

The Family in the Third (and Second) Millennium . . . BC:

Where We've Been

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Looking on the state of the family as we enter the Third Millennium AD, it is useful to take a look back at where the family has been. The furthest back that we have legible contemporary human historical records is the Third Millennium BC in Egypt and Mesopotamia. In these two areas we have continuous contemporaneous historical documentation from about the beginning of the third millennium B.C. to the present, nearly a thousand years before any other civilization in the world. We will look at three topics—the organization of the family, marriage and alternative lifestyles—in these two areas.

Earliest Records of Family Relationships

The earliest human records about the family come from Egypt and Mesopotamia and appear at approximately the same time as each other and the same time that writing first becomes legible in both locations.

Egypt

As early as the first dynasty, during the reign of Djer, we have several indications of family relationships: father, mother, child. One of the remarkable features of the Egyptian language is that the names for the basic family relationships are unchanged for millennia. Thus *jt* father is attested at least as early as the Third Dynasty (ca. 2700-2625 B.C.),¹ and lasted until the demise of the Egyptian language in the eighteenth century A.D.,² some forty-five hundred years later. The word for mother *mwt* is attested as early as the First Dynasty (ca. 3150-2925 B.C.), and lasted the entire span of the Egyptian language,³ some five thousand years. The words for children, however, change over time, from *z3* “son” and *z3t* “daughter” to *ms* “offspring” to *hrd* “child” to *šrj* “little one.” Most of the terms for children, however, are in use the entire time, although the popularity of terms for children changes over time.

Demographic data shows that ninety-one percent of Egyptians lived in families of some sort,⁴ and of those who lived alone, most were older, and “were probably most often the sole survivors of their families, living alone because they had been unable to marry or their marriages had ended.”⁵ This is true of both urban and rural areas with the major difference being that rural families are more likely to contain more extended families living together.⁶ The average household contained about 5 people.⁷

¹ Rainer Hannig, *Ägyptisches Wörterbuch I: Altes Reich und Erste Zwischenzeit* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2003), 228-32.

² W. E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 86-87.

³ Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*, 197.

⁴ From Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 60, Table 3.1, and 67, Table 3.2.

⁵ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 60.

⁶ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 67.

⁷ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 67-68.

Textual evidence also indicates that the Egyptians desired to extend the relationship of the family beyond the grave.⁸ That family consisted of “my children, my siblings, my father, my mother, my loved ones, and all my relations.”⁹ These are precisely the individuals usually depicted on funerary stele.¹⁰ Examples are ubiquitous.¹¹

The basis of Egyptian society was the family, and even larger scale Egyptian society imitated the institutions of the home.¹² Thus the temples are the “household” of the god, and the kingdom was considered *pharaoh* “the great household,” a term that at first referred to the household itself and in time came to be used for the head of that great household.¹³

⁸ Coffin Texts 131-142, in Adriaan de Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 7 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935-1963), 2:151-75. For discussion of the texts, see John Gee, “On the Practice of Sealing in the Book of the Dead and the Coffin Texts” *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar* (forthcoming).

⁹ Coffin Text 131, in de Buck, *Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 2:152; compare Coffin Text 132, in de Buck, *Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 2:154.

¹⁰ Gay Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 102; William Kelly Simpson, *The Terrace of the Great God at Abydos: The Offering Chapels of Dynasties 12 and 13* (New Haven: Peabody Museum of Natural History of Yale University, 1974), 3, and see the list of Abydos North Offering Chapels on pp. 17-22.

¹¹ For a small sampling of illustrations, see Andrey O. Bolshakov and Stephen G. Quirke, *The Middle Kingdom Stelae in the Hermitage* (Utrecht: Centre for Computer-aided Egyptological Research, Utrecht University, 1999), Plates 1, 3-9, 11-13, 15-23; Sergio Bosticco, *Le stele egiziane*, 3 vols. (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1959-1972), 1: Tav. 23-24, 31, 34-36, 38, 39, 41, 43, 46-49, 56, 59; 2:Tav. 4-9, 12, 14-15, 18, 22, 27-29, 31, 40, 42, 47, 55, 59-62, 64-65; Jaroslav Černý, *Egyptian Stelae in the Bankes Collection* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1958), nos. 2, 7, 9, 10-11, 14; Albert B. Elsasser and Vera-Mae Fredrickson, *Ancient Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California, 1966), 41, 55, 62-63, 65; Mogens Jørgensen, *Egypt I (3000-1550 B.C.) Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek* (Copenhagen: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, 1996), 85, 87, 93, 163, 165, 173, 187, 195, 199, 201, 203; Mogens Jørgensen, *Egypt II (1550-1080 B.C.) Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek* (Copenhagen: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, 1998), 49, 51, 55, 79, 87, 177, 251, 253, 255, 259, 261, 273, 275; Renate Krausepe, *Das Ägyptische Museum der Universität Leipzig* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1997), 79, 93; Karl-Heinz Priese, *Ägyptisches Museum* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1991), 54-55, 57, 59, 91, 143, 151, 167; Nobuko Sakamoto, *Art of the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Nagoya, Japan: Nagoya/Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1999), 67, 80; William Kelly Simpson, *The Terrace of the Great God at Abydos: The Offering Chapels of Dynasties 12 and 13* (New Haven: The Peabody Museum of Natural History of Yale University and Philadelphia: The University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, 1974), plates 1-84; Emily Teeter, *Ancient Egypt: Treasures from the Collection of the Oriental Institute University of Chicago* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2003), 22, 27, 33, 38, 56.

