

## The House of the Mother

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*John J. Collins*  
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# The House of the Mother

The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in  
Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry

CYNTHIA R. CHAPMAN



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*For Daniel, Christine, and Jonah*

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# Acknowledgments

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# Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992.
ASV	American Standard Version
AYB	Anchor Yale Bible
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford, 1907.
CAD	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . 21 vols. Chicago, 1956–2014.
CAT	Commentaire de l’Ancien Testament
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Continental Commentaries
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by W. W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden, 1997–.
DCH	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . Edited by D. J. A. Clines. 5 vols. Sheffield, Eng. 1993–.
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
Eng.	English
HALOT	Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden, 1994–1999.

HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>JANES</i>	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JCS</i>	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
KJV	King James Version
<i>KTU</i>	<i>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit</i> . Edited by M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín. <i>Alter Orient und Altes Testament</i> 24/1. Neukirchen-Vluyn, West Ger., 1976. 2nd enlarged ed. of <i>KTU: The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani, and Other Places</i> . Edited by M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín. Münster, 1995 (= <i>CTU</i> ).
LXX	Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament)
MT	Masoretic Text
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
<i>NEA</i>	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i>
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	Old Testament Studies
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SAACT	State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts
SAAS	State Archives of Assyria Studies
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H.-J. Fabry. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 15 vols. Grand Rapids, Mich., 1974–2015.

<i>UF</i>	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WC	Westminster Commentaries
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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## The House of the Mother

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# Introduction: Disrupting the Begats (*tôlêdôt*)

One of the popularly known features of the Bible is its penchant for genealogies, often described in the King James language as the “begats.” Genesis 4 provides the first human genealogy, recording seven generations from Adam to Lamech. A section of this genealogy reads, “Irâd begat Mehujael; and Mehujael begat Methusael; and Methusael begat Lamech” (Gen 4:18),<sup>1</sup> an unbroken chain of fathers and presumed firstborn sons. At the generation of Lamech, however, the begats give way to narrative, and the narrative introduces new categories of kin into the patriline: wives, a younger brother, and a younger sister. Lamech, we read, “took unto him two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah.” Adah had two sons, and Zillah had a son and a daughter. The introduction of these two mothers with their pairs of children interrupts the patrilineal flow. The seven generations of named men represent the biblical authors’ organization of the known world into a single family, a neatly schematic patriline. In the culminating seventh generation, however, wives introduce social and economic divisions among men. Adah becomes the mother of pastoralists “who dwell in tents” and musicians “who play the lyre and pipe.” Zillah’s descendants become metallurgists (Gen 4:19–22).

We also find that at the seventh generation, the lines of kinship relatedness shift from the lineal father-son linkage to the lateral wife-mother-son-sibling linkage. If we imagine a genealogical chart, the line from Cain through Lamech would descend vertically down from father to son to grandson.<sup>2</sup> At the generation of Lamech, when the language of paternal begetting gives way to maternal bearing, the line splits laterally into two maternal groupings.<sup>3</sup> Even here, however, each mother is described only as

“bearing” her firstborn son; the second child of each mother is introduced as the sibling of the son of the same mother. And so for Adah, we read, “Adah bore Jabal. He was the father of pastoralists who dwell in tents, *and the name of his brother was Jubal*” (Gen 4:20–21; emphasis added). Jubal, the younger son, is not tied directly to either his mother or father; his primary kinship bond is to “his brother,” and through his brother to his mother. The similarity in the sound of the two brothers’ names contributes to a sense of connectedness between these sons of the same mother.<sup>4</sup> We find a similar pattern of connectedness between Zillah and her children. Zillah is tied directly to her firstborn son, Tubal-Cain, as the one who “bears” him (Gen 4:22), but Zillah’s daughter, Naamah, is introduced through her older brother as “the sister of Tubal-Cain.” At the generation of Lamech, therefore, women and maternally aligned children disrupt and divide the paternal line. Stated differently, at the generation of Lamech, the patriline becomes a paternally named household, what elsewhere in the Bible is referred to as “the house of the father.” Lamech’s house is complex, containing two maternally headed sub-houses, each comprising two maternally identified siblings (fig. 1).

What we see in this single text is actually a biblical pattern: exclusively paternal genealogies give way to narratives that introduce households, and these households contain fathers, mothers, wives, concubines, slave wives, firstborn sons, second-born sons, daughters, foreigners, and slaves. The introduction of women and maternally defined subgroups of kin disrupts the neatness of a patrilineal genealogy, marking divisions within a paternal line. This book focuses on these disruptions, namely, on complex biblical houses that are named for founding male ancestors but include socially marked women and maternally identified kin. When the biblical patriline becomes a noisy, fully peopled house, we find not only a father and his firstborn son but a series of maternally aligned kin groups with specific kinship labels that delineate maternal sub-houses within the larger house of the father.

