2

The Original Context of Old Testament Narrative

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

In the previous chapter I have outlined my aim of reading Old Testament narratives within their cultural contexts in ancient Israel, that is, reading them with the understanding of their original Israelite audiences. Is this possible? If we are speaking of putting ourselves fully into the lives of these ancient Israelites, plainly not. It is hard enough for an ethnographer engaged today in the participant observation of the people of another culture to do this, let alone for us fully to assimilate our understanding to that of a long-dead people who have left only fragmentary documentary and physical evidence of their presence on this earth. Yet the problem is not just the limited nature of the surviving textual and material remains. Since the social world of ancient Israel was radically different from the one with which I and (presumably) most of the readers of this volume are personally familiar (assuming they were raised and socialized in the societies of North America and northern Europe, Australia, and New Zealand), to undertake the *historical* task of investigating what biblical narratives written in that setting meant when they first appeared represents quite a challenge. The risk is that we will interpret the extant evidence in accordance with unexamined assumptions and prejudgments that are based on our own social experience and that are inappropriate for Israelite culture. To attempt to read such a biblical

narrative for its original meaning without vectoring in the distinctive ancient social scenarios it embodies risks obscuring its depths with anachronistic and ethnocentric misreadings.

In spite of these difficulties, the interpretation of the texts discussed later is based on the view that we can realistically aim for a general approximation of the culture in which ancient Israelites were immersed, and that is everywhere presupposed in the literature they have left behind, that is quite sufficient for the purpose of reading the narratives with their original audiences. While we cannot achieve the highest level of comprehension of their culture, we can learn enough to give us the general sense of the meanings these narratives would have conveyed to their original audiences in ancient Israel.

Moreover, the meanings we obtain from the narratives in this way are often radically different (as we will see repeatedly during the course of this volume) from those derived from interpretations that do not take seriously the need to attend to the cultural distance between our world and theirs, that make the mistake, in Cheryl Exum's words (noted in chapter 1), of wrenching "them wholly or violently out of their ancient context" to make them fit modern notions.[1]

How do we avoid this danger of reading our values into these ancient texts? As the ideal way for us to come to grips with the social setting of ancient Israel—a time-traveling team of ethnographers projected back to Jerusalem and its hinterland in the eighth century or so BCE—is, alas, denied us,[2] what means are available? Traditional biblical scholarship proceeds by the rigorous examination of all surviving sources of evidence, archaeological and documentary, to generate a picture of what Israel was like at this period. This sounds sensible but can involve a deep methodological flaw. Although close familiarity with the ancient data is necessary, all data has to be interpreted. A major problem with the traditional approach is that those who practice it usually bring to the task unrecognized and unacknowledged assumptions and beliefs about how societies work that stem from their upbringing and socialization in very different, modern cultures. These assumptions and beliefs often become embedded in traditions of interpretation that can create real impediments to understanding.

1. Exum, *Tragedy*, 13.

2. For an imaginative and highly revealing study of what such an expedition to first century CE Judea might be like see Malina, *Windows on the World of Jesus*.

The interpretation of the eight narratives set out in chapters 3 to 10 of this volume rests on the premise that the best way, probably the only way, we can step out of our habitual social frameworks is to draw upon anthropological resources and undertake comparative reference to social systems reasonably close to that in which these biblical texts are embedded, or at least much closer than those of North America and northern Europe. Such an approach, combined with the use of archaeology, has also been advocated by Carol Meyers in relation to families in early Israel (and families will be very prominent in the interpretations set out below):

> The value of ethnoarchaeology for reconstructing the early Israelite family merges with the general use of *social science methodology*. Again, precisely because so little information is available, knowledge of visible agrarian cultures provides important clues about early Israel. This is especially true in considering families. To be sure, cross-cultural variations are manifold and divergences even within a society are the norm. Yet, despite such differences, the very ubiquity of the family as an institution—as a small, kinship-structured domestic unit—allows theorists to suggest certain commonalities for families living in similar environmental niches and with corresponding subsistence regimes.[3]

All this fits in closely with the extent to which the interpretations offered in this volume are historical (in the sense of seeking to explain the meaning they would have conveyed to their original audience) even though I am not concerned with the historicity of the events described or with the history of the traditions that culminated in the various narratives considered. As Thomas Overholt has observed, "The object of using anthropology to assist in the interpretation of Old Testament texts is not, however, to argue that such narratives are historically accurate, let alone normative. What one looks for in the texts and seeks to understand is more basic patterns of behavior . . . The objective is not to establish 'reality' in some positivistic sense—this or that actually happened—but to suggest a broader social reality that was part of the context in which the texts were produced and that continues to be reflected in the texts, despite their subsequent literary history."[4]

