

# PARENTAL LOVE OR CHILD ABUSE?

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A woman abandons her child. A man tries to slaughter his son. What should we make of such behavior? While the Bible speaks theoretically about parental love, stories that feature children show them frequently being treated as property and in ways that we would now consider abusive. The key to understanding this behavior is that in biblical societies the individual was subordinated to the community. Parents felt that they were showing love for their children when they raised them to fit into their roles in the group. Yet, even so, the Bible shows signs of limiting parental authority and expanding the rights of children.

The treatment of children in the Bible exhibits an inconsistency between philosophy and practice. The Bible is full of maxims about the love of parents for their children. Parental love is depicted as normal and pervasive. Isaiah asks: *Can a woman forget her baby, or disown the child of her womb?* (49:15). Jeremiah says: *A cry is heard in Ramah – wailing, bitter weeping – Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone* (31:15). Moreover, there are many instances in which God's love for Israel is equated to parents' love for their children. For example, *You saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son* (Deut. 1:31); *As a mother comforts her son, so I will comfort you* (Isaiah 66:13); *As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear Him* (Ps. 103:13).

Yet, biblical stories illustrate that too much parental love leads to grief. Jacob created a dysfunctional family and caused himself years of sadness because his love for Joseph fostered jealousy: *Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons . . . . And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him . . .* (Gen. 37:3-4).

David's paternal love led to the tragic deaths of his children. Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar and consequent murder by his brother Absalom can be understood as stemming from too much love and too little discipline, for when David learned of the outrage *he was greatly upset* but did nothing (II

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Sam. 13:21). The Hebrew text does not elaborate, but the Septuagint continues: "He did not rebuke his son Amnon because he loved him." The rebellion of his son Adonijah is specifically attributed to parental indulgence: *His father had never scolded him* [saying]: 'Why did you do that?' (I Kg. 1:6).

In biblical societies, minor children were the property of their parents, who had life and death power over them. For one thing, children were a natural source of labor on small family farms. And sometimes, of course, they were not up to the exertion, as with the young son of the Shunammite woman, Elisha's patron, who almost died of sunstroke while working in the field (II Kg. 4:17-19). In addition, children had economic value, since the parents could sell their labor (Ex. 21:7) and broker their marriages. Thus, seduction of a virgin is an economic crime – theft of an asset from her parents:

*If a man seduces a virgin for whom the bride-price has not been paid, and lies with her, he must make her his wife by payment of a bride-price. If her father refuses to give her to him, he must still weigh out silver in accordance with the bride-price for virgins* (Ex. 22:15-16).

Likewise, the rape of a virgin is considered an economic loss to her father:

*If a man comes upon a virgin who is not engaged and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are discovered, the man who lay with her shall pay the girl's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife* (Deut. 22:28-29).

A classic example of parents wielding absolute power over their children is the Akedah, the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. Genesis 22 clearly states that God is testing Abraham's faith: *God put Abraham to the test. He said to him . . . 'Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love . . . and offer him there as a burnt offering . . .'* (22:1-2). And when Abraham shows that he is prepared to sacrifice Isaac, God tells him: *'Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you . . .'* (22:16-17). Notably, there is not a word about Isaac's faith being tested, or the reward that Isaac deserves for not resisting his father, Abraham.

In another incident, in I Samuel 1-2, Hannah vows that if God grants her a child, she will devote the child's life to God. Thus, when the toddler Samuel is three years old, she brings him to the sanctuary at Shiloh and leaves him with Eli, the priest. The point of view in the story is entirely hers: She prays,

she is rewarded, she fulfills her vow. There is no thought at all about the little boy's feelings when his mother abandons him. Furthermore, just as with Isaac, Samuel receives no praise for his obedience; it is taken for granted.