¹² Eugene Cruz-Urbe, “A Model for the Political Structure of Ancient Egypt,” in *For His Ka: Essays Offered in Memory of Klaus Baer* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1994), 45-53; Dorothy J. Crawford, “The Good Official in Ptolemaic Egypt,” in *Das ptolemäische Ägypten: Akten des internationalen Symposiums 27.-29. September 1976 in Berlin* (Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern, 1978), 200.

¹³ See Ogden Goelet, “The Nature of the Term *pr-ʿ3* during the Old Kingdom,” *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar* 77, 89-90.

Mesopotamia

The earliest society in Mesopotamia is that of the Sumerians, and we hear of families from the very beginning. We already have records of the Sumerian words for father (**ad-da**),¹⁴ mother (**ama**),¹⁵ and child (**dumu**)¹⁶ in old Sumerian times, at least as early as the reign of Urnanshe, about 2500 BC. It is also interesting to note that while Sumerian language does not have gender,¹⁷ the words for father and mother function as something of an exception to that rule.

The archaeological evidence from the Early Dynastic Period shows that “the city was composed of self-contained enclosures which could well have housed co-resident extended families.”¹⁸ Textual evidence, though sparse supports the “frequent assumption that kin-based residential grouping was more usual in the earlier cities.”¹⁹ “Relatives seem also to be neighbours.”²⁰ The third millennium shows some evidence for patrilineal descent.²¹ In Old Babylonian times (early second millennium) “the normal residential unit was clearly patrilinear and patrilocal, and the male line of descent was a principal ingredient in society. Men are identified by their father’s name (as in Russia and the Near East today). . . . Sons and daughters lived in the father’s house until they left for another household, either founding their own or marrying into another.”²² “Most of the households are either ‘simple’ — a married couple with offspring — or ‘expanded’ — a simple household ‘with the

¹⁴ Hermann Behrens and Horst Steible, *Glossar zu den altsumerischen Bau- und Weihinschriften* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983), 20.

¹⁵ Behrens and Steible, *Glossar zu den altsumerischen Bau- und Weihinschriften*, 26-27.

¹⁶ Behrens and Seible, *Glossar zu den altsumerischen Bau- und Weihinschriften*, 85-91.

¹⁷ Dietz Otto Edzard, *Sumerian Grammar* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003), 29.

¹⁸ J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 91.

¹⁹ Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 91.

²⁰ Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 91.

²¹ Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 91-92.

²² Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 92.

addition of one or more relatives other than offspring': there are sisters, evidently unmarried, mothers, presumably widowed, and brothers, perhaps still minors. What we do not find are 'multiple family households', comprising 'two or more conjugal family units connected by kinship or marriage'.²³

Marriage in Second and Third Millennium

Along with family, both Egypt and Mesopotamia provide evidence for marriage.

Egypt

Until recently, an argument based on a logical fallacy prevented Egyptologists from recognizing marriage in Egypt. Fortunately, the logical fallacy has been pointed out, and things are changing. The ancient Egyptian home began with a marriage between husband and wife²⁴ that involved an oath²⁵ made in the presence of a priest.²⁶ The marriage was seen as a partnership.²⁷ At the age of twelve women began to marry.²⁸ By age twenty, sixty percent of the women were married,²⁹ and virtually all of them would have married by the age of thirty.³⁰ Sixty percent of adult women from 15 to 50 were married at any given time.³¹ Men came of age at fourteen years old.³² Men seemed to marry a little later than women, starting

²³ Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 93-94.

²⁴ See P. W. Pestman, *Marriage and Matrimonial Property in Ancient Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), 6-11.