In a sense, the King James language with the repeated translation “begat” appropriately evokes an archaic ideology of patrilineality that biblical writers and modern biblical scholars alike have been too ready to present as a totality, the full picture of ancient Israelite kinship. Certainly, biblical authors valued and recorded exclusively paternal lines in the form of genealogies, but they also preserved the far more inclusive house of the father. Any study that attempts to account for the full picture of biblical kinship must include both of these mechanisms for describing kinship relatedness.

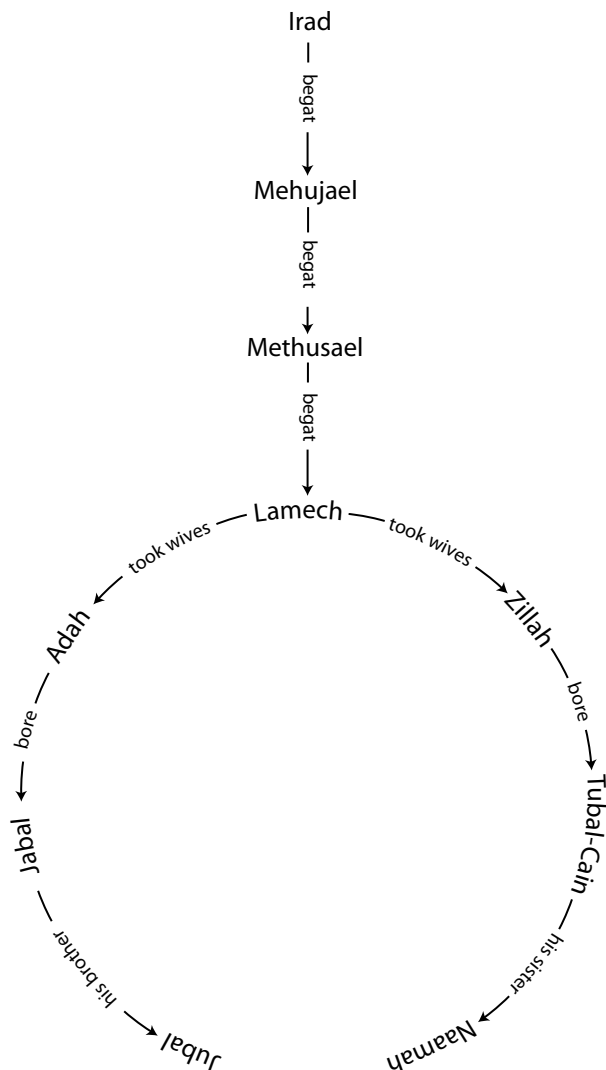


Figure 1. *Disrupting the patriline, Gen 4:18–22. Illustration by Bill Nelson.*

## The Patriline in the Bible

In biblical Hebrew the term that most closely approximates the concept of “patrilineage” is *tôlêdôt*, which is usually translated “the generations” and in some cases “the story.” The word *tôlêdôt* is associated with the priestly author, who uses the term to provide an “account of men and

their descendants,” a story of “successive generations,” and an accounting of “genealogical divisions.”<sup>5</sup> Ronald S. Hendel considers the *tôlēdôt* an “ethnic genre” specific to Hebrew literature, a biblical category used to denote “genealogical time.” He also notes that the word literally means “the begettings” and is appropriately translated “lineage.”<sup>6</sup> While these translations and explanations of the term are appropriate, at its most basic level, *tôlēdôt* means “the paternal begettings”; it denotes male reproductive generation of select males. The priestly *tôlēdôt* feature a series of men who “beget (*hōlid*)” single sons. Both the noun *tôlēdôt* and the verb *hōlid* are based in the *hip’il* stem of the verb *y-l-d*, which is explicitly masculine—“to cause to bear”—and therefore always translated “beget.”<sup>7</sup> Claus Westermann captures the exclusively male aspect of the *tôlēdôt* when he notes that at every generation a man is introduced “in such a way that it is the begetting of any individual by his father, not his birth, that is mentioned in the previous part.”<sup>8</sup>

Even as we acknowledge that the term *tôlēdôt* approximates the idea of a patriline, we have to note its limited use, occurring only thirty-nine times in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>9</sup> Given this limited use and its concentration in the priestly source, we can hardly argue that the Bible’s primary framework for understanding kinship is the patriline. In Genesis, the *tôlēdôt* serve as a literary “structuring clause,” and they likely represent an early genealogical source adapted and used by the priestly writers.<sup>10</sup> As a literary structuring device, however, the *tôlēdôt* frame narratives that feature maternally marked subgroups within a paternal line. Again, we return to the pattern of women and maternally identified kin disrupting the neatness and predictability of the patriline.

