

THE ‘FAMILY, LAND AND GOD’ TRIANGLE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: THE OFFER OF A SOCIAL READING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Abstract

The affiliation of the family with the land, ownership rights as necessary for a sufficient means of existence on one hand, and God’s blessings on the other, is a founding triangle constituting the basic principles of every ancient society. The triangle is also described in the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible. For many centuries, the ‘nation-land-God’ triangle has been an undisputed foundation for the sustainability of every society. The ancient intuition foresaw the inalienable constituents of society as still being worth remembering for modern man. However, in the 21st century, all three constituents could be described and named differently. Our reflections go far beyond the ancient book (or rather, collection of 39 books) composed more than 2,000 years ago for the needs of society in Ancient Israel. The house, the household, was the key concept for both the family, posterity and economics in Biblical times, and so it is today. We tend to think that family ties and economic relationships are separate concepts, but they are made by affiliation with the land, and changes in relations between the three elements have a deep impact on the stability of the nation, with far-reaching consequences.

KEY WORDS: household, land, family, stability of the nation.

Anotacija

Šeimos ir žemės tarpusavio ryšys, nuosavybės teisė, kaip išgyvenimo būtinybė, viena vertus, yra Dievo palaima, kita vertus, sudarė pamatinių kiekvienos antikos valstybės principų trikampį, kuris aprašytas Senajame Testamente – pirmojoje Biblijos dalyje. Daugelį amžių „tautos – žemės – Dievo“ sąsaja buvo neginčijamas kiekvienos visuomenės išlikimo pagrindas. Šį antikos laikais susiformavusį nedalomų visuomenės komponentų suvokimą derėtų priminti ir šiuolaikiniam žmogui. Tačiau XXI amžiuje visos trys sudedamosios dalys apibūdinamos ir vadinamos kitaip. Autorių požiūris siekia daug toliau nei senoji knyga (tiksliau, 39 knygų rinkinys), parašyta prieš 2000 metų ir skirta senovės Izraelio visuomenės poreikiams. Namai, namų ūkis bibliniais laikais, kaip ir šiandien, buvo svarbiausia šeimos, jos palikuonių ir ekonomikos sąvoka. Esame linkę manyti, kad *šeimos ryšiai* ir *ekonominiai santykiai* yra skirtingos sąvokos, susijusios su žeme, tad šiuos tris komponentus apimantys pokyčiai lemia tautos stabilumą ir atitinkamas pasekmes.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: namų ūkis, žemė, šeima, tautos stabilumas.

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Introduction

Relationships between the nation and the land are much debated today, when we experience mass migration beyond national borders around the globe. More than this, migration poses questions relating to the land perceived as a homeland, the perception of humanity as a family, the role assigned to age-old cultural and

national traditions when migration separates people from their birthplace, etc. The article deals with the traditional structure of relationships between the land, the nation and God, as seen in the Old Testament, written about 3,000 years ago. The Biblical outlook was important for national identities in Europe at least until the early 20th century, and the current human/national identity crisis is manifested in phenomena such as ‘humanness without a face’, ‘a future without culture’, and the like.

1. Methodology

The European Christian Academy employs a unique methodological approach to current social issues, ‘innovation from Antiquity’. Rather than searching for simple up-to-date solutions, this methodology is interested in the relationships between the personality, society, land and God, as they are described in ancient texts like the Old Testament and the Bible. These texts are well informed about the challenges when these texts were created, and to the penetrating eye they are sensitive enough to analyse current challenges; they could be used as a meaningful inspiration for creative studies. They may serve as reference points for the development of European civilisation in many respects. The reference is archetypal with a positive impact on changing ideological paradigms. The article offers an insight into the use of this methodology.

2. The ancient concept of ‘household’

The oldest stratum of vocabulary in every language belongs to the basic systems found in all world societies. These capacious words deal with family members, their relationships, and affiliation to the land. Kinship systems convey important social information, whereas the problem of the cultural meanings and correct translation of terminology has proven to be intractable, due to changes in word semantics over time. Therefore, a few words should be said here about more precise terminology.

