The Flawed Family of God

Stories about the Imperfect Families of Genesis

Carolyn B. Helsel
Song-Mi Suzie Park

WJK Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville • Kentucky

Contents

Introduction

"Biblical" Families?

What does the Bible say about what it means to be a family? And what does the Bible have to do with the current struggles of families today?

A husband and wife are worried about their sons who keep bullying, fighting, and teasing each other, so much so that the parents worry about their sons' physical safety. Their fighting has caused a split in the family as each parent lines up to the side of one child or the other.

An older couple have been trying for years to conceive a child without success. They have given up hope of being able to have their own child, so they go through a process of surrogacy. Another woman carries the child for them. But then the unexpected happens: the surrogate wants to keep the child she has borne, and the couple struggling with infertility conceive a child of their own. What happens now to the child conceived through surrogacy and to the woman who carried that child for the couple?

A man feels called to leave his hometown and travel to a new country with promising new opportunities ahead. The wife feels she has no say in the matter. How will their marriage weather the relocation?

With a bit of creative imagination, perhaps you have picked up on the fact that the previous three vignettes were from the Bible: Genesis 25, Genesis 16 and 17, and Genesis 12. But with that same creativity, perhaps you could hear the similarities to what contemporary families are experiencing: fears about bullies, dealing with infertility and blended families, and family moves.

As you read this book we hope you understand that the stories of the Bible, particularly the stories about families, have relevance for the

experiences of families today. What do we mean by "relevance"? We mean that they relate to our experiences in that these stories tell us something about what it means to be a family, including the struggles inherent to family life.

How We Read the Bible

When we say these stories have relevance, we also mean that they are important. These stories are important because they are part of the biblical canon, the books that have been passed on from generation to generation through religious faith communities that have viewed these texts as special and authoritative in some way. For hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, Jewish communities of faith would tell and hear, and eventually write down and collect, these stories about the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Hebrew people. As Christians began forming new faith communities following the ministry of Jesus, they too adopted these Scriptures as their own, reading the stories of Genesis along with the rest of the books we call the "Old Testament," or more appropriately, the "Hebrew Bible," side by side with what we term the "New Testament."

For hundreds of years, these stories were read only by learned priests and scribes, but they were shared with other believers through storytelling and preaching at the synagogues. The purpose of such storytelling was to remind people of faith that God accompanies us through life, including the ups and downs and moments of discouragement and suffering. The stories of our faith continue to serve this purpose, reminding us that God sees our suffering and pain and that God promises to be with us throughout our lives.

The ways we read the Bible are as different as the people who read the Bible, but there are some general commonalities across different groups. One way to read the Bible is as literature: seeing the Bible as a group of stories compiled thousands of years ago, much like the stories of Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. Because these are stories written in another time period and for another culture, they may not feel directly relevant to our daily lives since they do not connect to our religious communities.

Another way of reading the Bible is devotionally. This way looks to the Bible as a book with pages full of messages directly from God. When people speak of the Bible as God's Word, sometimes they mean specifically that the Bible was actually dictated by God to each author who participated in writing it down. For people who read the Bible this

way, they are reading the stories in Genesis as a direct message from God, which may include that all of the events in the stories took place exactly as they were written: the six days of creation, the order of which life forms existed first, and so on. For people who read the Bible this way, the stories in Genesis can seem like a prescription for how life *ought* to be lived.

But there is another way of reading the Bible, and this way can also be devotional; but to distinguish it from the paragraph above, let us use a different term: *relationally*. Reading the Bible "relationally" means that we are in a relationship with the Bible. The God described in its pages reflects and is intertwined in complex ways with the God we know from personal experience and from the communities of faith who have surrounded us since our birth. We are in a relationship with these stories because they have been told to us from our youngest memories by people of our faith communities or traditions who also believe that God is reflected in and through the stories in the Bible.

To read the Bible, and in particular, the book of Genesis, *relationally* means that we believe God speaks to us through these stories, though not necessarily in ways that we assume. Just as God was in relationship with the people whose stories we learn about in Genesis, so too God is still in relationship with us today. It is important to realize that reading the Bible this way means that we see the Bible as *not the same as God*. God is *not* the Bible. Some people want to read the Bible as if the Bible were God, and we see that as idolatry. The Bible is not God. And yet the Bible is one of the best sources we have for coming to an understanding of God and how communities of faith have understood God working in their lives for ages. To read the Bible *relationally* means that we are in a relationship with the Bible, and that relationship is separate from the relationship we have with God.