An examination of the *tôlēdôt* clauses in the ancestral narratives of Genesis demonstrates that even within these paternal genealogies, wives, additional sons, and daughters are present, named, and important. The Primeval History concludes with the *tôlēdôt* of Shem, Noah’s son (Gen 11:10–26). There are ten generations of named men between Shem and Abram; the first nine are listed as a pure patriline, naming only a father and his first-begotten son at each generation. At the generation of Terah, the patriline segments, and we learn that Terah had three named sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. As in the case of Lamech, the *tôlēdôt* of Terah introduce a household rather than a patriline, and Terah’s household includes a firstborn son, two younger sons, named wives, and a named grandson (Gen 11:27–30). What follows the *tôlēdôt* of Terah is a complex narrative cycle that ultimately presents the household of Abram/Abraham as a paternally named kinship unit that

divides into three maternal subunits: Sarah and Isaac; Hagar and Ishmael; and Keturah and her six sons (Gen 25). The *tôlêdôt* of Ishmael include a reference to his mother, Hagar, and her mistress, Sarah, meaning in the *tôlêdôt* sequence that he heads, Ishmael is introduced as part of a maternally named subunit within the house of Abraham (Gen 25:12–18). The *tôlêdôt* of Isaac, the chosen son in the subdivided house of Abraham, also introduce a narrative and household with a wife and twin sons (Gen 25:19–24). The *tôlêdôt* of Esau immediately divide his line into maternal subunits, each containing a grouping of sons and daughters (Gen 36:1–14). Finally, the *tôlêdôt* of Israel's eponymous ancestor Jacob focus immediately on the single son Joseph and introduce the full and maternally subdivided household of Jacob in the story of Joseph (Gen 37:2). This brief overview of the *tôlêdôt* in Genesis demonstrates that even when we focus our attention on those places in the Bible that use the word that most closely approximates a pure patriline, we find that each patriline yields to a more complex and often maternally subdivided household.

### **The Patrilineal Model in Anthropology: A Historical Overview**

The tension between an articulated value of patrilineality and the simultaneous preservation of narratives that demonstrate the importance of mothers and maternally related kin is something that anthropologists have recognized and begun to theorize. If we trace the development of kinship studies within anthropology over the past fifty years, we can document a complete reformulation of anthropological approaches to kinship. One of the key areas of critique and rethinking centers on the concept of patrilineality. Because biblical scholars' understanding of ancient Israelite kinship is so heavily indebted to anthropology, an understanding of the transformation within this field becomes an essential starting point for any new work on kinship in the Bible.

The first thing one notices when beginning research on kinship in the field of anthropology is a series of references to kinship studies as “reconfigured,” “revived,” “reformulated,” “transformed,” and “reconstituted.”<sup>11</sup> These descriptors bear witness to an upheaval within the area of kinship studies; they have been written in the aftermath of a methodological crisis. Anthropologists have described this situation as the “death” and “reconstitution” of kinship studies.

Turning first to what was initially thought to be the “death” of kinship studies, we begin with the scholarship of David M. Schneider, the anthropologist credited with bringing about this death. Starting with a 1965 article titled “Some Muddles in the Models: or, How the System Really Works” and culminating in his 1984 monograph *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, Schneider and his students have systematically called into question the very assumptions on which anthropological models of kinship and relatedness have been based.<sup>12</sup> A central tenet of Schneider’s critiques is his overarching distrust of anthropologists’ use of “models,” including the patrilineal model, as too theoretical, esoteric, rigid, and all-encompassing.<sup>13</sup> In 1972, Schneider presented an influential paper entitled “What Is Kinship All About?” at the centennial of the death of Lewis Henry Morgan, the anthropologist identified as “the father of kinship studies.”<sup>14</sup> In this paper, Schneider reiterated his critique of the use of models and the evolutionary charting of kinship systems from “primitive Others” to the creation of a “family” “resting on marriage between single pairs” (258). According to Schneider, kinship was something that Morgan “invented” and only existed “as a theoretical notion in the mind of the anthropologist” (269). A central critique within his paper focuses on the concept of “descent”; Schneider discredited the idea that kinship was based solely or even primarily on biological descent (270–71). Instead of studying societies based on preconceived anthropological models, Schneider advocated studying societies based on their own systems and terms for understanding relatedness. Once one turned to native categories, he argued, one could no longer justify treating kinship as a “distinct, discrete, isolable subsystem of every and any culture” (270).

Linda Stone recently summarized the impact of this 1972 paper as the “dropping of a bomb on the field of anthropology”: “Schneider’s bomb was nearly lethal for kinship studies: it spread shrapnel outward into other areas of anthropological inquiry, and its powerful echoes are still reverberating today. This bomb is summed up in Schneider’s now famous pronouncement that kinship ‘does not exist in any culture known to man.’ He declared that kinship—the very soul of anthropology, the subject that Robin Fox (1967:10) had said was to anthropology what the nude was to art—was thus a ‘non-subject.’”<sup>15</sup> The effect of Schneider’s critique can be seen, as noted by Stone, in the twenty-year period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, during which no major publications on kinship in anthropology appeared.<sup>16</sup>

As it turned out, however, Schneider’s scholarly challenges to the classificatory systems within the study of kinship did not bring about the death



of kinship studies within anthropology. Instead, when significant publications within the study of kinship began to reemerge after a twenty-year hiatus, they described kinship studies as “reconfigured,” “revived,” or “reconstituted.” When we look at the shared trends within recent works of reconfigured kinship studies, we see the lasting impact of Schneider’s critiques. First, there is a decisive move away from the use of any universalizing model to describe kinship systems as a whole. In place of an overarching model, anthropologists now focus on the specific historical and cultural context of the society or group they are studying. Rather than impose known European kinship terms on non-European societies, researchers retain indigenous terms and systems of classification for relatedness within a group.