The key Greek term in the context of the present article is ‘household’, or *oikonomia* (Greek οἰκονομία), usually translated as ‘governance’. The Greek word is composed of two parts: *oikos*, usually translated as ‘household’, and *nemein*, ‘management and dispensation’ (Dotan, 2016). Obviously, the word described ‘household management’ in Ancient Greece, and the meaning was retained by early Christians (Household, Family, 1997). However, besides the literal meaning relating to mundane household management in whatever sense, the Christian theological tradition uses this term to describe: (1) ‘stewardship’ or the management of

things for the benefit of one's neighbour (meaning Christians as 'God's stewards' or 'servants of the Lord', sometimes meaning 'deacons' who serve) (Ayres, 2004); (2) the way God keeps the created world together in Christ; 3) more specifically, *oikonomia* prescribes the manner of educating and chastising humanity for the future Second Coming of Christ. This is God's 'economy', which deals with people making ready to take the full revelation of God's Glory. Good stewardship is the good management of things in the world for Christ's sake, such as the just distribution of goods, almsgiving, charity, etc. In that sense, *oikonomia* is the 'administration of salvation' according to the 'plan of salvation', which has an eschatological dimension (οἰκονομία, 1967). The household is a challenge to which the Vicarious Death of Christ on the Cross is just the beginning, and the full implementation of it rests on the recipient's shoulders.

To put the idea into the context of social work, the household concept takes the reader far beyond the religious idea. From an ethical perspective, the concept deals with the norm and the deviation from it. Deviations should be corrected. In the Christian household the context correction is practised as 'justification' and 'healing', called 'deification', which means turning back to the once-given norm (Russel, 2004). Looking at it from a social work perspective, the concept of household contains three elements 'family-land-God-in-His-Blessings' as being vitally important for the sustainability of the nation.

3. Family, clan and land

The stability of society is more complex than personal salvation (which is not 'simple' either). 'Laws providing for safety and positive contribution in economics are the same which provide for stable family structure' (Shulz, 2013). Notwithstanding the fact that most literature dealing with the Old Testament is devoted to theological issues, the present article invites readers to pay more serious attention to the social reading of the Old Testament (Brueggemann, 1994). Its potential for today rests on values kept and respected by the nation across many centuries.

Ancient societies were organised around three concentric circles: (1) The smallest family unit was the 'nuclear family', in Hebrew *bēt āb*, literally meaning 'father's house'. This smallest unit was managed and ruled by the oldest male *āb*, 'father', which roughly corresponds to 'patriarch' in the European perception. In the traditional 'patriarchal family', the father or male exerts all power and authority. The younger generations, children, grandchildren and women, function under his authority. *Bēt āb* could encompass up to 66 people who did not doubt or oppose the authority of the patriarch (Gen. 46:26). Examples of this family are given in Gen. 50:22, Num. 18:1, Judg. 16:31, Is. 3:6, etc. Family ties within the 'father's house'

were also reflected as a sense of common heritage and collective responsibility for wrongs, i.e., the family functioned as one unit in an ethical, social and economic sense. Such descriptive systems were typically found wherever the nuclear family operated as a relatively autonomous unit both economically and socially.

Contrary to the present legislation, the land belonged to the ‘father’s house’, whereas today it belongs to any responsible individual. Interestingly, in Biblical times the ‘father’s house’ was conjunctive between the land in itself and the God of the Israelites (Jahveh). First, the land was ‘given’ by God to the nation; second, further generations inherited rights to use the land, but people were not owners! The concept of family and rights to use the land were religiously and ethically merged. The Law states: ‘Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD YOUR GOD IS GIVING YOU’ (Ex. 20:12). Thus, a triangle was constructed: family/clan-land-God. The apex of the triangle was the Law of Moses, which put forth requirements for just and blessed living on the land. Obviously, the laws of inheritance rights and legacy keeping were important to the ancients. When the father/patriarch passed away, and a generation replacement happened, land use rights were kept as an inheritance for the whole ‘father’s house’ for the next period (Gen. 13:14–15; Gen. 15:17, etc).

No doubt, the strictness of Mosaic law was aimed at securing wholeness and virtue in the ‘house’, or the house would be at risk of losing its land. Another law required to avenge the death of a family member: ‘I ... had two sons. They got into a fight with each other in the field, and no one was there to separate them. One struck the other and killed him. Now the whole clan has risen up against your servant; they say, “Hand over the one who struck his brother down, so that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed”’ (2 Sam. 14:6–7). Perhaps the most illustrious example showing care for the integrity of the family and land use rights was the redemption of a fellow Hebrew from slavery to another nation: ‘If a foreigner residing among you becomes rich and any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to the foreigner or to a member of the foreigner’s clan, they retain the right of redemption after they have sold themselves: One of their relatives may redeem them... [a more detailed list of redeemers follows]’ (Lev. 25:47–52). History shows that Israelites kept the practice throughout their history (Faber, 2002).