²⁵ John Gee, "Notes on Egyptian Marriage: P. BM 10416 Reconsidered," *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar* 15 (2001): 19-22, 25.

²⁶ All the marriage documents that we have were written by scribes, which in Egypt was a religious title; Sven P. Vleeming, "Some Notes on Demotic Scribal Training in the Ptolemaic Period," in *Proceedings of the 20th International Congress of Papyrologists*, ed. Adam Bülow-Jacobsen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1994), 185; Erich Lüddeckens, *Ägyptische Eheverträge* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1960), 248. For the role of the scribe in the marriage documents, see Lüddeckens, *Ägyptische Eheverträge*, 247-53.

²⁷ Eugene Cruz-Urbe, *Saite and Persian Demotic Cattle Documents: A Study in Legal Forms and Principles in Ancient Egypt* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985), 92.

²⁸ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 112.

²⁹ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 113.

³⁰ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 113.

³¹ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 115.

³² Raphael Taubenschlag, *The Law of Greco-Roman Egypt in the Light of the Papyri 332 B.C.-640 A.D.*, 2nd

in the late teens,³³ following the proverb: “Take a wife when you are twenty years old so you can have children while you are still young.”³⁴ About half of the men were married by the age of 25,³⁵ and virtually all would have been married by their early fifties.³⁶ Husbands were on average seven and a half years older than their wives.³⁷ “Long-term stable marriages are ubiquitous,”³⁸ but broken homes were also known usually from divorce or death of a spouse,³⁹ still, the divorce rate was only about 3%. In case of divorce, the children usually remained with the father.⁴⁰ Widowers remarried more often than widows, and divorced men remarried more often than divorced women;⁴¹ all told, men were twice as likely to remarry after divorce or the death of a spouse as women.⁴² This phenomenon has a cultural basis as indicated by the Egyptian proverb: “Do not marry a woman whose husband is alive, lest you make an enemy for yourself.”⁴³ Still, a survey of records left by tomb owners “shows a lack of unmarried people,” with only three examples from the New Kingdom of “men whose tombs contain no evidence for a wife” but “the lack of a wife in the tomb does not necessarily imply that the owner had remained unmarried throughout his life.”⁴⁴ In fact, “the

ed. (Warsaw: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1955), 167, 178; P. W. Pestman, *The New Papyrological Primer*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 151.

³³ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 116.

³⁴ P. Onch. 11/7, in Glanville, *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy*, pl. 11.

³⁵ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 116.

³⁶ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 116.

³⁷ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 118-19.

³⁸ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 122.

³⁹ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 123-24; Wilhelm Spiegelberg, *Demotische Papyri* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's 1923), 1-19; P. W. Pestman, *Marriage and Matrimonial Property in Ancient Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), 71-75.

⁴⁰ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 124-25.

⁴¹ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 126-27.

⁴² Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 126.

⁴³ P. Onch. 8/12, in Glanville, *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy*, pl. 8.

⁴⁴ R. B. Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire and Middle Kingdom Literature,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 81 (1995): 60 and n. 26.

predominance of married couples among tomb representations . . . suggests . . . that remaining unmarried would be viewed as a sign of . . . anti-social temperament.”⁴⁵

Marriage within the same village was encouraged: “Do not let your son take for himself a wife of another village, lest he be taken from you.”⁴⁶ Illegitimacy was relatively low, about 3 to 5% of births,⁴⁷ but mortality rates for children were high. One third of all females born would not live through their first year, over half would not reach the age of ten, and only a third would reach the ripe old age of thirty.⁴⁸ Slightly under one third of all males born would die in the first year, about half would attain their coming of age at 14, and less than one third would reach the age of forty.⁴⁹ Thus, the death of a spouse was a very real possibility since “if a man aged 25 married a woman aged 15, ... [there was] better than one chance in four that one or both spouses will die within ten years.”⁵⁰

Evidence for affection in marriage is ubiquitous.⁵¹ There are a few (sixteen) exceptional possible cases of polygyny from the Old Kingdom,⁵² and a few (thirteen) from the Middle Kingdom,⁵³ but these are without exception confined to very wealthy individuals⁵⁴ and there is some question about whether the multiple wives were sequential or

⁴⁵ Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire and Middle Kingdom Literature,” 67-68.

⁴⁶ P. Onch. 15/15, in Glanville, *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy*, pl. 15.

⁴⁷ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 155.

⁴⁸ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 77.

⁴⁹ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 100.

⁵⁰ Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, 123.