Feminist and gender studies approaches have been a driving force in determining the parameters of reconfigured kinship studies. Their emphasis on power differentials in a given group has allowed for the emergence of “multiple ethnographic voices.” Anthropologists now pay attention to the social positions of different members of a given group and show how one’s position in a group determines one’s view of a classificatory system and one’s place within it. Differently positioned members within a group employ diverse strategies within a given kinship system in order to secure or improve their positions. These strategies are often keyed to ethnicity, gender, and class.<sup>17</sup>

The decisive move away from universalizing models and the new emphasis on women and gender resulted in a sustained critique and reworking of the concept of patrilineality. Once again, terminology provides our first clue to a methodological shift. Instead of referring to societies like ancient Israel as “patrilineal,” many anthropologists have begun to qualify the term, describing societies as favoring, preferring, or valuing male kinship links over female kinship links while nonetheless depending on both. Researching a wide variety of societies, anthropologists have concluded that the “pure” patrilineal model always represents an expressed ideal rather than a lived, practiced reality. Biblically, we have seen that the exclusively paternal record of history found in the *tôlēdôt* is most often juxtaposed with a narrative that details the roles of mothers, younger sons, and daughters. What anthropologists have shown should hardly surprise us: “professed” patrilineal societies depend on women and maternally related kin for their perpetuation and hierarchical ordering. Women and relationships established through women, scholars observed, introduce social and political divisions and hierarchies among men in professed patrilineal societies. Maternally

marked hierarchies are not temporary. They do not simply reflect a personal rivalry or jealousy among wives in a domestic household at a given point in time; instead, the hierarchies defined through mothers had an impact on the social and political positions of their children and grandchildren that endured for generations.

In an article focusing on the Nuer, Susan McKinnon creatively captures the skepticism among anthropologists concerning the patrilineal model in her subheading “Patri-? Lineage?”<sup>18</sup> Her skepticism is echoed in the descriptive phrasing of other anthropologists who label patrilineality “an illusion,” something that is “at least partly mythical,” an “ideology” that is part of a “cultural dogma.”<sup>19</sup> Greg Urban argues that anthropologists “fantasized” the importance of descent groups and then “project their own images willy-nilly onto the tabula rasa of indigenous communities.”<sup>20</sup>

While some anthropologists have argued for the complete elimination of the term patrilineality,<sup>21</sup> I have found the work of anthropologists who nuance, critique, and reframe it more helpful for biblical material. The authors of the Bible clearly valued patrilineality, and they recorded their history giving pride of place to foundational paternal ancestors. Biblical Hebrew has the indigenous term *tôlēdôt*, and biblical authors and redactors used the *tôlēdôt*, the lists of paternal begettings, as the connective tissue in their story of national origins. Therefore, it is appropriate to consider ancient Israel as a professed patrilineal society, a “male-favoring society,” while at the same time recognizing the idealized nature of the claim.

Susan McKinnon is one of the anthropologists who critiques the notion of a “pure patrilineal society” while at the same time recognizing patrilineality as an expressed ideal among the Nuer people. She reexamines E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s three-volume work on the ostensibly patrilineal Nuer people, showing how he created “artificial domains” in order to sustain the illusion of pure patrilineality. Evans-Pritchard, she argues, understood his three volumes on the Nuer to represent three discrete domains: *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* (1951) focuses on the “domestic” domain; *Nuer Religion* (1956) deals with religious and ritual domains; and *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of Nilotic People* (1960) covers the “politico-jural” domain.<sup>22</sup> Evans-Pritchard, McKinnon notes, limited his treatment of bilateral and affinal relationships to the domestic domain.<sup>23</sup> Namely, he argued that relationships established through one’s mother or through marriage were only important or worthy of analysis within the domestic domain. This is because Evans-Pritchard,

along with Meyer Fortes and Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, understood only male, segmentary relations of descent to endure over time, meaning that patrilineal descent alone had an impact on social and political formations over generations. Relationships established through women, they argued, only linked individuals like a husband and a wife or a son and his maternal uncle. Women did not link groups nor did they establish bonds that endured beyond a single generation.<sup>24</sup> McKinnon's reassessment of the Nuer demonstrates that women and relationships established through women were, in fact, essential to understanding what Evans-Pritchard had isolated as the purely patrilineal, politico-jural domain. McKinnon argues that these falsely constructed domains allowed Evans-Pritchard and others to "exclude from the comparative study of political systems all that they have relegated to the substructural 'domestic' domain—including bilateral kinship, affinal relations, and the 'internal' differences in status between persons, individuals, and categories."<sup>25</sup>

