

## The Culture of the Ancient Near East

In order to understand the imagery, ideas, and message of the Bible, one must understand the worldview of the people of the Bible to whom Yahweh revealed Himself. A crucial part of their worldview was the way their families and societies were structured—completely different from the modern western world that is more familiar. The Bible does not necessarily call us to imitate this culture but to understand it so we can learn from it.

### Tribes and Family

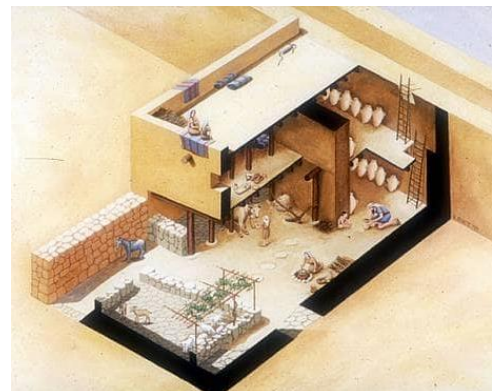
The modern western world is urban and bureaucratic—urban in that people live in neighborhoods based on their jobs, schools, or something attractive about the neighborhood; bureaucratic in that this society is governed mostly by the laws of the state, and people answer to the state when they violate these laws. Societies in the ancient Near East, specifically Israel, were tribal and traditional—tribal in that people lived in communities made up of their extended family and lived in the same place for several generations; traditional in that their society was governed by the local traditions and customs of the family, and people answered to the patriarch of the tribe when they violated these traditions.

In the modern western world, the family is separate from and not important to the government, and the government controls everything. In the ancient Near East, familial tribes were central in the culture, and the patriarch (ruling father) of the family controlled everything. Power and influence began with the patriarch and moved out to the family, the clan, the tribe, and then the nation. The patriarch was responsible for ensuring the economic well-being of his family, for enforcing the law, and for caring for his own who became marginalized through poverty, death or war.

When the patriarch died, the oldest son received the headship over the tribe and a double land inheritance. He received a larger inheritance than other heirs because he was responsible for taking care of everyone else in the tribe. If the family had become too large for one patriarch to care for, then the tribe split. The identity of everyone in the tribe was bound up in their father, gender, and birth order.

The tribe consisted of the father, his wife(s), unwed daughters, and his married sons with their wives and children. It could include up to three generations and as many as thirty people, not including possible servants. A wealthy patriarch would also have his servants and their families living in his community. This can be seen with Abraham, who, though he had no children of his own, had other families that belonged to him and traveled with him (Gen. 12:4-5; 14:13-16; 15:2-3; 16:1-4; 17:23; 22:3).

If the tribe was nomadic (living in tents), then their tents were set up next to each other, encircling the tent of the patriarch. If they had stationary houses, then the courtyard of their house would connect with the courtyard of others in the tribe. Houses were two stories, with a roof they could walk around on. The courtyard on the first floor was where meals were prepared and the family socialized. The side rooms were used for storage and the stables for the animals. The second floor was



where the family slept. The body heat from the animals on the first floor would rise and heat the home when the temperature dropped at night. Some people lived in caves. The front part of the cave was used as the living and eating quarters, the second part as storage, and the back as the stable.

The family was central to everything, and the family was the only source of one's identity and survival. The individuals were linked to the legal and economic structure of their society through their family. Everything was owned jointly, and everyone worked the farm and tended the animals collectively. They shared the resources and their fate. The tribe was one's livelihood, grocery store, civil rights, protection, retirement, etc. There was no survival outside of the tribe.

When a man married, he remained in the household; when a woman married, she joined the household of her husband. The only way she truly secured her membership to the new family was through having children. This can be seen with Tamar, a Canaanite woman who married into the tribe of Judah, an Israelite (Gen. 38). After her first two husbands died and she still had no children, in desperation she slept with her father-in-law in order to have a child and secure her place in the tribe. A woman's identity and her access to provision and protection was through the men in her family: she was first her father's daughter, then her husband's wife, and then her son's mother. This was why it was critical that a woman marry and have children. With no men in her life, she was destitute and outside the provision and protection of the tribe.