⁵¹ For a small sampling, see Dorothea Arnold, Krzysztof Grzymalski and Christiane Ziegler, *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 269-70, 290, 292-95, 368-70, 375-76, 378-81; Bosticco, *Le stele egiziane*, 1:Tav. 6-8, 10, 12-14, 16-17, 19, 21, 51; Jørgensen, *Egypt I*, 87; Krausepe, *Das Ägyptische Museum der Universität Leipzig*, 33, 53; Sakamoto, *Art of the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 64-65; Priese, *Ägyptisches Museum*, 53, 91, 105, 118, 151; Teeter, *Ancient Egypt*, 22, 27, 33; Emily Teeter, *Egyptian Art in the Collection of the Seattle Art Museum* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1988), 8.

⁵² Naguib Kanawati, “Polygamy in the Old Kingdom of Egypt,” *Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur* 4 (1976): 149-60.

⁵³ William Kelly Simpson, “Polygamy in Egypt in the Middle Kingdom?” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 60 (1974): 100-105.

⁵⁴ Kanawati, “Polygamy in the Old Kingdom of Egypt,” 159-60.

simultaneous.⁵⁵ Adultery was not tolerated and the evidence indicates that adulterers were removed from office if they held such⁵⁶ and burned alive or thrown to the crocodiles,⁵⁷ or exiled.⁵⁸ Sometimes the local lynch mob took the punishment of adultery into their own hands.⁵⁹

Mesopotamia

Ancient Sumer produced the earliest law codes. The oldest known is that attributed to Ur-Nammu, the founder of the Ur III Dynasty, although some attribute it to his son Shulgi who was known as a reformer.⁶⁰ Of the twenty-nine preserved laws, ten, approximately a third of them, deal with family law. Thus we know that rape was punished by death,⁶¹ as was seduction.⁶² Divorce and false accusations of sexual misconduct brought heavy fines.⁶³ Because of the broken and fragmentary state of the Ur-Nammu law code, we can fortunately round out information on Sumerian family law from the records of hundreds of court cases, both pending (**di-nu-til-la**) and closed (**di-til-la**). Marriage was contracted by oath in front of witnesses.⁶⁴ “Marriage in Neo-Sumerian times was monogamous, but dissolvable. It shows

⁵⁵ Simpson, “Polygamy in Egypt in the Middle Kingdom?” 100, 104; Kanawati, “Polygamy in the Old Kingdom of Egypt,” 159.

⁵⁶ Jac. J. Janssen, “Two Personalities,” in *Gleanings from Deir el-Medina*, ed. R. J. Demarée and Jac. J. Janssen (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten te Leiden, 1982), 113-15.

⁵⁷ P. Westcar 1/17-4/17 in A. M. Blackman, *The Story of King Kheops and the Magicians* (Reading, Berks: J. V. Books, 1988), 1-5.

⁵⁸ Janssen, “Two Personalities,” 119-121.

⁵⁹ Gee, “Notes on Egyptian Marriage: P. BM 10416 Reconsidered,” 17.

⁶⁰ Marcel Sigrist, *Drehem* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1992), 6. Jacob Klein, “Shulgi of Ur: King of a Neo-Sumerian Empire,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 4 vols., Jack M. Sasson, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 854 attributes this code to Shulgi.

⁶¹ Ur-Nammu Code ¶6 (C iv 76-80), in Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 17.

⁶² Ur-Nammu Code ¶7 (A v 225-231, B i 1-10, C iv 86-92), in Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 17.

⁶³ Ur-Nammu Code ¶¶9-10, 14, in Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 17.

⁶⁴ Adam Falkenstein, *Die neusumerischen Gerichtsurkunden*, 3 vols. (München: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1956), 1:102.

the characteristics of patriarchal marriage, so above all, in the regulation of inheritance, which was passed from the house to the male children, in the authority of the father over the children, which comes into play in divorce, in the regulation that divorce could only be initiated by the husband.”⁶⁵ Both the heavy fines associated with divorce and the restrictions on who could initiate it show the state’s active interest in minimizing divorce. Both infidelity and lack of sexual relations in the marriage are cited in court cases as reasons for divorce, although many of the cases do not cite the specific reason for divorce.⁶⁶ “The sparse available evidence from both the second and third millennia confirms the predominance of one man, one wife. A man could not, with rare exceptions, have more than one formally recognized wife at a time.”⁶⁷

In both Mesopotamia and in Egypt the vocabulary of marriage is worth examining. In both places, the phrase for marriage in Sumerian, Akkadian, and Egyptian is “to take a wife” with Egyptian variants of “to make a wife” or “to found a house.” The terminology is remarkably stable, lasting nearly five millennia. The gender roles for marriage are built into the language of the concept, just as the English term for marriage entered into English by the end of the thirteenth century from French *marier* “to be attached to a husband.”⁶⁸ The gender relationship of marriage goes back through the whole of human history.