According to McKinnon, the practice of domaining also allowed anthropologists to lay claim to several false achievements. She identifies the clear, elegant diagrams of patrilineal descent as one of these false achievements. In her view, the simplicity of these models is only possible through the suppression of domestic and religious dimensions of social life. Ignoring matrilineal kin results in a political model that fails to account for the social hierarchies that such kin introduce into the dominant lineage. The religious and domestic domains are the venues where many of these social hierarchies are formed and practiced.<sup>26</sup> Other researchers have reached similar conclusions. Margery Wolf, whose work focuses on the people of rural Taiwan, argues that the exclusive focus on men in a patrilineal system may cause a researcher to miss "the system's subtleties and also its near fatal weaknesses."<sup>27</sup> For Louise Lamphere, it is the exclusive focus on the "rights and duties" of men in patrilineal models that fails to account for "power and strategies to gain power" where women play active roles.<sup>28</sup>

While anthropologists today emphasize the constructed and fictive nature of the pure patrilineal model, they do not reject the idea that these professed patrilineal societies valued relationships established through men over those established through women. McKinnon, for example, notes that among the Nuer paternal kinship ties were the most valued, but relationships established through female links still had considerable "potency and political force."<sup>29</sup> Edouard Conte recognizes that within Arab societies, marriage between children of paternal brothers is the expressed ideal, but in

reality, he argues, the Arab kinship system is cognatic and “characterized by marked asymmetry of gender relations.”<sup>30</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, who studied a Bedouin community in Egypt, recognizes that within this community, “agnation has indisputable ideological priority in kin reckoning” and “descent, inheritance and tribal socio-political organization are conceptualized as patrilineal.”<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, she adds, maternal kin are “strategically useful,” even though the bonds formed through maternal kin are conceptualized in terms of “sentiment”—“closeness, identification, common interests, and loyalty.”<sup>32</sup> The Bedouin preference for “kin ties established through agnation” found full expression in the way couples presented their marital ties. Even if a couple were more closely related through maternal kin, they would present their relationship in terms of their paternal kin.<sup>33</sup> This is an excellent example of the ways a cognatic reality may be hidden by an agnatic ideology.

Karen Sinclair, who studies the Maori, likewise notes that among the Maori, there is a decided “preference” for “patrilocal residence and transmission of property to patrilineal descendants.” But pure patrilineal descent and primogeniture are best understood as “values” held by the Maori; they are part of Maori “dogma.”<sup>34</sup> Maori dogma articulates a worldview where older brothers are “pure,” “legitimate,” and “system sustaining,” while younger brothers and women are “polluted,” “antisocial,” and “system threatening” (168). Maori myth, on the other hand, celebrates women and younger brothers as allied teams who “herald creative transformative feats” (157). Again, what we see is the coexistence of a professed patrilineal ideal with a messier reality that involved women and lower-status men.

A repeated observation within these reexaminations of purportedly patrilineal or male-favoring societies is that maternal kin introduce politically significant and generationally enduring hierarchies and internal group divisions. Maternal kinship bonds are not transient nor are they limited to the domestic household.<sup>35</sup> Abu-Lughod concludes that outside of agnation, “the two most important bonds between individuals were maternal kinship and co-residence.”<sup>36</sup> The Maori, who had a clear preference for patrilineal inheritance, still practiced what Sinclair calls “descent group recruitment through women” as a “second best” but useful choice.<sup>37</sup> Finally, Wolf concludes her study of the patrilineal and polygynous villages of rural Taiwan by emphasizing that “the descent lines of men are born and nourished in the uterine families of women, and it is here that a male ideology that excludes women makes its accommodations with reality.”<sup>38</sup> This ongoing critique of the patrilineal model suggests that biblical scholars engaged in

kinship studies need to theorize women and the relationships established through women. Instead of “domaining” women and matrilineal kin out of the treatments of political and social structures, we need to theorize all relationships within one lens, “as part of one integral system.”<sup>39</sup>

To summarize, the anthropological investigation of kinship structures has moved away from universalizing models in favor of culturally and historically specific investigations of individual societies. The historical and cultural integrity of a society is maintained in part through the retention of indigenous kinship terminology. Anthropologists recognize the language of a pure patriline as an articulated ideal rather than a practiced reality, and so they have expanded their investigations of kinship structures to include multiple players in a given household and society. Scholars now theorize the differently positioned members of a household and the multiple strategies each uses to gain a secure position. Most important for this study, women and the relationships formed through maternal ties are central to understanding internal and multi-group hierarchies in professed patrilineal societies.