Redemption law also referred to the land, but it should be explained in more detail. Land redemption law arises from the concept ‘the Land belongs to the Lord.’ As was mentioned above, the land was ‘the Lord’s’, just like ‘a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed ... to *work it and take care of it*’ (Gen. 2:8, 15). The Divine ownership of land is mentioned several times (e.g. Gen. 13:15; Lev. 25:23; Deut. 19:14; Josh. 1:2, etc). ‘Protection of the land’ from

the interference of the snake (Satan, the one who destroys the harmony between man and God) was the most important condition for people inhabiting His land to enjoy God's blessing. God's law in Eden was clearly formulated ('you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die', Gen. 2:15); blessings were given if the law was kept, whereas disobedience brings death, that is, expulsion from the land.

For example, if the land was taken over for some reason by foreigners, the duty of the family was to redeem it: 'The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land. If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold [more details follow]' (Lev. 25:23–28). Looking from the other perspective, of giving 'God's land' to foreigners (in the language of the Old Testament, they are called idolaters, i.e., people who live on My land but 'do not acknowledge Me', Jer. 9:3; Ps. 35:15), is an unforgivable sin, and God cannot leave it unnoticed, and it ends with death and expulsion.

The configuration of man/family-land-God constitutes a relationship triangle, and merging the three elements brings forth the concept of 'blessing'. An interesting example illustrates this. King Solomon (reigned ca. 970–931 BC) purchased precious cedar and cypress timber from the King of Tyre (modern-day Lebanon, 'idolaters' in the times of the Old Testament) and paid with 20 cities in the land of Galilee (1 Kings 9:11). There is no doubt that it was a good move in an economic context, when the Galilee of the day had no big trees, and Solomon greatly needed timber for his building projects, but it was a harsh withdrawal from the sacred nation-land-God triangle. The land in Galilee was given by God to the Israelites. Notwithstanding the fact that Solomon worked hard to develop the infrastructure of his state and secure its borders, the Biblical narrative leaves no doubt that such management of God's given land was an unforgivable sin. The new, rational management of the land conflicted with the old tribal order that introduced cracks in the triangle and led to the collapse of the state. All three elements of the triangle require mutual respect, and none of them are to be cut off from the others. The Old Testament author is critical of the initiative to buy or sell the land without reference to the Law of Moses. In times when a new bureaucracy was born, many conflicts between the ruling class and the peasants show opposite developments in land management. Since the ultimate owner of the land is God Himself, Israel is chosen to serve Him on His land, otherwise they inherit death instead of blessed life.

To take the idea further, a few words should be said about the clan system in Old Testament times. The Hebrew term *mishpachah* denotes relatives connected to

the centre down the father's lineage (Mishpachah, 2016). The term in this sense is found in Ex. 6:14, Num. 3:20, 7:2, 17:1–3, etc. The concept corresponds roughly to both the Latvian and Lithuanian *saimē* ('wider family', which includes relatives on both the father's and the mother's side). Membership of the clan could be from 60 to 250 people (depending on geography and distance, the number of children, etc). This number is not incidental, however: this is the average number of people we all know more or less personally, and corresponds to approximately the number of contacts in a mobile phone address book. This concept points not only to the community of blood relatives, it also includes meaningful social relationships. In passing, it should be mentioned that within the *mishpachah*, there was an effective functioning 'gift economy', i.e., ties of mutual support and solidarity characteristic of all ancient societies (Cheal, 1988). Members of the community offered unconditional help to the less successful members in the event of need. The duty to offer help was binding for all members of the community (De Vaux, 1961).