⁶⁵ Falkenstein, *Die neusumerischen Gerichtsurkunden*, 1:98-99.

⁶⁶ Falkenstein, *Die neusumerischen Gerichtsurkunden*, 1:108-9.

⁶⁷ Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 106.

⁶⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), M:183, s.v. marry.

Alternative Lifestyles in Egypt and Mesopotamia

Because it has become an issue in modern society, it seems fitting to address the issue of whether homosexual marriage existed in earliest human society. There is no trace of such an institution in either ancient Mesopotamia or in ancient Egypt. There is, however, some very clear evidence to the legal status of homosexual relationships.

In ancient Egypt, “a sexual relationship between men was scandalous,”⁶⁹ an indication of how scandalous is that one report of homosexual behavior provoked a reaction screaming in outrage,⁷⁰ using the same term (*skp*) as the scream of someone with a migraine headache,⁷¹ or suffering the pains of childbirth.⁷² As an “antisocial sexual activity” the Ancient Egyptians saw homosexual behavior as “disruptive to the instituted social fabric of family and property.”⁷³ Texts explicitly prohibiting homosexual activity are attested by the late second millennium through the Roman period, and “it is likely that the negative attitude that it embodies was the ‘official’ ideal throughout pharaonic history.”⁷⁴ The deceased Egyptian, in order to escape the punishments of the afterlife would swear: “I have not masturbated; I have not committed buggery.”⁷⁵ All proposed positive portrayals of homosexual association in ancient Egypt have been shown not to be homosexual at all.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire and Middle Kingdom Literature,” 74.

⁷⁰ P. Chester Beatty I 10/11-13/1, in Alan H. Gardiner, *Late Egyptian Stories*, BiAe 1. (Bruxelles: FERE, 1932), 51-54.

⁷¹ P. Boulaq 6 5/1, in Yvan Koenig, *Le Papyrus Boulaq 6: Transcriptions, Traduction et Commentaire*, Bibliothèque d’Études 87 (Cairo: Institute français d’archéologie orientale, 1981), 52-53, pls. V-Va.

⁷² P. Boulaq 6 5/5-6, in Koenig, *Le Papyrus Boulaq 6*, 55-58, pls. V-Va.

⁷³ Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire and Middle Kingdom Literature,” 76. While Parkinson claims that homosexual relations were “less disruptive” than adultery, they were still disruptive.

⁷⁴ Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire and Middle Kingdom Literature,” 62.

⁷⁵ Book of the Dead 125 B 27, in Charles Maystre, *Les déclarations d’innocence (Livre des Morts, chapitre 125) Recherches d’archéologie, de philologie et d’histoire 8* (Caire: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1937), 88-89; see also M. Heerma van Voss, “Drie Egyptische Geboden,” in *Symbolae Biblicae et Mesopotamicae Francisco Mario Theodoro de Liagre Böhl dedicatae*, ed. M. A. Beek, A. A. Kampman, C. Nijland, and J. Ryckmans (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 185-87.

⁷⁶ Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire and Middle Kingdom Literature,” 62-64.

Ancient Egypt's "representational art's coded references to sexual acts seem to concern pairings of men and women exclusively."⁷⁷

Ancient Mesopotamia does not seem any more hospitable. Mesopotamia provides no evidence from the second and third millennia of families defined through a homosexual relationship. In ancient Assyria, according to the Middle Assyrian Laws, homosexual relations were punishable by castration.⁷⁸ Among the Hittites it was punishable by death,⁷⁹ as were bestiality, incest, rape, and seduction.⁸⁰

Conclusions

The family as we know it historically, and not as some people have recently tried to redefine it, goes back at least as far as we have human records. It has been civilization's most fundamental and enduring institution. The basic unit of the family is unchanged. Then, as now, it was based on monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, with polygynous marriage sometimes being an exception among those who were wealthy and could afford two families. The state had an interest in regulating sexual conduct from the beginning. Because Egypt and Mesopotamia functioned in isolation, with direct contact only known to occur at the end of the second millennium, these characteristics of family can be seen as universal and human rather than specific to Egyptian or Mesopotamian cultures.

⁷⁷ Parkinson, "'Homosexual' Desire and Middle Kingdom Literature," 64.

⁷⁸ Middle Assyrian Laws ¶20 (= ii 93-97), in Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 160.

⁷⁹ Hittite Laws ¶189, in Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 236.

⁸⁰ Hittite Laws ¶¶187-200a, in Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 236-37.