### **Biblical Scholarship and the Reevaluation of Kinship in the Bible**

The thoroughgoing critique of the patrilineal model within anthropology requires that biblical scholars working today reevaluate earlier treatments of ancient Israelite kinship. Many scholars have already begun this process, and their work serves as a foundation for my own.<sup>40</sup> Here, I briefly mention only a few studies that have made important advances. In the 1960s, George E. Mendenhall and Mary Douglas had already rejected the use of universalizing models and evolutionary schemes in interpreting the historical development of ancient Israel.<sup>41</sup> Robert Wilson, Ronald Hendel, Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, and many others have demonstrated the ideological and socially constructed nature of biblical genealogies.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Lawrence E. Stager and David J. Schloen have outlined the ideological and symbolic language that the Bible uses to articulate its social and political organization through “the house of the father.”<sup>43</sup> Biblical scholars have noted the ambiguity of specific Hebrew kinship terms and identified their ideological function in the biblical text and their participation in social hierarchies within the house of the father.<sup>44</sup> They have shown multiple meanings for specific Hebrew kinship terms like *na’ar* (young man) and *na’arâ* (young woman), *’ab* (father) and *bat* (daughter), *bēkôr* (firstborn or

designated heir), *bēt 'āb* (house of the father), and *mišpāḥā* (clan, family).<sup>45</sup> Most important for my study are the many scholars who have demonstrated the important social, economic, and political functions of women in the house of the father and in village, religious, and political spheres as well. I engage the work of these scholars in all of the chapters that follow.

### **The Bible as the Primary Source for Biblical Kinship**

In this book I identify and define indigenous Hebrew kinship terms that are maternally specific. Since these terms are found in the narratives and poetry of the Hebrew Bible, the Bible is my primary source text; it is the literary context within which we can define and attempt to understand Hebrew kinship terms. Greg Urban's discourse-analysis approach to social organization is helpful in determining the nature of the Bible as a source document. He notes that a community's "discourse" or "talk" about kinship does not simply describe that community as it already exists; it participates in the community-building process.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, during times of transition or community upheaval, a community's discourse on kinship shapes its identity and can provide "seeming fixity with respect to a reality in flux."<sup>47</sup> This becomes important when we consider that biblical narrative was shaped into a nation-defining document during and following sequential exiles, historical periods marked by extreme uncertainty and communal upheaval.<sup>48</sup> For Judeans during and following the period of the Babylonian exile, the discourse of biblical narrative, poetry, and genealogical lists would have created a fixed or stable image of themselves that confronted their constantly shifting reality.<sup>49</sup> Several features of the evolving biblical story presented Judeans with an image of stability and purpose. Family narratives that offered migrant Judeans a discourse about being part of the "House of Israel" and descending from Jacob gave meaning to their return to the land. Discourse about the national god Yahweh as the god of their direct ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—helped a fractured community begin to feel connected. "Talk" about standing in a direct line of inheritance for the land of Israel empowered returning Judeans in their resettlement of Judah and what had been Israel. Finally, elevating this narrative to the status of scripture presented this evolving discourse on national identity as an agreed-upon image of the resettled Judah.

The Bible is not an ethnographic report of ancient Israelite society and therefore does not provide a direct window into the lives, values, and beliefs

of average ancient Israelites from a particular time period. Multiple ethnographic voices, however, are discernable even though the Bible is not *per se* an ethnographic report. Biblical family narratives provide differing vantage points on a house, village, society, or kingdom through multiple characters' voices. The male-favoring values found in the begats and in some proverbs give voice to a cultural ideal. Family narratives like those focusing on the household of Abraham or Jacob allow the voices of "underdogs and tricksters," women and younger sons, to be heard.<sup>50</sup> We can even consider the Bible's multiple sources, its redactional layers, as ethnographic voices; one generation comments on the values of a previous generation by adding a family member or changing a kinship label in order to give precedence to a particular view of history. In this book, we see how references to maternal kin can elevate or discredit a particular house's claim to insider status.

Maternally specific kinship terms appear most concentrated in the biblical books that feature well-known foundational family narratives: the houses of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Genesis 12–50; the house of Levi leading up to Moses in Exodus 1–6; the house of Gideon/Jerubbaal in Judges 6–9; the house of David in 1 and 2 Samuel. The core of the stories about these origin houses dates to the pre-exilic period.<sup>51</sup> We then have additional texts, likely dating to the exilic and postexilic periods, that update, expand upon, and revise these family histories. Ruth comments on an existing tradition of the house of David.<sup>52</sup> Song of Songs, with its attribution and punctuated references to King Solomon, assumes an existing lore about Solomon's royal house. Texts in Numbers reorganize the house of Jacob to reflect postexilic priestly ideals.<sup>53</sup> While it is outside of the scope of this book to provide a diachronic analysis of each maternally specific kinship term, there are some historical patterns that can be discerned in the development of the Bible's foundational family narratives. First, birth stories, which tend to provide information about the mothers of foundational ancestors, seem to develop late in the process of building a biography of a hero. Second, where we can trace a diachronic development of a hero's narrative, later additions seem to add genealogical complexity by including mothers or mothers' names, adding additional wives, or changing the label for a wife. In each of these cases, later authors use women in the hero's family ideologically to present a certain line, one to which the author likely belongs, as legitimate, ascendant, and divinely chosen. They also use the addition of wives and mothers to clarify other lines as outsiders to the people of Israel or as marginal within the power structures of a resettled Judah. So while this book is in

general synchronic in its approach to identifying and defining maternally specific kinship terms, there are certain places where a diachronic analysis helps to show the ideological function of wives and mothers in the ongoing construction of the Bible's foundational houses.