## **Culture and Values**

The modern western world is an individualist, guilt-innocence culture. The culture puts a high emphasis on right and wrong, which is derived both externally, by the law of the state, and internally, by one's personal conscience. One's ability to reason and argue logically determines the rightness and truth of that person's claim, and speaking the truth or rightness of an idea is more important than politeness. In a guilt-innocence culture, the independence desires, freedoms, and rights of the individual are valued above all else. When it comes to how people use their time, getting tasks done is emphasized above spending time with people or enjoying an event. In relationships with others, equality and the right of every person to have a say and a place are supreme.

Education is about the individual learning from experts in all fields of knowledge to become knowledgeable in as many fields as possible, which will empower the individual to become what they want to be. Sports focuses on the individual and on their doing their best. The individual is idolized by others, the individual is scouted out, and the individual can make a team more successful. In entertainment, the individual is mostly passive and is entertained by the movie, concert, or game. The image of the individual and how they prefer to portray themselves is very important. The way they dress and decorate their belongings is more important than practical function, and they must have the freedom to reflect their individual tastes with how they do this. Even so, their image will be evaluated by the other individuals on whether what they have chosen is right or wrong.

Competition is a major part of acquiring good grades in education, trophies in sports, and promotions in the business world. The individual is encouraged and celebrated for standing out or becoming better than others. However, if the individual fails morally, all the blame falls on them, and they are punished or canceled by the collective for being wrong.

These perspectives inform how people of the modern western world approach and read the Bible.

However, the ancient (and modern) eastern world was a collectivist, honor-shame culture. They put a high emphasis on tradition and the desires of the community, which were derived externally by the community, going back for generations. Honoring the desires and expectations of the community and working for the good of the community were what was right and true. Knowing whom to honor and how to act were essential to navigating the culture successfully. In an honor-shame culture, family, community, and hierarchy are valued above all else. When it comes to time, spending time with people and enjoying an event are more important than getting things done. In relationships with others, respecting the hierarchy of the culture and maintaining harmony are more important than equality and speaking the truth.

Education was done in the family. The sons learned from and modeled themselves after the father and then continued the trade of the father. The same was true for the daughters and mothers. Later in history, up to the modern time, a son could leave the family and his father's trade and follow a mentor. Yet even in these cases, the pupil would live with and emulate the life of the mentor and become what they were. This was the practice of the Jewish rabbi, who would gather a group of twelve men around himself to teach and do life with him, as seen with Jesus and His disciples. In either case, education was done in community and was about following the traditions of the community. There were no sports—just group activities. In the modern eastern world, the focus of sports is on the community or the team, not the individual. In entertainment, the community came together to tell a story or participate in a game or a group performance. Function and practicality were more important than image. The dress and belongings of the individual reflected the customs and traditions of the community. Standing out as unique from the community was seen as an insult to the community.

The individual worked for the benefit, honor, and recognition of the community. If the individual violated the traditions or expectations of the community, this brought shame to the entire community. The individual would then be publicly shamed by the community so that the community could try to maintain honor (Deut. 25:1-12). The individual would then have to atone for their dishonor in hopes of being restored back to the community. In some cases, however, they were killed, or they killed themselves, in order to restore honor to the community.

The honor of a family or tribe was determined by one's social status, reputation, actions, and gender. Those in an honor-shame culture cared very much and even did things based on how God, the gods, and other groups saw them. As when Jacob's son slaughtered the Shechemites, Jacob was not concerned with their immoral actions but on how the other tribes would see them and respond (Gen, 34:30-31). The social status of a family was fixed based on the actions of previous generations. The individual could never rise or fall from their social status. The family or tribe could only change their social status incrementally over generations. Behavior could weaken or strengthen one's family in the social hierarchy. Jesus was seen as insignificant because He came from the poor, backwater town of Nazareth (John 1:45-47). No matter how great His teaching and miracles were, the high-status Sadducees and Pharisees never gave him honor. When someone of a high social status came into your presence, you stepped out of the way and/or bowed to them to honor them.

