

The Cultural World of the New Testament

Session 5: Family and Household

Dr. David deSilva

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

kinship, household, lineage, honor, sibling, patriarchal hierarchy, slavery, fictive kinship, Greco-Roman, New Testament

Abstract

This lecture explores the foundational role of lineage, kinship, and household structures in the first-century Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds. Dr. David deSilva examines how lineage acted as an individual's social credit rating and how families functioned as patriarchal units of production governed by hierarchical rules of submission, silence, and sexual purity. He highlights the ancient kinship ethos, which prioritized sibling cooperation and trust over individual gain, in contrast to external competition. Finally, the lecture demonstrates how early Christianity utilized these deeply ingrained cultural concepts to redefine the church as a fictive kinship group that transcended biological ties.

Outline

I. Introduction to Family and Household in the Ancient World

- A. Family as the most basic and frequently engaged social unit in human society
- B. Lineage as the determinant of social location and "credit rating"

II. Lineage and Ancestral Merit

- A. Lineage in Israel's history
 - 1. Ezra and Nehemiah: Importance of traceable lineage for national and religious inclusion
 - 2. Internal hierarchies and status (e.g., priestly and Levitical clans) based on descent
- B. Inheritance of honor and ancestral merit
 - 1. Individual merit begins with parents' and ancestors' achievements
 - 2. Biblical and Apocryphal examples:
 - a. Tobit: Lineage as a resume and "credit rating" for Azariah
 - b. Gospel of Matthew: Opening with Jesus' genealogy (Matthew 1:1-17) to establish theological claims of descent from Abraham and David
 - c. Matthew's numerology: Use of the number 14 (gematria for David) to emphasize messianic lineage

III. The Fluidity of Kinship

- A. Kinship as shared essence ("same kind" / *genos*)
 - 1. Greeks' shared kinship vis-à-vis "barbarians"
 - 2. Jews' shared kinship vis-à-vis non-Jews
- B. Contextual expansion and contraction of kinship boundaries
 - 1. Diaspora Jews: Broader definition of kin due to minority status
 - 2. Jews in Galilee or Judea: Narrower focus on immediate clan/family
 - 3. Dynamic shifts under external pressure (e.g., presence of Roman soldiers)
- C. Jesus' expansion of kinship boundaries
 - 1. Assertion of the larger "family of Abraham" over subgroupings (e.g., Pharisees)
 - 2. Specific examples:
 - a. Healing the crippled woman on the Sabbath (daughter of Abraham)
 - b. Restoring Zacchaeus the tax collector (son of Abraham)
 - c. Parable of the Two Brothers (Prodigal Son) representing sinners and tax collectors as siblings to religious leaders

IV. The Ethos and Ethics of Kinship

- A. Distinct ethic for kin versus outsiders
 - 1. Cooperation (seeking mutual/family good) versus competition (limited goods economy)
 - 2. Sibling bonds as the pinnacle of friendship (Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*)
- B. Avoidance of sibling rivalry
 - 1. Competition channeled to advance family honor, not individual triumph
 - 2. Sibling conflict as a "Cadmean victory" (Oedipus' sons destroying each other)
- C. Core values of kin
 - 1. Mutual honor and sharing of resources/privileges
 - 2. Trust: Deceit allowed against outsiders (e.g., Judith and Holofernes) but shameful against kin
 - 3. Unity, harmony, and being "of one mind" in ethical literature
 - 4. Sibling love (*philadelphia*) and brotherly affection (Plutarch's *On Fraternal Affection*)

V. Structure and Management of the Ancient Household (*Oikos*)

- A. Aristotle's classification of household pairs (*Nicomachean Ethics*)
 - 1. Husband and wife, father and children, master and slaves (with the male head as the central hub)
 - 2. Household as a unit of production, not just consumption (agriculture, crafts, fishing)
- B. Patriarchal hierarchy and authority (*Oikonomia*)
 - 1. Male as natural ruler and female as natural subject
 - 2. Absolute monarchical authority over children and slaves
 - 3. Extremes in Jewish thought: Josephus on female submission and natural inferiority

C. The Ancient Ideal for Wives

1. Submission: Plutarch's music analogy (the lower note carries the melody)
2. Silence and reticence: Injunctions from Aristotle and Ben Sirah
3. Seclusion: Private vs. public spheres (Philo and Plutarch)
4. Sexual purity/chastity: Life-long exclusivity (4 Maccabees example)

VI. Children in the Household

- A. Absolute parental (especially paternal) authority
- B. Duty, gratitude, and filial piety to aging parents
- C. Education and instruction
 1. Home education: learning trades and core values
 2. Religious instruction as a parental duty (Deuteronomy 6:6-9, 4 Maccabees 18)
 3. Elite education: Use of pedagogues (disciplinarians) and public gymnasiums
 4. Jewish schools focusing on the Torah

VII. Slavery in the Ancient World and Economy

- A. Scope and sources of slavery (1 in 5 people to 1 in 3 in urban areas)
 1. Military conquest and the slave trade
 2. Criminal penalties, heredity, and debt default
- B. The slave as a "living tool" (Aristotle)
 1. Complete power of the owner without legal recourse
 2. Ethics of reciprocity and benevolent care
 3. Diversity of slave roles: from galley/mines to high-ranking imperial freedmen

VIII. Fictive Kinship and the Early Church

- A. Fictive kinship defined: shared goals, similarity of conduct, and values over blood
 1. Philo on apostasy dissolving kin, and welcoming converts into a new family
 2. Jesus' redefine of family: discipleship overriding natural bonds
- B. The Church as the "Household of God"
 1. Followers forming a new sibling network
 2. Sibling love (philadelphia) and familial ethics applied to inter-church relationships
 3. Synthesis in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Peter)