### **Extra-Biblical Literary Sources from the Ancient Near East**

The anthropological emphasis on examining cultures within their specific historical and linguistic contexts argues against any effort to make sweeping kinship claims about "the ancient Near East." This book focuses on biblical kinship terminology and does not attempt to draw comprehensive analogies with the broader ancient Near East. Nonetheless, there are strong arguments for bringing in some ancient Near Eastern sources that feature the same maternally specific kinship terms that we are attempting to understand. As Semitic languages, Ugaritic and Akkadian can provide a broader cultural, linguistic, and historical framework for understanding specific kinship labels. Many of the biblical kinship terms that I cover in this study are found in Ugaritic and Akkadian texts, even to the extent of replicating word pairs and using them in similar social contexts. Moreover, these kinship terms are found in texts of a similar literary genre, namely the foundational narratives of human and divine kings.<sup>54</sup> For example, the biblical word pair "my brother, the son of my mother," is also found in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle and in the Akkadian language Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon.<sup>55</sup> The examples of this word pair in the Bible are sufficient, in and of themselves, to establish the meaning of the kinship term and its expected social functions. Ugaritic and Akkadian parallels strengthen the argument made based on biblical source material alone. Moreover, the early dating of the Ugaritic and Akkadian texts demonstrates that the kinship structure within which maternal kin carried out important social functions was not a late Hebrew or postexilic innovation. Instead, the social function of maternal kin is as enduring historically as the male-favoring social structure within which it is embedded.

### **Modern Ethnographies**

Throughout this study, I, like so many biblical researchers before me, have turned to anthropological studies of kinship and to ethnographic studies of specific societies as a secondary source base for the study of bibli-



cal kinship. Ethnographies documenting societies that are historically, culturally, and linguistically removed from ancient Israel cannot be used to fill in the gaps in our historical record of ancient Israel. They cannot provide definitive answers to a biblical researcher's questions. Instead, modern ethnographic studies help to make biblical researchers such as myself aware of the cultural box within which we read and analyze texts and generate questions for the text. Once we are aware of our own cultural box, we can attempt to inhabit other cultural boxes in order to broaden our vantage point and generate new sets of questions and a wider range of possible answers. Ken Stone is correct here when he notes that "anthropological concepts can help us to construct and continually reassess our reading frames—that is to say, our ideas about the possible context of symbols and beliefs in terms of which the texts seem to make sense—in a way that at least mitigates our tendency to interpret biblical texts in terms of our own assumptions."<sup>56</sup> While modern ethnographies do not fill in the gaps in the biblical record, they can remove cultural blinders allowing biblical scholars to see patterns and make connections that might not otherwise have been possible. Still, only biblical and epigraphic evidence in Hebrew and related Semitic languages can provide the answers to questions raised by a biblical researcher's encounter with another society through a recorded ethnography.

One especially clear example from this book is found in chapter 6. My reading of ethnographic studies made me aware for the first time of multiple societies that considered breast milk to be a substance that transmitted ethnic identity and social status from mother or wet nurse to suckling. This new interpretive possibility led me to reconsider the Bible's understanding of breastfeeding and breast milk and helped me to recognize the indigenous Hebrew phrase, "O that you were like a brother to me, *one who had nursed at my mother's breasts*," as a kinship term. It also suggested that I pay attention to the ethnic and status markers that were present within biblical narratives that featured breastfeeding. A less specific example, but one that has proven essential to my research, is the prominent role of uterine siblings in polygynous societies. Uterine siblings are siblings born to the same mother in a household where the father has more than one wife. Jabal and Jubal, for example, are uterine siblings within the house of Lamech. Even though we cannot make a universalizing statement about the function of uterine siblings in male-favoring, polygynous societies, we can observe that this relationship is an important and strategic one that deserves scholarly attention.

There are a couple of checks and balances we can use when bringing ethnographic material to bear on the biblical text. First, any concept, kinship term, or cultural pattern that is suggested by a comparative ethnography and subsequently “recognized” within the biblical text should be present within the biblical text through indigenous terminology and modes of expression. Second, if an anthropologically generated term or concept is authentically present within the world of the biblical text, it will solve rather than create textual problems. In this book, we see how the concept of “patrilineage” led scholars repeatedly to emend the biblical text in order to maintain the illusion of a pure patriline. Restoring women and maternally identified kin to the house of the father shows that in multiple cases textual emendation is not necessary.

