

The Significance of Family Imagery in Biblical Theology

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Abstract

It is possible to miss the overall message of the Bible unless one understands how various themes interconnect. Family is one of the themes that runs through the creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. It is presented as a typology in OT and NT, where God's restorative work is presented. This paper examines the divine tapestry of Family and its significance in the grand redemption plan. It uses the Redemptive History approach to biblical theology to trace the development of the 'Family theme' from creation to the New Creation. The paper highlights that family is a creation ordinance that forms a foundational basis of redemption and that there is a shift in what the family is in the New Creation. In addition, it demonstrates that a proper understanding of the role of Family in God's redemption story forms a foundation of Christian marriages and families. The paper advocates that since all believers will be part of God's family in the New Creation, the functionality of earthly Christian families should be possible despite the fall of humanity. Thus, achieving functional families is feasible through the principles of Christ's restoration and redemption work.

Keywords: Family Imagery, Christian Family, Biblical Theology, Redemptive History.

Introduction

Despite the great diversity of how the Bible is presented in terms of content, context, and themes, there is a divine interconnectedness; when viewed as such, the relationship becomes coherent, and the holistic message of the Bible becomes noticeably clear to the reader. At the very onset, God had a grand plan of what he wanted from and for his creation. When expressed linearly, biblical theology would be taken as the continuous story of God's love for



his creation and rescue plan.¹ First, he creates all that exists so that it can serve his purpose. Later, creation does not fully serve that purpose due to the fall occasioned by humankind's disobedience. However, he set out a restoration plan for his creation. This redemption starts from the OT to the NT through various typologies, all culminating in the NT through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Such typologies include the Tabernacle, the sacrificial system, the Passover, people, and places. As these typologies unfold (culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ), the relationship is restored, and the fallen creation is made a 'New Creation.'

Although the central theme of the Bible boils down to Jesus, it is presented in many subthemes, all of which build up to God's granted plan for his creation.² Barnett and Martin observe that God's grand strategy in creation is presented in a four-point narrative: creation fall, redemption, and future hope. These stages have been acted out throughout human history.³ This paper examines 'Family' as a sub-theme using the 'Redemptive History' approach to Biblical Theology, showing how it develops from Creation to New Creation. Writing on the same metaphor, Lassen focuses on the OT and early Judaism,⁴ while Finlan picks only on how Jesus used it in his preachings.⁵ Therefore, examining the metaphor in a biblical theology way becomes necessary. Looking at God's redemptive work should inform family relations and lead to the restoration and success of the earthly and God's family.

Development of 'Family' Sub-Theme Through the Stages of Redemptive History

Three aspects of the family will be important in developing this paper: the creation of man (male and female) in God's image, marriage, and the role or mandate of the family as an institution. Humanity is created male and female with proper gender distinction, which points

¹ T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, England: Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2000), 9.

² The Missiological Hermeneutics of the scripture should be seen in totality. This means that consideration should be made to mission of God as a whole, to human life in general, the historical election of Israel, the centrality of Jesus identity, and the calling of the church as an extended people of God: Mike Barnett and Robin Martin, *Discovering the Mission of God: Best Missional Practices for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 46-47.

³ Ibid., 41.

⁴ Eva Maria Lassen, "Family as Metaphor: Family Images at the time of the Old Testament and Early Judaism ¹," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 6, no. 2 (January 1992): 247-62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09018329208584995>.

⁵ Stephen Finlan, *The Family Metaphor in Jesus' Teaching, Second Edition: Gospel Imagery and Application* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013).



out the foundations of a Christian family/ marriage (Gen 1:27). Their ultimate expected role is to be stewards of God's Creation.⁶ The stewardship would extend to procreation, where they are expected to be fruitful and to multiply to the extent of filling and subduing the earth (Gen 1:28). In Genesis 2:18, God's idea is to create a suitable helper for Adam, which seems to hint at the nature of relationships and on roles and responsibilities in a Christian family.

Family in the Creation Account (Gen 1—2)

In the creation story, family is part of God's plan for human life. The creation ordinances include procreation, labor/ work, the Sabbath, and marriage.⁷ Most creation ordinances have a significant place in the entire story of redemption. First, a family is expected to be formed from the sacred covenant union between a man and a woman. It has a form of permanence where the man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife, becoming one flesh, as recorded in Gen 2:24. Jesus would comment later in the gospel of Mark (10:6-9) emphasizing the unity of the married couple and overruling the possibility of divorce.⁸ Collins says, "Just as Eve was taken from the very body of Adam in an extraordinary procedure, so every married couple is one flesh."⁹ Hence, the conclusion in verse 9 is: "What therefore God has joined, man shall not separate."

