



# Hebrew Scriptures

## The Genesis of Family, the Family of Genesis

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*God's dream of the human family as outlined on the first page of the Bible.*

According to the Bible, the family is the oldest, the very first institution of human history. It came into being on the sixth day, as the last work of the divine creation, and marked the beginning of human history. Family did not come by itself. The idea and the event did not originate as a human initiative or as the simple result of chance. God created family. This extraordinary reference to the supernatural Agent is given in the Genesis story in two ways. First, it is explicitly formulated in the report that says

that God “created them,” “in His own image” (Genesis 1:27). Second, it is implicitly suggested through the literary device of parallelism that relates the two Genesis reports of Creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4a//2:4b-25; see chart on page 15) and thus brings the creation of family in the second text (Genesis 2:23-24) into connection with the creation of Sabbath in the first text (Genesis 2:1-3).

### Family and God's Image

To relate family to the production of God's image conveys a number of lessons that are worth considering in our reflec-

tion about the meaning and the function of family.

*Lesson of confrontation.* It first of all affirms that God's image can only be achieved in that context of family where man and woman and later children and parents are confronted with the vis-à-vis, the “other” as Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas put it. You become God's image, that is the fulfillment of who you are at your best, only if you submit yourself to that tough and genuine struggle. This is one of the spiritual messages registered in the name of Israel (see Genesis 32:22-32). In order to

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deserve his new name Israel, Jacob had to wrestle with “the Other”—God and man. God’s image, human individuality, blossoms only insofar as we are challenged by the other, by his/her difference.

*Lesson of responsibility.* Family is then not just a gift from above, not just a divine creation. It also involves a response from below. Interestingly, Jewish tradition reads this lesson of human responsibility in the plural formula, “Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26). The idea is that God’s image in the human person is not a mere passive product, but instead a dynamic process. Man does not just receive; he/she also responds actively and participates in “building” the divine stamp in him/her. Incidentally, the

Hebrew word for family is *bayt* (house). To found a family means “to build a house” (Deuteronomy 25:9). This language implies human effort and hard work. Family is not just the “home sweet home” to be enjoyed beatifically. It is not obtained easily. It is instead something to build day by day, brick by brick, with pain but also with care, because it is something difficult and precious to achieve and to keep.

*Lesson of difference.* The parallel between house and family conveys also a lesson regarding the nature of the ingredients that make the family. Every brick, every material of the house has something unique and plays a unique role that makes it necessary for the building. It is this uniqueness, this variety that makes the

house possible. The brick does not behave like a tile and the window does not claim to be a chimney. Each individual is different in his/her appearance and in his/her character. Family life is never monotonous. It is full of surprises and new discoveries that make life interesting and rich.

*Lesson of solidarity.* And yet, every element of the house does not stay by itself. The brick, the tile, the window, and the chimney serve each other; and beyond each other, they serve higher purposes: the society, the universe, and God. They, therefore, must relate to each other, and everyone partici-

*Sabbath is the family day par excellence.*

pates in making the house possible, comfortable, pleasant, and useful. The tile does not go its own way, and the brick does not follow its personal inclinations. No one would dare declare independence and

**The Genesis Creation Story (Genesis 1-2)**

adapted from Jacques B. Doukhan, “Loving the Sabbath as a Christian: A Seventh-Day Adventist Perspective,” in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, edited by T. C. Eskenazi et al. (New York: Crossroad, 1991), page 158.

<i>Introduction</i> In the beginning of the Creation . . . (Genesis 1:1-2)	<i>Introduction</i> In the day of the making . . . (Genesis 2:4b-6)
1. light from darkness (vss. 3-5)	1. man from dust (vs. 7)
2. firmament in heaven (vss. 6-8)	2. garden on earth (vs. 8)
3. plants (vss. 9-13)	3. dominion of man over the earth (vss. 9-15)
4. luminaries to separate (vss. 14-19)	4. tree of knowledge separated (vss. 16-17)
5. animals (vss. 20-23)	5. concern for companionship for man (vs. 18)
6. dominion of man over animals (vss. 24-31)	6. dominion of man over animals (vss. 19-22)
7. the <b>Sabbath</b> (2:1-3)	7. the <b>Family</b> (vss. 23-24)
<i>Conclusion</i> These heavens and earth (vs. 4a)	<i>Conclusion</i> These two, man and wife (vs. 25)

think that it could do what it wants and “this is none of your business.” They all know that they depend on each other. If a tile breaks, the brick will suffer. Indeed, “no brick or tile is an island.”