Finally, *all Israel was seen as one family*. In the Book of Genesis, we read about the patriarch Jacob as 'Israel' having 12 sons, presented as ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel (Gen. 46:8*sec*). The Old Testament speaks extensively about the sense of unity of the Israelites and their resistance to assimilation, for which there is no need to give more proof (Josh. 23). The line of demarcation between the Israelites and other nations was drawn after the conquest of Canaan during Joshua's times (Joshua conquered Canaan for the Israelites settled by 'idolaters', ca. 1200 BC). Shortly before his death, Joshua prohibited marriage to foreigners. The prohibition was announced in the ancient rhetoric of the Holy war: 'Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. If you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you' (Josh. 23:4–13). Assimilation may lead to the loss of God's blessings, and national unity equals that of obedience to Moses' Law of the Covenant.

4. Genealogies and the integrity of tradition

Another aspect of the traditionally inherited family structure is reflected in Biblical genealogies. They take the topic much further. Registers may slow down the tempo of the action, and the reader may lose his or her interest in purely historical

information without a contemporary meaning; however, they were far more important than just registers for posterity. Genealogies fixed descent from influential and powerful ancestors, and finally went so far as 'God Himself'. The descent testified to the highest value of God's presence in the lineage, which was forwarded and cherished from generation to generation, and land use was derived from that. More than that, nation and land were seen as synonyms. Registers speak about staying close to the land, the family's mighty ancestors, and finally to the one chosen nation of Israel separate from others (cf. Gen. 9–10, Gen. 25, Gen. 36, etc). Genealogies made the history of the nation and legalised land use rights.

Registers had even more importance beyond the mere economic and social integrity within the 'father's house'. Keeping several generations together secured pedagogical continuity, whereby children and grandchildren learned from fathers and grandfathers. Since the Old Testament is a 'religious text' *per se*, the chain went back to 'God Himself'. The chain secured the inheritance of the value system, being accepted by a common identity, and insisted on responsibility for maintaining family ties and the value of mutual relationships, respect for elders and care for the young. All these were, and still are, essential virtues in any society. An illustrious example may be found in the Book of Ecclesiastes, which was composed by King Solomon ('the wisest man of all ages') as a letter to his son. Solomon left rich instructions regarding all aspects of life, man's dignity, family values and virtues, and the letter summarises the best of the traditional thinking of Old Testament people beyond subjective experience (Eccl. 1:7, etc).

Strict Mosaic laws were written with the single purpose to guard the 'father's house' from immoral deviation. First, and above all, 'the house' must not deteriorate in posterity. For example, it is reflected in instructions regarding the 'stubborn and rebellious son'. 'If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders: "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid' (Deut. 21:18–21).

The even greater integrity of the 'father's house' is illustrated by the decree to marry the widow of a deceased brother (Latin *levirate* law, Hebrew *yibbum*). This is an example of an ancient 'social security' system. It prescribed the adoption of fatherless children: 'If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother, so that his name will not be

blotted out from Israel' (Deut. 25:5–10). This is one of the most brilliant examples illustrating a 'social security system' in ancient Israel (today *yibbum* is prohibited in Israel). Because the widow did not inherit the property of the deceased husband, she was literally left out on the street with nothing, and being accepted into the family offered her protection. Of course, the brother could try to get out of it, but the community, the villagers or the family at large, looked down on him with contempt: 'If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her", his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line"' (Deut. 25:9). *Levirate* marriage was practised by societies with a strong clan structure in which exogamous marriage (marriage outside the clan) was forbidden.

5. Affiliation with the land as a prerequisite for God's blessing

Due to the Biblical conviction that the land belongs to the Lord (Lev. 25:23–24), we may ask what the practical consequences of this belonging are? The simplest answer is: man badly needs them. More precisely, in Biblical times, the fertility of the land and livestock, and, of course, procreation, children and grandchildren, was due to God's blessing. Blessings secured prosperity, confidence in the future, and the continuity of the family.

It is mentioned above that King Solomon initiated large building projects in his kingdom. These projects required more centralised government and an army of state officials to run them. Giving up the old tribal formula of 'the land given by God' was seen as necessary for the execution of more progressive and up-to-date reforms (Anderson, 2001). The reforms prescribed changing old tribal land territories occupied by many generations since Joshua's times (ca. 300 years). The reforms implemented also optimised tax policy; in other words, the reforms were executed with a cold rationale, which tore families away from their inherited land. The land was turned into an object for sale and trade, it became an object of economic relations, and the reformed concept had nothing to do with the concept of 'land given as a blessing', and nothing to do with tradition and history. A new army of state clerks was created who were not affiliated to the land. They prospered through corruption and dishonest profiteering, as always happens in times of measuring land all over the world. The warning pronounced by the judge and prophet Samuel was fulfilled: '[The king] will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants' (1.Sam. 8:14 sec). This is a very simple and clear show of the origins of corruption in the Bible: people who have no respect for the sacred are corrupt. Until that time, field husbandry was in the