Second, productivity and growth are attached to the family unit. In Genesis 1:28, God blessed the family unit by commanding Adam and Eve to be fruitful. The capacity for sexual reproduction as given to Adam and Eve was a divine blessing.¹⁰ It is not to be taken as if man and woman were under compulsion to produce or 'work for God,' but rather as a means through which God points out to the relational God he is. Through the human offspring that would come, there would be a community through which He would continue fulfilling his relational purpose in his entire creation. When man and woman succeed in bearing children (Gen 1:28) and raise them in fear of God, they would be living within the parameters that God had set for the family. The world would be full of people with the proper teachings, faith, and morality. This means that in raising their children (Deut 6-7, Eph 6:4), parents would be

⁶ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (United States: Baker Publishing Group: Made available through hoopla, 2014), 25.

⁷ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 60, http://archive.org/details/genesiscommentar0000radg_f512.

⁸ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 468, <http://archive.org/details/markcommentary0000coll>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ John. D Barry, "Faith life Study Bible" (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).



good stewards of God’s creation, where they instill proper values and virtues in them. Through the family institution, the character of God, such as love and unity, would be exemplified. The same love flows to God’s creation because God is love. The aspect of mutual love and respect that a family unit should bring indicates the kind of relationship God wanted with his creation.¹¹ The concept of bodily union is provided in Ephesians 5:22–31, which serves as a link between the ideas of Gen 2:24 and Eph 5:31. The church is figuratively considered as the bride of Christ; thus the aspect of Christ’s lordship over the church and his union with it is well indicated.¹² The emphasis here is that the church is obligated to Christ just as the wife is to the husband. Also, Christ’s love for the church is likened to that of the husband, who loves the wife as his own body, as Christ (the head) loved the church (his body).¹³

The place of family is embedded in creation as one of the foundations God intended to use to fulfill his redemptive purpose in the world. Grudem notes that God’s purpose is to save all creation.¹⁴ As we shall see later, in the ‘Redemption’ and ‘New Creation,’ the Bible uses the family figuratively to refer to the relationship between the Hebrew people (community) and God.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, God was setting up his kingdom on earth in a family structure. Terms like father are synonymous with a family setup, just like in both the Ancient Near East and Greco–Roman religious world,¹⁶ where the father was the male authority of the house. Thus, the father became the source of identity for the other family members, and as it shall be seen later, throughout the Bible, God is referred to as the father. This name brings in the understanding that creation, including families, finds its identity in God. Also, just like a father would be the source of provision in the family, God is the source and provider of creation. When he blessed Adam and Eve to ‘multiply and increase in number,’ God asserted his authority on man so that he could function as a steward over all other creations of God. Humanity was to rule the creation on God’s behalf since he was created in the image and

¹¹ Daniel G. Reid, ed., *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament: A One-Volume Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 139.

¹² *Ibid.*, 139.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press [u.a.], 1994), 21.

¹⁵ Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Baker Academic; Paternoster Press, 2001), 743.

¹⁶ Michelle. J Morris and John. D Barry, “Family,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* Bellingham, WA, 2016.



likeness of God.¹⁷ This image and likeness of God is also reflected in humans' authority over other creations.¹⁸

The Family Imagery and the Fall

Human beings were the primary agents through which the fall came, and since a family is made up of a male and female, the family is a central player in the unfolding events. As a result, the family was significantly affected, hence God's entire plan for his creation. Adam and Eve were created with a will to choose whether to be loyal to God, for which they disobeyed by eating from the tree of knowledge of evil and good (Gen 2:9).¹⁹ This disobedience broke the relationship between God and humanity. The consequences of the fall were far-reaching, and that is where the redemption journey started. Sin had a significant effect on both humanity and the entire creation. There was death (physical, spiritual, and eternal), judgment, and distortion of relationships—vertically (God and man) and horizontally (man and man).²⁰

Now, focusing on the family, sin (the fall) brought a significant separation. The relationships within the family were affected. Man would have to toil and moil for a living. The woman would experience 'severe pains in childbirth' (Gen 3:16), which means complications and difficulties in reproduction, including barrenness and infertility.²¹ This view is contrary to the traditional interpretation that assumes that 'severe pains in childbirth' only refers to increased labor pain. Humanity was condemned to death (Gen 2:17). Even the ground that man was to till was affected because it would produce thistles and thorns, making it difficult for man. The one effect that the fall had on humanity is that through Adam (the first man), sin came into the world) and thus, all humankind became sinful. The entire universe became dysfunctional, making the effects of the Adamic fall have a cosmic scope.²² As a result of sin, we experience more conflict, shame, and brokenness in human relationships. Today, we experience more marital discord characterized by strife and tension in marital relationships.