To take this to another level: in order to have a relationship with God or to have a good relationship with the Bible, you do not need to believe that God created the world in six days. You do not need to believe the story of creation in Genesis 1–3 is a historical and scientific description in order to have a relationship with the God who created all of the expansive and ever-expanding universe as we know it, and you do not need to place unfair expectations on the Bible to be something it is not. You can still have a relationship with the Bible, learning from it and letting it teach you about who God is, without expecting it to teach you about geology or biology.

Reading the Bible Relationally and Learning about Biblical Families

So what does how we read the Bible have to do with the families portrayed by the Bible? A lot, it turns out. If we read the Bible as only the absolute words from God's mouth, we may tend to see the descriptions of biblical families as somehow reflective of the way God intended for families to be. That is, we may misinterpret the biblical text as a kind of easy do-it-yourself instructional manual. But there is a lot of pain and abuse and inappropriate ways of relating to one another in these stories. If we took these words as absolutely the way God intended life to be—as prescriptive—we may believe that God wants us to suffer, and we may unintentionally harm others by suggesting their suffering is willed by God. Especially when we are talking about children, it is essential that we reject any notion that God wants them to suffer abuse from their parents or from others.

But reading the Bible *relationally* means that we can talk back to some of these texts. We can get angry at them, and we can ask questions about them. We can get angry at the God or the various characters mentioned in these stories who allowed these things to happen. As we see in the book of Psalms, God's people are constantly expressing their anger at God when things go wrong. We can continue to do the same today *because we are in relationship with God, and we are in a relationship with the Bible*. We can get mad at how Adam blames Eve for the Fall. We can get mad at the way Abram treats his wife Sarai when he passes her off as his sister to the pharaoh in Egypt. We can get mad at the story in Genesis 22 where God supposedly tells Abraham to sacrifice (kill) his son Isaac. We can get mad at the story in Genesis 34 that we never heard about as children: the rape of Dinah. We can be in a relationship with God and question why God would allow this and many other stories of abuse and torture to remain in the Bible.

To read the Bible relationally means that we can come back to it, even when we have not been immersed in its pages for many years, having turned our backs on its painful messages. The God who has met us there in the Bible's pages is still there with us today, and God will meet us again in these stories. And that may be exactly why you need to return to it: pain in your own family or the situations your family is facing may be making you wonder where God is. Rather than finding picture-perfect families in the Bible, we find mirrors of our own dysfunctional dynamics. And in those family portraits that the Bible presents us with, we see ourselves and the experiences of our loved ones, perhaps in new ways. And

just as God was with those families, so too is God with us now, seeing us in our pain and struggles and wanting us to know God accompanies us.

God accompanies the families of the Bible, and God uses them and works through them in often surprising ways. As we look at these stories together, we hope that you will experience God accompanying you as well.

Outline of the Book

We center our relational reading of families in the Bible by focusing on the stories in the book of Genesis. Genesis is not only filled with stories about the first human families, but as the first book of the Bible, it also colors how we think about families both in the Bible and in our own lives. As such, each chapter of this book will take a careful look at one particular story in Genesis that concerns an issue faced by a family. For each story, we will first examine the biblical tale in detail, pointing out interesting and important features, and also explaining how the story might differ from the way it is usually remembered or taught in churches. This close reading of the biblical story is followed by a discussion of the modern relevance of the tale—that is, the ways in which the biblical story affects and is related to similar issues or instances in our lives today.

To offer a brief overview of the various stories and issues we will consider in this work, we begin our exploration of families in chapter 1 by showing how the two myths about the creation of humanity in Genesis 1–3 serve as a blueprint for a diverse reimagining of families. Continuing the saga begun by the creation myths, chapter 2 focuses on the tragedy of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1–16) by looking at the impact of competition, rivalry, and jealousy in families. Our study of dysfunctions in the family continues in chapter 3 as we consider the lingering effects of trauma on Noah and his family in Genesis 6:5–9:28.

We delve into issues related to family moves and trailing spouses in chapter 4 by examining Abram and Sarai's migration in Genesis 12:1–20; and in chapter 5, we focus on Sarai's infertility—a problem experienced by many biblical characters—and one which still affects people today. The issue of infertility leads to discussion in chapter 6 about the challenges faced by blended families, such as those created by remarriage or adoption, as we explore the first blended family in the Hebrew Bible: Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael.