### Family and Sabbath

The biblical connection between family and Sabbath is not just attested in the steps of human history in Genesis 1 and 2. This association recurs in the beginning of the history of Israel. In the Law given on Mount Sinai, the commandment about family is related to

*Love makes duty possible and easy and duty makes love strong and lasting.*

the commandment about Sabbath. They follow each other in the sequence of the laws. They are also stylistically connected since they are the only two commandments that are expressed positively with the same grammatical form of the Infinitive absolute: fourth commandment: “Remember [*zakor*] the Sabbath day” (Exodus 20:8); fifth commandment: “Honor [*kabed*] your father and mother” (Exodus 20:12). The

same association also introduces the ceremonial laws in the book of Leviticus: “Everyone of you shall revere his mother and his father, and keep My Sabbaths: I am the Lord

*We lost God’s dream for mankind, and therefore, we lost our*

your God” (Leviticus 19:3). This relationship between Sabbath and family contains a number of important lessons.

*A lesson of time.* The connection between Sabbath and family teaches us what Abraham Heschel has reminded us of, namely that the value of time should prevail over the value of space. The gift of our time, the gift of our presence is more important than the gift of objects or of money. For Sabbath is the day when we stop working, we stop achieving and valorizing space and things. It is the day when we learn to have time, a day when we can share time together. Sabbath is, therefore, the family day par excellence.

*A lesson of grace.* Sabbath is the day when we remember that it is not our achievements that count, but the gift we receive from the other—from God and from our parent, our spouse, and our brother. To introduce this perspective of grace into family life will help us appreciate each other and become grateful. We will learn not to take the gift for granted but to enjoy it as something we did not deserve, just as the Sabbath



“A home where Torah is not heard will not endure.”  
(*Intr. Tikkune Zohar, 6a*)

was paradoxically given to Adam and Eve as a reward for the work they did not do. This mentality of grace and gratefulness will contribute to create an atmosphere of love and joy and thus promote a happy family.

*A lesson of duty.* It is noteworthy that both family and Sabbath are given to mankind as commandments, as if they were not natural and spontaneous products. The success of family does not just depend on great sentiments and emotions, or nice words and smiles. The happiness and the survival of family depends also on the imperative duty that should oblige us to respect (Deuteronomy 5:16), to show love (Genesis 25:28; 32:4), to remain faithful (Exodus 20:14), and to do the chores (Genesis 18:7). In fact, love and duty are dependent on each other. Love makes duty possible and easy and duty makes love strong and lasting.

*A lesson of memory.* Both Sabbath and family convey the same call for memory. They both invite an appreciation and a respect for the past. The Sabbath reminds of the roots of the

universe and the family reminds of our personal and historical roots. Through the Sabbath, we remember that we are humans created in God's image. Through the family, we remember our genealogy, the history of our ancestors and ultimately who we are in human society. Just as the Sabbath functions as a pedagogical device which repeats week after week the lesson from the far past, the family functions as a religious community that preserves past traditions and passes them on through instruction and worship (Deuteronomy 6:7; Micah 7:6).

*A lesson of hope.* It is also interesting that both Sabbath and family are likewise the recipient of blessing, suggesting, thereby, for both of them a horizon of fruitfulness and hope. For blessing is always in the Bible associated with promise and the perspective of a rich future, health, long life, and many and enduring progeny (Genesis 22:17-18). The Sabbath becomes on earth a sign of hope; and its time quality points to eternity, to the other

Sabbath of the future kingdom. Likewise, the family becomes on earth the place of refuge and a place that nurtures our nostalgia for the lost paradise, a sign of heaven.

The biblical ideal of family has never been so needed. For we lost all the values and all the truths that family was supposed to teach and preserve. We lost the sense of God the Father and thus lost the sense of brotherhood. We lost the sense of God's image in the human being and thus lost the sense of wonder and respect toward our spouse, our parents, our children, and our neighbors. We lost the sense of time and memory. No wonder family has degenerated into an arena where fights for our pleasure, our power, and our human happiness have become the priority! We lost God's dream for mankind, and therefore, we lost our home. For as the ancient rabbis used to say, "A home where Torah is not heard will not endure" (*Intr. Tikkune Zohar*, 6a).

## A Talmudic Principle

*"He who loves his wife as himself; who honors her more than himself; who rears his children in the right path . . . concerning him it is written: 'And thou wilt know that thy home is at peace.'"*

*(Yebamot, 62)*