¹⁷ Didymus, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. Robert Charles Hill, The Fathers of the Church, volume 132 (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 435.

²⁰ Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 29.

²¹ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 436.

²² *Ibid.*, 436.



God pronounces judgment to Eve that her desire will be for her husband and that she will be ruled by her husband (Gen 3:16). Regarding the use of ‘her desire will be that of her husband,’ Kowalski observes that this phrase means that both man and woman will be mutually attracted to each other in an intimately inseparable way.²³ Contrary to widely held beliefs and interpretations, it does not subordinate the woman to the man. Such interpretations include the view that since the woman was taken from the ‘man’s rib’ (Gen 2:7, 22), her subject is subordinate to the man.²⁴ Instead, it strengthens their equality since she is the only one who can effectively be a man’s companion and not any other animal. It is such unity created by mutual sexual yearning for one another that contributes to their unity even in their diversity and highlights the central position of social life in humanity.²⁵ The understanding that the woman is subordinated to the man has become a source of power struggles and difficulties in marriage and among couples, leading to more strife.

Regarding childbirth, God said that he would multiply Eve’s pain in childbirth. The statement does not only refer to the emotional attachment and concerns of childbearing but also refers to the increase in the rate of barrenness and infertility.²⁶ What was initially meant to be a source of blessing, since they were to ‘be fruitful, increase and multiply in number’ (Gen 1:28), has now become a source of pain. It probably points out the emotional anguish that comes with infertility and barrenness. Christine observes that infertility and barrenness that came to the woman are parallel to the toiling that man would do on the now barren / ‘cursed’ land.²⁷ Notably, infertility and barrenness significantly affect the ability to build a family. It appears to many people that the companionship bit of marriage is incomplete without children. The fall of man leads to barrenness and infertility that affect families even today. Many people find inexplicable restrictions and complications that make it difficult or impossible to have children, and others die out of such complications.

Before the fall, the concept of work was enjoyable and non-tedious. However, after the fall, the idea of arduous work comes into the picture, and human beings had to toil and struggle to sustain their families (Gen 3:17-19). Today, people still go through grief because

²³ Kowalski Wojciech, “Female Subjection to Man: Is It a Consequence of The Fall?” *AFER* 35, no. 5 (October 1, 1993): 274-87.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵ Wojciech, “Female Subjection to Man.”

²⁶ Christine Curley and Brian Peterson, “Eve’s Curse Revisited: An Increase of ‘Sorrowful Conceptions,’” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 26, no. 2 (2016): 157-72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*



of the death that originated from the fall. Human lifespans were significantly affected due to the entrance of physical death. God has expressly said that eating the fruit from the forbidden tree (the tree of knowledge of good and evil) would result in death (Gen 2:17). This could be interpreted to mean physical and spiritual death. Spiritual death is seen when their relationship with God is impacted; they hide themselves and try to cover up their nakedness using leaves.²⁸ In Genesis 3:22-24, the fall brought about physical death- the dissolution of the body and soul unity. They were driven from the Garden of Eden so they would not eat from the Tree of Life, through which they would have lived forever in that 'fallen' state.²⁹ Even the presence of the Cherubim is an indicator of the barrier that now existed between the holy God and the sinful man. Although man's lifespan had not been indicated as to whether he would live eternally, it was now evident that it would be shorter than was expected. Later in Gen 6:3, God spells out that men would live for only 120 years, which would later reduce to 70-80 years in Psalm 90:10. Regarding the reduction of the years to a mere 120 in Genesis 6:3, Skinner notes that it was a punishment that God put on humankind, as a result of the 'sons of God, having a sexual relationship with the daughters of man.'³⁰ Notably, this relation is a result of the fallen nature of the human race, and they are seen to significantly affect the family institution since the natural God-ordained order of sexual relations had been distorted. Although Noah's family would be saved because of his fear of the Lord, it is evident that these consequences of the fall had a direct impact on the family; thus, it would not function as effectively as it was initially intended.