3. Meyers, "The Family," 7 (italics original).
4. Overholt, *Cultural Anthropology*, 18–19.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE ANCIENT CONTEXT

Since the late 1970s an increasing number of biblical interpreters have turned to the social sciences to provide modes of interpreting the primary data in ways that are methodologically self-conscious and that depend upon the disciplined examination of similar social phenomena to allow us to escape the otherwise automatic importation of our own (often wildly inappropriate) prejudgments and presuppositions. In fact, however, the use of social-scientific ideas to understand the Old Testament has precursors going back to the nineteenth century, especially in the work of Scottish academic William Robertson Smith (1846–1894).[5] This is now a flourishing field.[6]

Since a burgeoning body of literature explains the use of the social sciences in biblical interpretation,[7] only brief remarks on the methodology need to be made here. The use of the social sciences in relation to biblical texts inevitably entails the process of comparison. Given that we cannot have direct access to the people of Israel in the first millennium BCE, we bring the data we do have about them into comparison either with particular works of ethnography or with theoretical resources that have been generated by anthropologists (or other social scientists) from empirical data, in the form of typologies, models or theories, or perspectives derived from theories.

In so doing we are not seeking to fill holes in ancient data from these theoretical resources; that is entirely inapposite, not least for the reason that it is precisely where lacunas exist in the ancient evidence that the phenomena in question may have differed from modern circumstances.[8] No, the reason to use anthropological resources is twofold. First, it has a heuristic function, enabling us to appreciate data that may be unexpectedly significant in the light of the social-scientific perspective being deployed. Second, it allows us to organize the data in ways that make

5. See Esler and Hagedorn, "Social-Scientific Analysis of the Old Testament," 16.

6. For a recent review, see Esler and Hagedorn, "Social-Scientific Analysis of the Old Testament."

7. See Elliott, *Social-Scientific Criticism*; Esler, "Introduction: Models, Context and Kerygma"; and Esler, "Social-Scientific Models"; Horrell, *Social-Scientific Approaches*; Malina, *The New Testament World*; and Overholt, *Cultural Anthropology*.

8. On this point I part company with Thomas Overholt when he writes, in speaking of the gaps in our knowledge of the society that produced the Hebrew Bible (*Cultural Anthropology*, 22), "insights derived from anthropology can often allow us to make inferences that at least provisionally fill in some of these gaps."

more sense than if we just employed our own homespun understanding of social phenomena (in other words, "to draw lines between the dots" more convincingly). I have recently defended such an approach by reference to the social-scientific methodology of Max Weber.[9]

In this volume the main area of the social sciences to be utilized is that of cultural anthropology (including ethnography). Although anthropology hardly exhausts the social sciences available for use in biblical criticism (and in my own work on the New Testament in recent years I have relied extensively on social psychology and the largely sociological field of collective memory), it does offer resources highly apt for interpreting Old Testament narrative. This is particularly the case with the ethnographies written in the second half of the twentieth century of various Mediterranean peoples and with the theorization that anthropologists produced based on this ethnographical research. Before considering this work, it is worth mentioning that it had some antecedents, with one notable Finnish pioneer—Hilma Granqvist—in the 1920s and 1930s (whose work we will utilize extensively later) and some French researchers in the 1930s and 1940s.[10] Raphael Patai was a shrewd observer of Middle Eastern cultures, and published a work in 1959, *Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East*, that contains still useful information.[11] Given that the use of anthropological perspectives from the Mediterranean in biblical interpretation has come under some criticism in recent years, a brief review and defense of the project is called for.

MEDITERRANEAN ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

The emergence of the Mediterranean as a distinct field of anthropological study dates from 1959, when Julian Pitt-Rivers organized the first conference devoted to the subject at Burg Wartenstein in Austria, bringing together anthropologists from the UK and continental Europe (both northern and southern), the USA, and Egypt.[12] Another conference

9. See Esler, "Social-Scientific Models."

10. See Albera and Blok, "The Mediterranean," 17, who mention Marc Bloch, Charles Parain, J. Weulersse, and Fernand Braudel.

11. Patai (1910–1996) was the first person to receive a doctorate from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (in 1936). Also worth noting here is Johannes Pedersen, an Old Testament critic who was convinced of the importance of setting the texts in their social contexts; see *Israel: Its Life and Culture*.