David and Bathsheba are punished for their liaison by the death of their baby (II Sam. 10-11). Job's faith is tested by the deaths of his children (Job 1). In none of these cases is there the slightest suggestion that the children had done anything to deserve death. This is because it was common in antiquity, as in Roman law, for entire families to be killed for the crime of one member. In the case of Dathan and Abiram, who rebelled against the leadership of Moses and Aaron (Num. 16:27-32): *. . . they stood at the entrance of their tents, with their wives, their children, and their little ones . . . and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households. . . .* When it was discovered that Achan had taken taboo plunder from Jericho:

*Then Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan . . . his sons and daughters, and his ox, his ass, and his flock, and his tent, and all his belongings . . . And all Israel pelted him with stones. They put them to the fire and stoned them* (Josh. 7:24:25).

The practice of group punishment was especially prevalent when one dynasty deposed another. Thus, as soon as Baasha became king: *. . . he struck down all the House of Jeroboam; he did not spare a single soul . . . in accordance with the word that the Lord had spoken . . . because of the sins which Jeroboam committed . . .* (I Kg. 15:29-30). So too, Zimri:

*. . . struck down all the House of Baasha; he did not leave a single male of his, nor any kinsman or friend. . . . in accordance with the word that the Lord had spoken through the prophet Jehu – because of the sinful acts which Baasha and his son Elah committed . . .* (16:11-13).

Significantly, the text gives God's support to these murders.

In contrast, Jeremiah prophesies that a time will come when: *. . . they shall no longer say, 'Parents have eaten sour grapes and children's teeth are set on edge.' But every one shall die for his own sins: whosoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be blunted* (31:29-30). Ezekiel condemns the same proverb even more forcefully:

*The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by quoting this proverb upon the land of Israel, 'Parents eat sour grapes and*

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*their children's teeth are set on edge'? As I live – declares the Lord God – this proverb shall no longer be current among you in Israel. Consider, all lives are Mine; the life of the parent and the life of the child are both Mine. The person who sins, only he shall die (18:1-4).*

Yet, the belief in group punishment was so great that Ezekiel's audience protested. After 25 verses describing how God weighs the actions of the righteous and wicked in order to determine their fate, we read:

*Yet the House of Israel say, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.' Are My ways unfair, O House of Israel? It is your ways that are unfair. Be assured, O House of Israel, I will judge each one of you according to his ways – declares the Lord God (19:29-30).*

Interestingly, while the overwhelming sentiment of biblical societies favored parental control of children, biblical law tried to reduce the power of parents. At first glance, the law of the "Rebellious Son" seems to be another instance of life and death control:

*If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, . . . [they] shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city . . . [and] all the men of the city shall stone him to death (Deut. 21:18-21).*

However, this law actually reduces the power of the parents by requiring them to state their cause in court, and have the court condemn the child to death.<sup>1</sup> So too, the Bible commands: *Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for parents; a person shall be put to death only for his own crime (24:16).* Thus, while the entire family of Dathan and Abiram died because of their rebellion, in the accompanying uprising of Korah, *the sons of Korah, however, did not die (Num. 26:11).*

That is also why the Bible praises Amaziah, King of Judah, for not killing the children of the men who murdered his father:

*Once he had the kingdom firmly in his grasp, he put to death the courtiers who had assassinated his father the king. But he did not put to death the children of the assassins, in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Teaching of Moses, where the Lord commanded, 'Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor*

*children be put to death for parents; a person shall be put to death only for his own crime' (II Kg. 14:5-6).*

While the incidents that are reported show, by today's standards, emotional and physical abuse, it is very important to realize that parental love for children is not in question. The fact that parents are punished through the death of their children shows that it was assumed that parents would love their children greatly. In fact, the reason the Akedah was a test of Abraham's faith is that it is assumed that sacrificing one's child is a daunting request.<sup>2</sup> The manifestations of love are ambiguous by modern standards, but biblical societies should not be faulted. Child-rearing was defined differently in societies where the well-being of the family or community was viewed as supreme. The demand for survival did not allow for concerns about cultivating a child's individualism and emotional growth. Children, like everyone else, were subordinate to the general good of the group. The rights and survival of an individual were not of paramount significance. In biblical cultures, individuals defined themselves within the group. And this applied to children as well as adults.

#### NOTES

1. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996) p. 196. See also, Gilad Gevanyahu and Harvey Sicherman, "What Never Was and Never Will Be," *JBQ* 29:4 (Oct.-Dec. 2001) pp. 251-252.
2. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 393.