taking an interdisciplinary approach see, *inter alia*: Daniel Justel Vicente, *Infancia y legalidad en el Próximo Oriente Antiguo durante el Bronce Reciente (ca. 1500–1100 A.C.)* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018); Kristine Henriksen Garroway, *Growing Up in Ancient Israel: Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018); Julie Faith Parker and Sharon Betsworth, eds., *T & T Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World* (London: T & T Clark, 2019); Shawn W. Flynn, ed., *Children in the Bible and the Ancient World: Comparative and Historical Methods in Reading Ancient Children* (London: Routledge, 2019).

¹⁴ Older studies often mention children and parents together, but do not focus on the relationship between them. For example, works on slavery or adoption often focus on the institution rather than the individuals being described.



she looks beyond the biological aspects of motherhood to focus on the social aspects. Characterizing the social aspects of motherhood as wisdom places a mantle of authority on the mother, something usually associated with a father. Meyers explains how mothers are responsible for imparting two types of wisdom. The first is practical wisdom, which encompasses technologies needed to maintain a household related to food, textiles, and rituals. She characterizes the second type of wisdom as socialization, where a mother teaches and models for her children the social and moral values of the Israelite household.

Next, Agnès Garcia-Ventura and Mireia López-Bertran's article, "A Tearful and Busy Mother: An Approach to the Construction of Motherhood through the Study of a Mesopotamian Baby Incantation" examines the hardships of motherhood related to caring for infants. They examine the tension a woman encounters between her domestic duties as the head of the household and the exhausting work of mothering an infant and the tears that express this tension. At times this tension appears in Sumerian and Akkadian literature to make the mother out as lazy. Using a lens of empathy studies, they reread a mother's tears as signs of both empathy and exhaustion and defend the Mesopotamian ideal of the industrious mother.

While motherhood was expected of most women, there were certain situations in which women were not allowed to have children. In "Other than Mother: On Childlessness as Part of the Social Identity of *Naditu* Women," Katrien De Graef delves into the life of such women in Old Babylonia. She reassesses the current understanding of the *naditu* and the childbearing taboos placed on them, arguing that they are 'othered' intentionally as non-birth-giving-beings. Rather than being problematic, this 'otherness' added to their social status, playing an important part of their identity as a privileged group within society.

Perhaps a parent's worst nightmare is to outlive their children. In "Hiobs Vaterschaft und die Trauer um seine Kinder: Eine Relektüre

des Hiobbuches,” Anja Marschall explores the intersection of child loss and the resulting grief in a parent’s life. She compares typical mourning practices for children in the ANE with Job’s reaction, and further looks to the sciences to help understand how grief manifests itself. Using psychology as a lens to understand Job’s grief, she re-reads the conversations between Job and God, to show how the book of Job is more than just literature on justice and divine will, but also a book about grief, protest, and coming to terms with irretrievable loss.

While Marschall addresses the role of the grieving father, Luciana Urbano addresses the role of the kingly father. Her article, “No me desobedezcas, ¡solo ve! La política matrimonial de Zimri-Lim de Mari o de la disposición masculina sobre los cuerpos femeninos,” looks at the way in which kingship intersects with the role of fatherhood (and in the absence of fathers, brothers) through documents of marriage alliances in Old Babylonian Mari. Analyzing power dynamics through the lens of gender studies, Urbano reveals how the threat of marriage dissolution was an act of rebellion utilized by daughters as they were bound up in the patriarchal kinship structure, and subject to the wishes and whims of their male family members.

Sari Fein continues the discussion of a woman’s place within the patriarchal household structure. Her insights into parenthood understand the house of the father, the *bêt ’āb*, as the location of fatherhood and primacy. A woman’s place as a daughter within this *bêt ’āb* is precarious. Using theories of agency and gender, Fein’s article, “Discourse and Intercourse: Women’s Speech and Sexuality in the House of the Father,” analyzes ways in which women’s speech patterns can appropriate masculine speech traits in order to provide the women with a measure of security and, in doing so, reinsert themselves back into the *bêt ’āb*.

These articles represent the wide breadth of work being done on parenting and parenthood in the ancient Near East. Each article offers a different perspective on a topic that has long been a part of



the human experience. In addressing a universal topic such as parenthood through different interdisciplinary lenses, the articles here not only provide new information, but also bridge the gap between the past in present, making the unfamiliar a little bit more recognizable.