Chapter 7 turns to the weighty issue of child abuse and other instances of child "sacrifice" in the family, including the difficulties of someone coming out as LBGTQ, by examining the near sacrifice of Isaac by his

father in Genesis 22. Speaking of family problems, competition among parents is the focus of our discussion in chapter 8, which considers the troubling situation of Rachel and Leah, sisters who are both married to Jacob. Chapter 9 examines the long, complex story of the twins Jacob and Esau, as they move from trauma, familial wounds, and estrangement to reunion and reconciliation. And finally, chapter 10 looks at the irreplaceable nature of a family member as we discuss how a death affects the family unit.

Hopes for This Book

Our exploration of these family stories and issues is centered on three goals. The first is that you will be able to see the relevance and connections between these biblical texts and the struggles of families today. This means looking deeper at the book of Genesis and exploring stories that may have been missed in the traditional Sunday school curriculum you learned as a child.

For instance, the story of Noah and the ark is not only told to children in Sunday school, but it is also one of the most widely recognized pictures for decorating the rooms in which we teach children Sunday school. But what if we look more closely at Noah's story as it unfolds, especially the scene where he becomes drunk and curses his grandson, a curse that Christians used for hundreds of years to justify slavery? What if we looked at this story as a way of talking about the impact of traumas on a family (a flood destroying the earth's inhabitants would surely have been traumatic!), and include in that discussion the ways traumas lead to family secrets and family interventions, and the importance of no longer covering up the actions of leaders who hurt others? In an era of #MeToo and ongoing clergy sex abuse scandals, it is important that we help people in churches stand up to authoritarian leaders and interpretations of the Bible that have been used to justify the misuse and abuse of power.

We want to take a deep dive into these stories that may be familiar, as well as those that are not, in order to talk about how these texts can serve as mirrors for some of the pain in our modern world. Returning to the idea of reading the text relationally, it is important that we see it not as a voice that speaks only of what God wants and intends. Rather it should also envision the text itself as a mirror of what is happening in our lives and as a testimony that God is still present in the messiness of it all. For families today who are struggling with moving for a parent or spouse's job, for example, perhaps they can listen to the story of Sarai and Abram

and see the pain of their journey as something that enables them to talk in their own family about the difficulties of relocation.

Second, we want to give voice to the characters in these texts who do not actually have a voice in Scripture, and let these silences be a reminder to us today to listen to the voices in our own families that often are silenced. Sarai, when following Abram out of Ur, doesn't have a say in the matter. Similarly, there are couples today navigating moving cross-country or the world for one family member's job—either through corporate moves or military base relocations or educational opportunities. Sometimes members of a family feel that they do not have a voice in those moves. So connecting these two experiences—the lack of voice of the characters we read about in the text and the felt sense of lacking voice in the family that some family members may experience—can hopefully help create a bridge between the world of the text and the world of our families today, to deepen empathy and opportunities for discussion in and among family members.

Third, and this builds upon the first two goals, our goal is to help readers deepen their relationships and make more meaningful connections with their families and communities of faith. By making stories from the book of Genesis relevant to the lives of families today, and by practicing empathy with characters whose voices are silenced by the biblical narrative—as well as with family members who may experience their own voices as being silenced—we hope to create opportunities for persons to have conversations about their family relationships in ways that can deepen their connections and create a greater sense of care. Ultimately, we hope that readers can feel seen and heard by God and by others in their family by discussing experiences common to many families through the lens of the biblical text and by cultivating a deeper sense of empathy with and for one another.

These three goals, in summary, guide our work: helping readers find relevance in these biblical stories to the experiences of families today; creating opportunities for empathetic listening to voices in the text and in families; and encouraging readers to deepen their own familial relationships and connections with their faith communities.