hands of one family and clan, who respectfully cared for the ancestor's heritage, whereas from Solomon's times on, cold calculation and economic considerations were sandwiched between the land and the people. They became separated, and the triangle was no more, there was no place for God. Man became alienated from the land; the land was not essentially important as the property of Yahweh, and living on the land was not dependent on keeping Mosaic law. The law from the Decalogue 'Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you' (Ex. 20:12) lost its meaning.

The most dramatic story in the Old Testament about the consequences of Solomonic reform is the one about King Ahab, his wife Jezebel, and the poor peasant Naboth (1 Kings 21). Ahab's cruel wife Jezebel found a way to take Naboth's vineyard for herself, since it was pleasant and well cultivated. The king offered to buy the vineyard, but Naboth rejected the offer, saying that it was part of the 'inheritance of my ancestors'. He clearly applied the old tradition that the land could not be bought or sold. However, Ahab followed advice from Jezebel, came up with false accusations against him of blasphemy, and finally took the vineyard. The poor old man was stoned to death. This was the sad but unavoidable result of Solomonic reform. It not only took people away from the land, and not only alienated them from the joy of working, but also created rich ground for cynical meanness. This is one of the first stories about the confiscation of the land under the monarchy in Israel made possible by stepping away from the 'people-land-God' triangle. The Old Testament goes on to tell more stories about how rich landowners drove out small husbandmen.

In the meantime, the process did not develop undisturbed: both major and minor prophets dared to speak against it (e.g. Is. 3:13–15; 5:8–10; 10:1–2; Hos. 5:10). The most illustrative example comes from the book of the minor prophet Micah (7th century BC): 'Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance.' Further, he proclaims the wrath of God against them. 'Therefore, the Lord says: "I am planning disaster against this people ... You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity. In that day people will ridicule you; they will taunt you with this mournful song: 'We are utterly ruined; my people's possession is divided up. He takes it from me! He assigns our fields to traitors'"' (Mic. 2:1–4). The prophet's message is clear: if you drive people from their inherited land, you drive the nation out of God's protection. The nation is turned into an army of greedy, rootless individuals, not caring for their history or the land of their ancestors.

Conclusions

The article is a short insight into the ‘social teaching of the Old Testament’. Notwithstanding the enormous distance in time, it has not lost its meaning to the modern reader. Although our economy today is not rooted in agriculture alone, the issue of ‘belonging to the land’ is still strong. Additionally, a social reading of the Old Testament offers an insight into the mechanism of how the new generation of rootless people came into being. Two important conclusions may be useful for the application of this insight:

1. The family as an important element in the ‘people-land-God’ triangle is an important provider of both economic and social protection for the nation;
2. If the state uses its power to strengthen the privileges of office clerks, it is at risk of generating alienation from their land and work; they are also alienated from their history and traditions;

The struggle for the land and closeness to the land have always been an instinct for the Latvian people throughout the ages; it was something more than just a fight for economic independence. In Classic Latvian literature (from the beginning of the 20th century), the ‘God-nature-work’ triangle was described by the Latvian writer of genius Anna Brigadere; it manifests itself as being in harmony with nature (in the prose of Eduards Virza and the poetry of Fricis Bārda among others); and finally in the political pragmatism of the founders of the Latvian state after the First World War, who praised the peasantry as the holders of Latvian traditional lore and virtues against the debauched inhabitants of the industrialised cities uprooted from their land.

These insights into the Old Testament may sound strange to the reader, like the work of a researcher lost in the study of Ancient texts. This would be true if the dilemma outlined ended with the 19th century. When Latvia was literally stuck between the major superpowers of Russia and Germany in the First World War and the Second World War, thousands of Latvians fled the country to spread around the globe. The question remains: can the Ancient text be read as a prophetic message for today? Surely ‘yes’, on one condition, if ‘belonging to the land’ means something more important to national sustainability than mere economic prosperity, and goes deeper into an awareness of the identity of both the personality and the family, and the land and its history. This is an echo of our origins, even if there is no one who gives a call. Our role is to listen to the voice of the call.

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