Hospitality was another very high value of the eastern world. Showing hospitality and serving others of equal or greater social status was important to one's honor. But if the guest was outside of the tribe or covenant, then the host would not eat with the one they were showing hospitality to. One ate meals only with those they were willing to call family. Those of a lower status could be ignored without incurring shame. This is seen when Abraham and Lot invited the angels to

stay and eat with them (Gen. 18:1-8; 19:1-4). Later, the people of Gibeon ignored the priest and his wife and servant as insignificant, but it was a fellow Ephraimite who invited them in to stay and eat (Judg. 19:14-21). Jesus was invited to eat with Simon the Pharisee, but Simon did not honor Jesus and rejected the sinful woman who came into his home because they were of a lower status than he was (Luke 7:36-50).

The eastern culture was also a debt culture, meaning if anyone did a favor for you, then you were in their debt, and they could require you to pay them back at any time. Until then, you belonged to them. And if they paid off financial debts on your behalf, then you would become their slave until you had paid it off. Favors were not done out of hospitality. When Abraham defeated the Mesopotamian kings and retrieved the plunder and the people who had been taken from the kings of Canaan, the king of Sodom wanted to give Abraham a reward because he did not want to be in Abraham's debt. Abraham refused because he did not want to be in the king's debt, and he did not want the king of Sodom to be able to take credit for Abraham's prosperity instead of Yahweh getting the credit (Gen. 14:21-24).

## Covenants

In a collectivist culture, unlike the western world, those outside the tribe were not trusted, and one did not socialize with them. If one was of a different family, the only way to be included in, socialize with, or be aligned with the family was through covenants (*berit*). The most common was the marriage covenant. For everyone else who wanted to establish a relationship of privilege and responsibility with another family, they would use the fictive kingship and suzerain-vassal treaties.

In a fictive kingship treaty, both parties agreed to act like family. They would refer to each other as "brothers." This treaty was usually limited to a military alliance against an outsider. Both parties would agree not to attack the other and to come to the aid of the other if they were attacked. This treaty might also involve freedom of passage through a territory for the sake of trade. They rarely infringed on the personal freedoms of the covenant partners or how they managed their own tribe. Examples of this treaty were between Abraham and Abimelech and then Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 21:22-34; 26:25-33). Yahweh warned Israel not to make a treaty with the Canaanites (Ex. 34:11-13; Deut. 7:1-3).

In a suzerain-vassal treaty, one party was more powerful than the other and had the power to demand submission of the other. They referred to each other as "father and son" or "lord and servant." The suzerain owned everything that belonged to the vassal and had authority over the land and the people of the vassal. However, the vassal was allowed to maintain their authority and rule their land as they pleased. The suzerain would offer protection to the vassal and sometimes began the treaty by gifting land to the vassal. The vassal then aided the suzerain in battles and paid taxes. The suzerain could have different treaties with different vassals, but the vassal could not make a treaty with any other suzerain. Absolute loyalty was demanded of the vassal. Joshua made a suzerain-vassal treaty with the Gibeonites, who deceived them (Josh. 9). Yahweh initiated a suzerain-vassal treaty with Abraham (Gen. 15) and with Israel after the exodus on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24).

Violations of the covenant were punished with death or an extreme tax (Jer. 34:18-22). The way a vassal would seek to get out of the treaty was by refusing to pay the taxes and see if the suzerain was still strong enough to come and attack them. This can be seen when the kings of

Canaan stopped paying the tax to the kings of Mesopotamia (Gen. 14:1-12). However, the kings of Mesopotamia came down and defeated the kings of Canaan and took plunder and many of their people as slaves as an extra tax for rebellion.