Churches can become a family for many individuals, and it is important that these conversations about family—in the broad sense of human longing for connection—happen in churches where many families worship together and people join to find a place of belonging. We hope this book will be accessible to persons who are in small groups together, as well as a helpful tool for preachers looking to engage these issues from

the pulpit. Whether you are reading this book alone, as a member of a family you grew up in, or with a family of your own today, we hope you will see and hear in these pages some of your experiences addressed. And in the way we talk about the text, we hope you will be able to engage more deeply with the relationships all around you: in your home, with your family of origin, and with the family that is your community of faith. Along the way, we hope you will deepen your relationship also with this text we call the Bible, strengthening your ability to challenge and question parts of it that seem harmful, as well as opening yourself up to the wisdom it still conveys. And ultimately, may your deepening relationships remind you of the constant and abiding presence of God, who does not need us to "work on" or "deepen" our relationship to God, but who is always already deeply abiding in us and through us, throughout our lives.

Chapter 1

Not Good to Be Alone?

Singleness and Breaking the Norm

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 1:1–3:24

Introduction

The idea of "biblical families" may seem to conjure up some sort of traditional understanding of what it means to be a family: a man, a woman, and their children. Unfortunately, the church has too often painted this picture as the only way for people to be part of a "family," ignoring the fact that many people live in situations that are very different from that particular arrangement. The church is also a place where some people feel particularly left out if they are not married with children. To begin this discussion of biblical families, we want to challenge some of the ideas around "family" because there are many ways of being a family. We also want to name the ways that the church has at times harmed people who feel left out of traditional images of family.

So first, we study the story that started it all off: the story of Adam and Eve, where the Bible first says that it was "not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). We look at this story to raise questions, and to consider whether the basic storyline is itself a message we are passing on in the wrong way. For instance, when churches assume it is "not good" for persons to be alone or to be single, we are sending a message that a "real" family is something different, when in reality persons who are single can tell us what it means to be a family just as much as persons in long-term relationships can. Or another example is how the church has used the story to paint Eve, and all women, as inferior to men. These are mistakes we want to avoid in retelling this story. And along the way, we want to question how these stories have influenced our own views of the family

and how we may need to shift in how we view one another. Let us begin with an in-depth look at the beginning of Genesis.

Families at the Beginning of Creation

Considering the dramatic plot and unforgettable imagery—a pristine garden paradise, forbidden fruit, a cleverly talking snake, and a devastating expulsion—the story that ends with humanity's exit from Eden is usually imagined as the *only* story about humankind's creation in the Bible. Yet unknown to most readers, this story is one of *two* different accounts of the creation of human beings and therefore of the first human family in the biblical corpus. The prominence given to the Eden story and to a particular commonly accepted interpretation of this narrative have greatly impacted the ways in which the church envisions human relationships, setting up a normative vision of the family that has limited the more complex ideas conveyed in the biblical text.

The First Story of Creation

Mesmerizing in its liturgical cadence, the Bible begins with the creation of the universe by an omnipotent deity imagined as a fluttering spirit and commanding voice (Gen. 1). Perhaps because of its hypnotic repetition of divine satisfaction, "it is good," as well as its neatly ordered day-by-day structure, most readers gloss over the first succinct narrative of humanity's creation that comes at the conclusion of this chapter. On the day before the first Sabbath, which finalizes God's great creative act (the Hebrew root, *shabat*, means "to rest, cease, desist" as well as "seven"), the biblical text states that God created humanity alongside all the other living creatures on the earth (Gen. 1:25–27).

The description of humanity's creation is simultaneously humbling and lofty. We are created alongside all the other earthly creatures and, as such, envisioned as no better than—indeed, as siblings of—the animals, creeping things, and beasts that are also divinely birthed on the sixth day (v. 25). This humbling description speaks to the deep interconnectedness of humanity with the other creatures that inhabit this divinely created world. This understanding in turn compels us to widen our vision of the family as one inclusive of other living beings that share this planet with us.

After declaring our familial place alongside other creatures, the text pivots to point out humanity's uniqueness by pausing to detail our creation:

"So God created humankind [*ha-'adam*] in its/his image; in the image of God, it/he created it/him; male and female it/he created them . . ." (1:27, author's translation). This single poetic sentence, which encompasses the first story of humanity's creation in the Bible, tells of how God created humanity—in Hebrew, *'adam*, a word related to the term for earth and soil (*'adamah*), and which later will be used as the personal name of Adam—in God's image.