### **Archaeology**

While my primary source base is the biblical text, in chapters 1 and 3 I examine the archaeological scholarship on the pillared house and on gendering the house in order to elucidate the Bible’s division of the house of the father into maternal subunits. One of the main differences between the Bible’s houses and the excavated houses of ancient Israel is that biblical houses are much larger and more complex than the houses of average ancient Israelites. In some ways, the excavation of elite houses, royal palaces, and temples might provide more valuable data for understanding the multi-chambered, multi-tented, or multi-dwelling houses like those of Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, David, or Solomon. Still, some of the larger, rural household compounds that contained multiple dwellings opening onto a shared courtyard or linked by a contiguous wall help to provide a brick-and-mortar anchor for house-related vocabulary that emerges in biblical narrative.

### **Methodology: A Discourse Analysis of Indigenous Hebrew Kinship Terms**

This study takes as its starting point current anthropological emphases on retaining indigenous kin terms and respecting the historical specificity of a given community. Additionally, my study of maternal kinship in the Bible is attentive to multiple strategies for survival and ascendance that are in evidence within biblical family narratives. The first chapter of this study introduces more fully the indigenous Hebrew terms “house” (*bayit*) and

“house of the father” (*bêt ’āb*), both of which are foundational to any study of biblical kinship. Each of the following chapters then identifies maternally specific, indigenous kinship terms that are associated with the house or house of the father, terms that have not been recognized properly as distinct kinship classifications. These terms are sometimes dismissed from comment and other times emended to reflect patrilineal ideals. English translations frequently erase the maternally specific nature of these kinship terms. In my analysis, I retain the Hebrew for the kinship terms and offer literal translations into English. Hebrew grammar, syntax, and literary context help to uncover the social, political, and ritual functions that the biblical text associates with each maternally specific kinship term.

Because indigenous terminology represents the starting point for this study, I sketch my approach to identifying and defining these kinship terms. According to Stanley K. Stowers, the purpose of a definition is to classify a term, compare it to like terms, and provide an interpretation of the term that attempts to explain it.<sup>57</sup> In my case, I am confining my study to the “house” (*bayit*) and to maternally specific kinship terms that appear in relationship to the biblical house. In the chapters that follow, I provide new or emended definitions for Hebrew terms such as “house”; “house of the mother”; “my brother, the son of my mother”; “son of my womb”; “a brother who nursed at my mother’s breasts”; “the womb-opener”; and “the house of the father of my mother.” Defining these terms ultimately shows their connectedness one with another but also their connection to and indispensability within other known kinship entities such as the “house of the father,” the “nation” or “people,” and the “kingdom.”

As soon as we label a Hebrew term a “kinship term” and translate it into English, we confront a problem. While definitions can be heuristic, they can also mislead, and the danger with translating and defining Hebrew kin terms into English is that we might impose foreign assumptions onto indigenous terms. If definition is a form of redescription, then it necessarily requires that the researcher take a native or local term and redescribe it in ways that serve the researcher’s interests.<sup>58</sup> A definition can also suggest a kind of universality and fixity in the understanding of a term, when in reality language is dynamic, shifting, and perspectival. To avoid falsely restricting the meaning of a given term, I first retain the Hebrew when possible and provide literal translations for Hebrew kinship terms. I also show how the understanding of many kinship terms shifts depending on the speaker, the social context, and the words that emerge juxtaposed to

it. In short, I allow for what Edouard Conte has called “extreme semantic latitude” in the definition of kin terms.<sup>59</sup> Greg Urban locates the distinction between real and ideal kinship relations in the area of discourse. He argues that researchers have to distinguish between kinship terms and *talk* about kinship terms.<sup>60</sup> He defines “social organization,” his preferred term for “kinship,” as “the interpretation of the social world through discourse.”<sup>61</sup> This study retains indigenous terminology and categories, acknowledges multiple native-speaker understandings of a single term, and recognizes the difference between ideal categories and lived practice of kin and kinship functions.

In order to keep my focus on an indigenous understanding of each of the kinship terms and to identify additional terms, I depend on Hebrew grammar and syntax where the juxtaposition or co-emergence of terms communicates connectedness. A key insight in this regard has come from Hebrew word pairs, whether in apposition or divided in a parallelistic line. Hebrew kinship designations often take the form of parallel lines with split word pairs wherein the second element of the word pair narrows, specifies, and defines the first. Some examples that are covered in this book include “into the house of my mother, into the chamber of her who conceived me” (Song 3:4); “my brothers, the sons of my mother” (Judg 8:19); “like a brother, one who had nursed at my mother’s breasts” (Song 8:1); and “No my son, no son of my vows, no son of my womb” (Prov 31:2). I cover biblical scholarship on word pairs and my application of this scholarship to maternally specific kinship terminology in chapter 3.

In order to arrive at an indigenous understanding of Hebrew kinship terms, I subject each narrative example to the following set of questions:

1. How and when does the kinship term emerge, and in what literary contexts?
2. When a term occurs, what kinds of ideals and assumed realities are present?
3. What narrative expectations are set up with the introduction of a maternally specific kinship term?
4. When does a person enter a narrative with a kinship label? Does the person also have a name or only a label? To whom does the kinship label connect the person? Does this particular kinship label obscure other possible kinship relations?
5. When do kinship labels shift or disappear in a narrative and what does this signal?