The making of a suzerain-vassal treaty began with both parties coming together with sacrificial animals for a blood sacrifice that would bind the two parties together. The two parties would cut the animals in half and lay the halves on both sides of a path, which would then be covered in the blood of the animals (Gen. 15:9-10; Jer. 34:18-22). Then one king would carry a blazing torch and the other a smoking firepot. These elements represented life and the power to ward off evil. This was how Yahweh appeared to His covenant people (Ex. 3:1; 13:21-22; 14:24; 19:18; 20:18; 33:9-10; Deut. 31:15). Then the two kings, carrying the fire and smoke, would walk between the animals as they recited their vows of blessings and curses (Gen. 15:17-21). Then the vassal would swear loyalty with the understanding that if he violated the treaty, then what had been done to the animals would be done to him and his people (Jer. 34:18). Then a banquet would be held in celebration, for now they were family.

The Bible records seven covenants Yahweh made with humanity. These are major events in the Bible that mark major developments of Yahweh redemption. These are the Adamic Covenant (Gen. 1–2), Noahic Covenant (Gen. 9), Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 15; 17), Mosaic Covenant (Ex. 19; 20; 24), Restoration Covenant (Deut. 30), Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7), and New Covenant (Matt. 26:17-30; Luke 22:7-38).

## Idol Worship

The pagan (nature) gods and spirits controlled and permeated every aspect of one's life. See [The Nature of the Near Eastern Gods<sup>1</sup>](#) for a discussion of what the gods were like. The third kind of culture is a power-fear culture, which would have been intertwined with the honor-shame culture of the ancient Near East. In this type of culture, the gods or spirits had absolute power over the people, who lived in fear of what the gods may or may not do to them. They believed that the gods controlled the fate of every person—in life and death, sickness and health, and prosperity and poverty. The people also worshipped their dead ancestors, believing that they somehow still watched over and guided them.

Worshipping and honoring the gods was the only means of gaining possible favor or blessing from the gods. For this reason, everywhere people went were idols, both reminding the people who was in control of their life and giving them an opportunity to honor the gods in order to stay in their good favor. The people of the ancient Near East would not have called this idolatry; it was a normal part of their lives. It is only Yahweh in the Bible who calls it idolatry.

The idols were the image of the gods, and the people believed that the spirit of the god lived in the idol. After they crafted an idol, a ritual sacrifice would be performed, and the people believed that the god would breathe its life into the nostrils of the idol, animating it as a living being that watched over the people. This may be why the noses of some Egyptian statues are broken off—in an attempt to kill the idol of a god that the new pharaoh no longer wanted to revere.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.knowingthebible.net/topical-studies/the-nature-of-the-ancient-near-eastern-gods>

The people would erect large idols at public venues and events and keep smaller personal idols in their homes or with them. These smaller idols are called *teraphim*, sometimes translated as “household gods.” They are small figurines (two to three inches long) and were sometimes carried on the body as charms, many of which archaeologists have discovered. They may have been the images of family ancestors, whom they were expected to honor and consult. Devotion to these teraphim was thought to bring blessing and protection to the family (Gen. 31:19).



Neither the people nor the gods really cared for each other, but they needed each other for survival. The gods fed off the sacrifices and devotion of the people’s worship. The gods needed the devotion and the grain, animal, and sometimes human sacrifices of the people in order to survive and be energized. The people then needed the gods to bless them with crops, animals, children, and protection to be able to have the means to feed the gods.

The people were also superstitious, believing they could be blessed (but mostly cursed) by what they did or did not do. Even the places they went or things they touched could be cursed and rub off on them and curse them as well. Many people would wear some kind of an amulet to ward off evil or protect them from curses. Sometimes these amulets were in the shape of the thing they feared would curse them. Sometimes when they made sacrifices, they would offer to the temple of the god amulets in the shape of what they wanted the gods to remove from them or protect them from (1 Sam. 6:1-6).

When approaching the Bible, the reader needs to think in and interpret by these categories. The better we understand the worldview of the Bible, the better we will understand why Yahweh and the ancient people acted and spoke as they did, and the better our interpretation and application to our own lives will be.

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