This sentence, however, is packed with ambiguities and contradictions, the most important of which is the switch of pronouns at Genesis 1:27 from singular to plural in the Hebrew of the Masoretic Text (MT), which is the authoritative Hebrew version of the Hebrew Bible. Some translations, like the NRSV, might mention this switch of pronouns in their notes. In this verse, humanity is referred to by the singular pronoun in the first part of the sentence ("in the image of God, it/he created *it/him*"), but switches to the plural in the second part of the sentence ("male and female it/he created *them*"). The fluctuations in the pronouns convey two significant points. First, this story explicitly states that males and females are created at the same time. If we assume that birth order conveys notions of hierarchy, the simultaneous creation of male and female strongly suggests that the genders are equal. Second, the concurrent creation of males and females has implications for the imagined gender of the creator deity. It suggests that the deity who created these first human beings might also encompass both genders. Going further, the fluctuations in gender even put forth the possibility that this creator deity is fluctuating in gender. This vision of the creator God as fluid, neutral, or complicated gender-wise is significant when we consider that humanity is said to be created in God's image (v. 27). If we are made in God's image, then we too might be more complex in gender than we presume.

These ideas that emerge from this first story of creation—that we, as human beings, reflect both our androgynous creator deity and also the beasts and animals that are created alongside us on the same day—open up space to enlarge our understanding of the family. A family need not necessarily consist of a male and a female and their children, as is typically imagined, but can consist of a more heterogenous and complicated grouping, such as that of a single person and their pet, or two friends. Indeed, even a single person in relationship with their God can be considered a family. The meaning and idea of family, in short, can be enlarged to encompass any group composed of creatures in relationship with each other or with their deity.

The Second Story of Creation

The second story of creation in Genesis 2:4b–3:24, usually attributed to a different source or group of writers, has a variant account of the creation of humankind. This second account initially appears to assert more firmly the bifurcation of genders: God states that it is not good for Adam, who is created first from the dust of the ground and assumed to be male, to be alone (2:18). However, God cannot find a fitting helper (*'ezer ke-negdo)* for this first human among any of the animals (2:20); this leads to the creation of the woman through the surgical use of Adam's rib; this woman will later eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, leading to the expulsion of the first humans from the Garden of Eden.

Interpreters have taken the creation of the woman after that of the assumed man, the use of Adam's anatomy in her creation, and the woman's designation as a "helper" as indicative of the inferiority of the woman, and therefore all women. Yet, as Phyllis Trible has shown, there are significant problems with this argument.[1] The most prominent problematic assumption is that the creation of the woman after *ha-'adam* implies her subordination and deficiency. This assumption presumes that the first created being in the Eden story, designated as *ha-'adam*, or "the human," only encompasses one single gender: male. However, since the differentiation of genders does not occur until after Eve's creation and Adam's subsequent declaration of the intimate relationship between the two genders (2:23), the first being might have been androgynous, not simply male.

As to the order of creation, being created second need not necessarily imply inferiority. Rather, as evident in Genesis 1, creation climaxes with the creation of humanity on the sixth day and with God's rest on the seventh. Hence, the creation of the woman at the very end of God's creative act might indicate that she is the apex or culmination, not a subsidiary, of God's creative act. Equally dubious is the claim that females are inferior because of the woman's creation from a rib. This "method" of creation, Trible argues, is no better or worse than the creation of the first person out of the dust of the ground. Rather, considering that no other living creatures in the garden sufficed as a partner for the first human, there is a heightened sense of divine intentionality with the creation of the first woman, which again hints of Eve's superiority.

The fairest reading, however, is that the Eden story, similar to the first story of humanity's creation, also evinces a kind of equality between

the two genders. When the woman is created, the man happily declares: ". . . this one shall be called Woman [*'ishshah*] for out of Man [*'ish*] this one was taken" (2:23). The wordplay between "woman" (*'ishshah*) and "man" (*'ish*) indicates that the two genders are intimately interrelated and interdependent. Indeed, notice that the woman is designated as a "helper befitting him" (*'ezer ke-negdo*) (2:18, author's translation)—with the term *neged*, which means "in front, opposite" or "parallel to," used alongside the term *'ezer*, which means "helper." Considering that is *'ezer* is a word frequently used to describe God (cf. Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:26, 29; Pss. 121:2; 124:8), this description seems to imply that the woman, as a helper parallel to the man, is equal to him. Both the woman and the man therefore are equal partners in a mutually beneficial relationship.

THE REMAINDER OF THE CHAPTER IS NOT INCLUDED IN THIS EXCERPT