Adam's family experienced a very fractured relationship. First, blame -shifts between him and his wife, leading to shame (Gen 3:12-13). Later, when they had children, Cain killed Abel, indicating that the purpose for which a family existed in the first place had been distorted. It was supposed to be the institution that trained and nurtured godly morals and values, but the fall brought the opposite. Brother kills brother out of envy! The family fabric is completely broken, and divisions set in. A complete breakdown of communication threatens the basic family structure and unity.

²⁸ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 435.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ John Skinner, *The International Critical Commentary A Critical And Exegetical Commentary On Genesis*, 1925, 240, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.58446>.



Bunkowske notes that God created man in his image and put them in a family setup as a way of building His kingdom and for man to rule even the rest of the creation.³¹ Grudem presents the same perspective: ‘Man (male and female) was created in God’s image as the pinnacle of his creation. He was made more like God than any other creature and was appointed to rule over the rest of creation.’³² It means that man had all the authority and acted in God’s capacity on earth. However, after the fall, this authority is undermined. Man becomes subject to Satan, and there is a dent in the original plan concerning the family and creation. Since man is created in the image and likeness of God, he cannot now function fully in his capacity because he has fallen into sin. He can no longer represent the kingdom as expected. Whatever man does after the fall is a misrepresentation of the kingdom he is supposed to represent. Both animate and inanimate creation suffered from the fall, meaning that the effect of the fall is cosmic in scope, as Paul would say in (Rom 8:20-22).³³

Considering the ability to choose that Adam and Eve had and their choosing to disobey the law of God, they were blatantly rejecting God’s law and were seeking to be independent from God. This lousy state continues throughout the OT even though God had already instituted the redemption process through the nation of Israel, the law, and the prophets.³⁴ Humanity was now ‘kings’ without proper authority since they had unknowingly relinquished their power to the devil through Satan’s deception. This failed kingship is replicated in the family unit, where the parents do not seem to have any control over their children (Cain). They are no longer in the garden of Eden (presence of God) and are prone to doing their things. It is the same case today with the family unit– even with redemption having been achieved (through Jesus Christ’s death on the cross),³⁵ these effects of sin are still a problem to the family. Often, people cannot do the wrong thing (sin) and remain in the presence of God, as it leads to total depravity.³⁶ The church, community, and nations are

³¹ Eugene W Bunkowske, “How Does God Build His Kingdom?: A Case Study Approach,” *Missio Apostolica* 20, no. 1 (May 1, 2012): 3.

³² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 221.

³³ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 436.

³⁴ John H. Walton, *Covenant: God’s Purpose, God’s Plan* (Harper Collins, 1994), 183.

³⁵ Jeff Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation: The Strategic Purpose of Galatians 6.11-17*, Library of New Testament Studies 508 (London New York (N.Y.): Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

³⁶ David Haines, “Thomas Aquinas on Total Depravity and the Noetic Effects of Sin,” *Themelios* 48, no. 2 (August 1, 2023): 9.



made of families. When the family unit is broken down, these other dependent institutions will not stand.

The Family Imagery in the Progress of Redemption

The family's place in redemptive history started during the fall. Redemption is the idea of payment of a ransom so that salvation can be achieved.³⁷ Biblically, redemption is an act of God saving and rescuing humanity (His Creation) from the effects of sin (the fall). God instituted 'the ransom payment' to get humanity and creation back to its rightful position.³⁸ In Genesis 3:15, God gave the first and ultimate promise of redemption immediately after the fall when he said, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (NIV, 2011). This alludes to the coming of Jesus Christ.³⁹ According to Cheek, "the offspring of the woman" can refer to an individual (Jesus Christ) or a collective group associated with the individual.⁴⁰ And so, right at the time of the fall, the redemption process was initiated. God's grace is seen in the way he covered the now-naked Adam and Eve (Gen 3:21). Laymon says that God's act of covering them with animal skin is an indicator and a particular act of His Grace, though they still had lost the benefits of being the garden of Eden.⁴¹ Jean has a similar opinion, though he further explains that the fact that God clothed them with skin showed their fallen nature, as this material is not sufficient to cover their nakedness.⁴²

Family Imagery in the OT

The OT and the NT present the family as a central metaphor for understanding the human relationship with God. For instance, the nation of Israel is presented as the Lord's daughter and, at times, as the Lord's wife (Jer 3:20; 31:22).⁴³ Also, Jesus referred to his followers as children of God and said that his siblings do God's will (Mark 3:31–35). Similarly, Paul numerously relates to followers of Jesus as 'brothers and sisters' in most of his letters (Rom

³⁷ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 993.

