

Bite Size Bible Study

Kinship #213

By Pastor Lee

What is Kinship? The dictionary says that it is the state or fact of being of kin. In other words, a family relationship.

Originally it referred to one's family or race, but quickly became narrowed to refer just to one's blood relations. One's "next of kin" is their closest family member: spouse, child, parent, or sibling.

Next was the extended family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) and all were part of a larger clan (or tribe).

The unwritten rule was that anyone who was not a blood relative was an enemy or at least not to be completely trusted. Interestingly, this is true even in most reptile, bird, and animal societies, to name a few.

Why do we feel that we can only trust blood relatives?

Generally, people who are "blood relatives" will deal with you in a good way. They will not cheat you or cause you to fail in business or fail personally. This expectation is not always true, and many Bible stories portray kin vs. kin relationships – not the least was Cain and Abel.

The patriarch of the clan was the oldest living male member, and was responsible for the whole clan. The head of each household was the male "bread winner" who was responsible for providing for his family, slaves, servants, and members of the extended family who were too old or otherwise unable to provide for themselves. An important responsibility of the head of the household was arranging marriages for his children and this was taken very seriously.

Marriage was fundamentally a business arrangement designed to assure and perpetuate an orderly society. Marriages were contracts to formalize business agreements concerning land sales, water rights, mutual protection, or for any agreement the parties understood as mutually beneficial. As business agreements, they were begun with a legal contract signed by the heads of the households in the presence of witnesses and stanchioned by the patriarch of the clan.

In addition to the business portion of the marriage the purpose of marriage was to provide the paternal line with legitimate heirs. This aim did not preclude the possibility that the home knew romantic love between man and wife and parental affection for their children, but these were secondary concerns to the practicalities of perpetuating the lineage for a family.

Kinship

In Israel's patriarchal culture an individual's privileges and responsibilities within the family, clan, the tribe and the larger society were predetermined by their lineage,

gender and birth order. The patriarch exercised the highest level of authority within the society; he also bore the highest level of responsibility. Among the children, all males inherited, but the firstborn received a double portion. In return for this privilege came the burden of increased responsibility.

We see this in the New Testament story of the prodigal son. What does the eldest say? "*Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours!*" (Luke 15:29 NIV).

As the eldest, you can be sure that all his life he had pulled the heaviest workload, the largest share of household chores, the closest scrutiny of his father's watchful eye. No wonder this firstborn is angry with his younger brother who has squandered his part of the family estate and is now further endangering the economic well-being of the family by his return.

Or think of Jacob's twelve sons. When the brothers conspire to murder Joseph, who intervenes? Reuben, the eldest (Gen 37:18-22). He convinces the others to leave Joseph in a dry cistern, out of which Reuben intends to rescue him. When Reuben returns to find the cistern empty (as the brothers had sold Joseph), he tears his garments and cries out: "The boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?" (Gen 37:30). How will this eldest son explain to his father that he has failed to protect his younger brother?

Or think of Boaz's declaration in response to Ruth's request for redemption that "there is a relative closer than I" (Ruth 3:12)

One's level of responsibility toward another member of the tribal society (and privilege with that individual) was determined by blood. The more closely related, the greater the responsibility; the more distantly related, the lesser the responsibility. Whenever the relationship went beyond the tribe, there was no responsibility toward that individual or group. Although one could treat them well, there was no requirement to do so.

Fictive Kinship

How might a person go about establishing a relationship of privilege and responsibility with someone who is not a relative?

A person would have to **make** a relationship with that person who is not a blood relative. This was accomplished by means of fictive kinship. By means of an oath the people of Israel's world understood that a fictive kinship bond could be established by which both parties agreed to act like family.

In tribal societies there were legal mechanisms or covenants by which outsiders, non-kin, might be

incorporated into the kinship group. Hence, on the individual, tribal and, eventually, national level, if you needed someone to **act** like a family member, and you were willing to give that person the privileges of family in return, you would invite that individual (tribe or nation) into a covenant agreement which created **fictional kinship**.

Perhaps the easiest way for us in the 21st century to understand this sort of arrangement is to think in terms of marriage and adoption. Even in our present, nontribal societies we understand the notion of making someone family who was previously not family, simply by means of a legal agreement. By claiming someone biologically unrelated to me as my child or my spouse, I am also legally binding myself to care for that individual as if they were blood-related to me.

Are the legal and moral responsibilities of an adoptive parent any less than those of a biological parent? Of course not. Rather, by means of a legal agreement, two unrelated individuals become family and bear all the responsibilities and privileges that lie within. This is fictive kinship, and this is the concept that made covenant making in the ancient Near East ideologically possible.

Our Neighbor

We are to love our neighbor, but as the expert in the law ask, who is my neighbor?

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Luke 10:25-37 NIV

God created all human beings, both the male and the female, and He is referred to as Father, making Him patriarch of the human family. Could it be that since all human beings are Sons of God that we are to consider everyone as "my neighbor"?

If everyone who has existed and does exist and will exist in the future is a member of His family, is this not a blood-family relationship?

There is no need for a fictive kinship because everyone is in the Family of God and has the responsibilities and privileges of the family.

We are all Kin

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