³⁸ Alexander and Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 37.

³⁹ Jonathan Cheek, "The Individual and Collective Offspring of the Woman: The Canonical Outworking of Genesis 3:15," *Themelios* 48, no. 1 (April 1, 2023): 29–46; Jonathan Cheek, "Recent Developments in the Interpretation of the Seed of the Woman in Genesis 3:15," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 64, no. 2 (June 1, 2021): 215–36.

⁴⁰ Cheek, "The Individual and Collective Offspring of the Woman."

⁴¹ Charles M. Laymon, ed., *Interpreter's Concise Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 15.

⁴² Jean Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 162, http://archive.org/details/commentaryongene0000calv_b9k3.

⁴³ Morris and Barry, "Family."



16:17). God’s covenant with the people is seen as an extended family, where humanity is invited to partake in the kingdom of God through adoption. Ragnar argues that through faith, believers are adopted into the family of God; they become co-heirs with Christ (who has been appointed heir already) and members of God’s family.⁴⁴

The Torah primarily shows the regulations regarding family relations. In Leviticus 18:6–17, sexual relations are addressed, with emphasis on no sexual relations with close family members. There are many regulations on inheritance rights in a family, as addressed in (Deut 21:15–17)⁴⁵– this has a bearing on redemptive history in that believers are to inherit the kingdom of God as heirs. The laws protecting the vulnerable in society (in Deut 25:5–10) correspond with God’s care and concern for His people / his family.⁴⁶ It is such levirate laws that kinsman redeemers (as was the case of Ruth and Boaz) came to be, and it will be remembered that Jesus Christ came through Boaz and Ruth.⁴⁷ Finally, Exodus 20:12 and Deut 5:16 forbid abandonment of parents at an old age, a thing that can be equated to a warning for the believers (God’s children) not to abandon God, their father.

Further, the Torah shows some of the challenges that families face: (i) blame-shifting –Adam and Eve (Gen 3:12); (ii) sibling rivalry –as seen in Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1), Jacob and Esau and Joseph and his brothers (which probably was a result of the polygamous setting that that his family was established in); (iii) master and slave relations as regards inheritance– as exemplified in the case of Hagar (Gen 16:15; 21:8–20). (iv) Social pressure on the pain of barrenness and childlessness– as seen in the lives of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachael. The story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38 points out the difficulties of fulfilling the levirate marriage laws (Deut 25:5–10; Ruth 4:5). A levirate marriage sought to reinstate an individual to a family after they had been rendered unfit due to circumstances beyond their control.⁴⁸ These challenges, when viewed from a biblical theological eye, are a type of impediment to people coming into God’s kingdom.

The T historical books, proverbs, and wisdom literature focus on the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, with tension brought about by ‘outsiders’ (from nations) becoming ‘insiders’ (the Jews) and doing much better than them. One main outsider is Ruth, who leaves

⁴⁴ Ragnar Bring, *Commentary on Galatians*, 1961, 197, <http://archive.org/details/commentaryongala0000ragn>.

⁴⁵ Morris and Barry, “Family.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Alexander and Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 177.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 42,177.



her people and ancestral home to follow Naomi. Similarly, Esther, who becomes a part of the king's family, remains an outsider when the Jews are faced with the annihilation threat (Esth 8:1–2).⁴⁹ Looking at Proverbs, the foundations of strong families are well explained. Such include cohesiveness (Prov 1:8–19; 14:1), children's respect for parents (Prov 20:20; 30:11–14), and parental discipline to children⁵⁰ (Prov 22:6; 29:15). Also, the family is depicted as a place of instruction (Prov 1–9) and molding of godly behavior (Prov 20:7). Proverbs is like a handbook for managing the family institution.⁵¹

The prophetic books metaphorically depict the family as representing the relationship between God and Jerusalem, his wife/daughter. She is appraised or punished depending on how Jerusalem relates with God at a particular time.⁵² Some of the reasons for the punishment of Jerusalem include sexual abuse and worship of images. In the wisdom literature, it is indicated that a breakdown of the family leads to a negative impact on the relationship between God and Israel. Reuben says that mending family relations is synonymous with Israel returning to God.⁵³

Therefore, as seen in the Torah, the writings, and the prophets, the family comes into play. A redeemer would come through a woman— who would be within a family set up (that would later be Mary betrothed to Joseph— Mathew 1:18). Throughout the OT, specific families are strategically positioned to carry through this promise of a redeemer through a woman.⁵⁴ Matthew 1:2–16 records Jesus' genealogy, where forty-two generations are singled out as through which Jesus Christ (the promised Redeemer) would come. The families come through the covenants God made with individuals in some families.

Abraham's family is chosen —where the nation of Israel comes from. The nation becomes a type of Jesus through whom God would bless the entire world (Deut 7:7–9, Matt 2:13–25). The approach failed because Israel (as a nation) continually deviated from the covenant agreement. From the time the Israelites left Egypt, as they settled in Canaan, the exiles, and even the return from exile, God would position specific families to keep alive the

⁴⁹ Morris and Barry, "Family."

⁵⁰ Joel R Beeke, "Building Family Convictions through Wisdom Literature in Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 14, no. 2 (July 1, 2022): 6.

⁵¹ Morris and Barry, "Family."

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Dziejzorm Reuben Asafo, "The Return Of Prophet Elijah: Restoring The Eschatological Family In Malachi 4:4-6," *Valley View University Journal of Theology* 1 (January 1, 2011): 1.

⁵⁴ Alexander and Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 144.



promise of the coming Redeemer. The family of Levi had also been chosen from among the chosen nations to serve as priests (Deut 18:1; Heb 7:5) –a foreshadowing of what Jesus Christ would be, in that in the same way they were a priestly household, Jesus would be the high priest.⁵⁵ All along, God has maintained the principles of kingdom, people, land, and laws.

Family Imagery in the NT

When we look at redemption in the NT, a family is involved. Jesus Christ is born through Mary– again, in a family. He grows and starts ministry, and even at the time of death on the cross, he belongs to a family (John 19:25). When he begins teaching, he emphasizes the original foundation of the family in the kingdom of God. For instance, regarding marriage and divorce, Jesus refers the people back to the beginning, stating that the family institution is permanent and thus divorce was not allowed (Matt 19:1–6). Other teachings of Jesus about the family include honoring parents (Matt 15:3– 6), children and humility (Mark 10:15), and love and forgiveness (Matt 6:14– 15). All these are aspects necessary for the best functioning of the family.

The concept of family is redefined in the Gospels and Acts of Apostles. There is a shift of God’s family from the Jews to the believers through adoption through Jesus Christ. Significantly, the biological family is challenged (Matt 12:46–50; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21).⁵⁶ Jesus says that the disciples will experience hostility from members of their families (Matt 10:21, 36; Mark 13:12).⁵⁷ Jesus’ approach to family is focused on the spiritual family more than the physical one. He says one must suffer for the kingdom’s sake, whether as a member of a physical family or a believer.⁵⁸ He mentions that there is a reward for those who take such bold steps for the sake of the kingdom of God (Matt 19:29; Mark 10:29–30). In the book of Acts, the church functioned as a new family and would be open to growth by receiving new brothers and sisters. Amos Young observes that the family in Acts has ecclesiological, eschatological, and soteriological views. This means that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the believers become a family of believers, waiting for the end of the age, and they will be united with God the Father.

⁵⁵ Norman C Habel, “Deuteronomy 18: God’s Chosen Prophet,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 35, no. 9 (October 1, 1964): 575–82.

⁵⁶ Morris and Barry, “Family.”

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 94, <http://archive.org/details/matthewcommentar0002luzu>.



In Paul's writings and context, the Greco-Roman values concerning a family were a bit retrogressive compared to modern times. Emphasis was laid on the authority of the father.⁵⁹ Women were only meant to bear children, wives, children, enslaved people, and all family members were subordinate to the father. Paul pushes too hard against their tradition, which holds the family in high regard. For instance, Paul discourages people from getting married by offering an alternative way of life (1 Cor 7:8), which conflicts with the Roman laws that required those at the age of childbearing to marry and bear children.⁶⁰ Also, he challenges the authority of the fathers and encourages mutuality between them and their wives (1 Cor 7:3-4), which was against the Roman teaching *paterfamilias*.⁶¹ In 1 Cor 7:22, Gal 3:28, and 5:13, Paul brings out a redemptive aspect of the family by talking about a reverse relationship between masters and slaves in a household.

Further, Paul presents the image of the family as a community of believers, especially on how they have been adopted into the family of God (Rom 8-9; Gal 4:19; 1 Thess 2:7). In other NT letters, the redemptive aspect of the family is exemplified. For instance, God's role as a father and Jesus' role as a son is seen in Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 John. In Hebrews 12:9, there is a parallel between God's disciplining and a father. The responsibility over widows and orphans in James 1:27 is communal. The family of God members are called brothers and sisters in Colossians 4:15. Therefore, as explained, Paul, like Jesus, addresses the family theme. He points out that the marriage institution remains sacred and honorable to all (Eph 5:22-33), and the right attitudes play a pivotal role in maintaining healthy families. It will be noted that the values reflect those God's intentions at the very beginning. Paul admonishes husbands and wives to maintain diligence in their family and marital roles, indicating that the family's position remains important (Col 3:18-19).

Regarding children and parents, Paul gives guidelines on the nature of relationships within a family (Eph 6:1-4, Col 3:20-21). Regarding divorce and remarriage, he advises Christians to take marriage as a covenant with permanent implications (1 Cor 7:10-16; 32-35). He spells out a blueprint of the Christian household code in Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1).

⁵⁹ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 82, <http://archive.org/details/grecoromanworldo0000jeff>.

⁶⁰ Morris and Barry, "Family."

⁶¹ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 82.



All this points out the centrality of the family institution and how its role in redemption cannot be neglected.

More specifically, apart from the fact that Jesus Christ (the Redeemer) came through a well-traced family genealogy, we can point out that the family is central in the redemption story in that it provides the first platform where an individual learns about their fallen state.⁶² They desire their redemption through faith in Jesus Christ. Like the lost Eden (presence of God), families provide the right environment for spiritual growth. The original order is restored, and the parental roles are well exercised. God's fellowship with Adam and Eve is restored through a family's fellowship.

Further, just like the covenant nation that God had chosen, the family becomes a covenant community, and just like God's covenant with Abraham led to the birth of the nations of Israel, those who have accepted Jesus become a covenant family. This can be at the physical family level, congregation level, or even the Christians world over. Christian ministry efficiency will also improve if the family union is strengthened. Restoring relationships in families from the fallen state is a replica of the redemption that Christians attain through Jesus Christ. As indicated earlier, redemption is all about restoring by paying the ransom. It is a good illustration of the broader theme of reconciliation. Jesus' redemption brought reconciliation between the Jews and the Gentiles to God (Eph 2:13-16). In the NT, the idea of family is beyond biological ties. It involves the broader concept of the spiritual Christian family.

Family in a New Creation

New Creation refers to the present and the future.⁶³ Those who have accepted God's redemptive work by expressing their faith in Jesus Christ are presently a New Creation (2 Cor 5:17), though still living in the fallen world.⁶⁴ In a futuristic sense, a time is coming when the old order of the fallen world will pass away, and everything will be new (Rev 21:1). The New Creation is, therefore, here with us (believers in Christ) and is still to come (at the end of the second coming of Jesus)⁶⁵ Everyone who has accepted Jesus Christ is now in God's family

⁶² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 573.

⁶³ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 824.

⁶⁴ Scott Hafemann, "The Forgiveness-Based Virtue of The New Creation: The New 'Sociological' Location of the Believer," *New York*, 2000, 45-46.

⁶⁵ Maurice Lee, "Colossians, Resurrection, and New Creation," *Word & World* 41, no. 4 (January 1, 2021): 325-33.



(Eph 2:19, Gal 3:26). Christians (God's family) are envisioned to live in perfect harmony, away from the chaos created by the fall.

Believers (the church) are called the bride of Christ (Eph 5:25-27; Rev 19:7-9; 21: 9-11). Initially, only the Jews would be the family of God. However, in the New Creation, identity in the family is dependent only on one's faith in Jesus.⁶⁶ Such faith highlights God's original intention of having a well-organized, harmonious heavenly kingdom here on earth. That is why believers anticipate a reunion with Christ and all others who have been made a New Creation and are now part of God's family. As God initially planned, believers shall be one big, united family in good fellowship. Again, family in the New Creation is seen as fulfilling God's promise that he gave at the point of the fall. God will crush the head of the oppressor, and he will restore the peace that had been destroyed. Even the physical family will experience God's blessings and presence.

In Revelation 21:2-4, Jesus will wipe away the tears of the family members (believers). Carol says that a people transformed by God will become God's dwelling place, indicating that a family is a place of healing and wholeness. This is a replica of what will happen to families, even physically. Believers' families that have experienced brokenness can receive healing and restoration in their family relationships through the redemptive work of Christ. It is worth noting that family relations and all members are referred to as the 'body' or 'bride' or 'family' of God- gender notwithstanding. This is transcendent from the original setup where the family was to come to a male and female union.

The family of believers will experience God's presence, which was initially destroyed, and it will be another Eden-like moment. There will be no pain and suffering. Thus, family relationships will be restored. It will be a fresh start; hence, the old will be forgotten since transformation and reconciliation will have happened (Col 3:10); as Christians, we should then put on the "new self" in Christ. This calls for a transformation of character and relationships, even in the family. Lisa remarks that as a way of restoring the family, the love between the husband and the wife, which is expected in the New Creation, should be like that of Christ to the New Creation (the church) (Eph 5:25.)⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Hafemann, "The Forgiveness-Based Virtue Of The New Creation: The New 'Sociological' Location of the Believer," 48.

⁶⁷ Lisa Baumert, "Biblical Interpretation and the Epistle to the Ephesians," *Priscilla Papers* 25, no. 2 (2011): 22-25.



Implication for Christians

Since believers are the New Creation, they form the family of God (they live in a world where the old law has been fulfilled and is no longer in force).⁶⁸ This means they are all taken as sons of God through adoption (Gal 4:4). Paul uses the adoption image to show how, today, the believers have been conferred rights of inheritance and thus are heirs through redemption.⁶⁹ Just as a family would have sons in a physical human family, believers are sons in God's family and, hence, able to inherit the kingdom just as sons inherit the estate of their fathers (John 1:12-13). In Ephesians 1:5, the reason for adoption is God's love through Christ, and therefore, it is a free grant to completely undeserving people, not by merit but based on Grace. There is a connection between adoption and the Spirit since it is through the Spirit that the believers can relate to God as 'Abba' –the father. Adoption is not only a past event but also a futuristic aspect where it will be consummated, for it includes the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:23).⁷⁰

Being God's family is permanent. This means believers cannot lose their identity since the means of becoming sons is God-given. By grace, believers become members of God's family (God's grace) (Eph 2:8-9). Gender does not determine who fits in the new family of God. It is dealt with in the New Creation family relations, and all members are referred to as the 'body' or 'bride' or 'family' of God. This is transcendent from the original setup where the family was to come to a male and female union. Such transcendence points out the open doors that everyone can join the family of God, regardless of their earthly family status. Believers now have eternal life and will spend eternity with God (John 10:28). Further, adoption is sealed in the Holy Spirit, which assures the believer of security and a guarantee that they cannot lose their relationship with God (Eph 1:13-14). Believers can count on God's faithfulness (1 Cor 1:9) and unconditional love (Rom 8:38-39) to ensure their permanence in his kingdom. Once a person becomes part of God's family, they are in a secure and everlasting relationship where they do not lose their newly acquired status.

Knowing the New Creation and that believers are part of God's family should give a better approach to earthly family relationships. Through understanding Christ's love (John 13:34-35), believers can cultivate love amongst themselves and their families. Love will then

⁶⁸ Alexander and Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 313.

⁶⁹ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 21.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.



present them as distinct disciples of Christ. Jesus brought believers to the family of God by providing restoration and forgiveness. Christians should embrace such values as forgiveness and seek to restore wayward family members in the same love they have received from Christ. Out of forgiveness, mutual support and care become available at the church and family level (Gal 6:2). Moral accountability (James 5:16) is also enhanced since family members feel safe to open up to one another. They will build each other up through encouragement (1 Thess 5:11) instead of tearing down one another in preparation for the consummation of the adoption. Jesus' act of reconciling man to God should form the basis of reconciliation and restoration of relationships in the family. This will, in turn, create a culture of love and unity, mutual support, encouragement, and inclusion, solving the sorrows that befell the family unit traceable to the fall.⁷¹

Conclusion

Right from Creation, God had a purpose for the family institution. He started it and made its foundations regarding gender, composition, and roles. Significant attention is paid to the family, especially in the fall and redemption. By the time Adam and Eve were tempted, they were already living as husband and wife; thus, the fall came through a family. Their inability and desire for independence from God led them away. Also, it was through a family that redemption came. First at the time of the fall (the promise of a savior Gen 3:15) and later through the incarnate birth of Jesus Christ through a family (Joseph and Mary). There is a significant shift in the family structure in the New Creation, and some of the parameters of the family before the New Creation are transcended to a wholesome approach of having all believers as the family of God. Christians should use the New Creations' understanding to make their earthly families functional by considering Christ's restoration and redemptive work.

⁷¹ Alexander and Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 652.



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