12. On the background to this conference, see Pitt-Rivers, "La conférence."

involving a similar group was held in Athens in 1961, organized by John Peristiany.[13] These meetings led to the publication of two important collections of essays. First came *Mediterranean Countrymen: Essays in the Social Anthropology of the Mediterranean* in 1963, edited by Julian Pitt-Rivers, which was concerned with "social structure," in particular "the rural Mediterranean family and land tenure" that had been the main interest of the 1959 conference.[14] Second was *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* in 1965, focusing on the values honor and shame in the Mediterranean and edited by John Peristiany.[15] Most of the essays were based on ethnographic research conducted by the authors in the 1950s and early 1960s that had appeared or that would subsequently appear in published monographs.[16]

The work undertaken in the 1960s involved the highlighting of a number of themes: social structure and organization (including family structure, kinship and inheritance, and patron-client relations), social values (especially including honor and shame—and their close connection with male competitiveness, sexuality and the separation of the sexes—but also hospitality, sanctity and impartiality), city and country, internal and external migration, and social change.

The exploration of honor and shame was important but did not dominate these proceedings. On the other hand, honor and shame—understood in extremely diverse ways yet still recognizably honor and shame—were central to the social values of many rural communities this group of anthropologists were investigating right around the Mediterranean (including in Andalusia, Corsica, Cyprus, Thessaly and Boeotia, central Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, and the Atlas mountains) in ways that have long disappeared in the societies of North

13. See Peristiany, "Introduction," 9 and Albera and Blok, "The Mediterranean," 11 and Silverman, "Defining," 45–50.

14. See Pitt-Rivers, "Foreword and Acknowledgement," in *Mediterranean Countrymen* (for "social structure"); and Friedl, "Some Aspects of Dowry," 114.

15. Also, from a meeting in Athens in 1963, came *Contributions to Mediterranean Sociology: Mediterranean Rural Communities and Social Change* in 1968, edited by J. G. Peristiany. Papers presented at a meeting in Canterbury in 1967 were published in a special issue of *Anthropological Quarterly* 42:3 (1969).

16. This ethnography included Pitt-Rivers, *People of the Sierra* (1954), on the agrarian people living in a town in Andalusia; Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage* (1964), on the Sarakatsani (transhumant shepherds of central Greece); and Paul Stirling, *A Turkish Village* (1965).

America and northern Europe. On this matter their published ethnography speaks for itself. It is thus disappointing to discover H. V. Harris endorsing a throwaway remark of Sir Kenneth Dover (in a book review) in relation to honor and shame that "I find very little in a Mediterranean village which was not already familiar to me in a London suburb."[17] Dover (who died in St Andrews on 7th March 2010, aged 89 and greatly loved) was in his time the greatest Hellenist alive, but on this matter he was simply (and seriously) wrong. Yet even *bonus dormitat Homerus*.[18] Was Dover (or Harris?) familiar with young women in a London suburb (except perhaps among immigrant families from the Middle East) being killed by their fathers or brothers for besmirching the family honor by having sexual intercourse out of wedlock with a man of whom they did not approve (or for the mere suspicion of such activity)? This phenomenon is quite common in some Middle Eastern countries, and it reflects an attitude to honor utterly unlike that held by most people in the UK, northern Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand.[19] To refuse to acknowledge that cultural difference can be real, and that more extreme cultural forms can be fatal to those caught up in them will not assist the advance of scholarship in this area.

For a number of reasons this early research retains its importance, even though anthropology has changed greatly since the 1960s. First, it has a high value as ethnography, since it is characterized by close observation and penetrating analysis and discrimination. Second, it was largely conducted in rural areas that were already beginning to experience major social change that has now led to the modification or even disappearance of some of the phenomena studied by Julian Pitt-Rivers, John Campbell, Pierre Bourdieu, and the rest.

This area of anthropology continued to develop in the 1970s and 1980s. Notable ethnographic studies included Juliet DuBoulay's *Portrait of Greek Mountain Village* (1974), Jane and Peter Schneider's *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily* (1976), David Gilmore's *The People of the Plain* (1980), and Lila Abu-Lughod's *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (1986).

17. Harris, *Rethinking the Mediterranean*.

18. "The great Homer nods," Horace, *Ars Poetica* 1.359.

19. On the subject of honor killings as a context for Joseph's remarkable attitude toward Mary in Matt 1;19, see Marohl, *Joseph's Dilemma*.

A major aspect of the 1960s Mediterranean ethnography was its emphasis on unrelenting competition between males for honor, including over women and sexual access to them.[20] Pitt-Rivers argued that Mediterranean honor involved the domination of other men: one achieved honor by defeating someone else, whereby his honor became yours.[21] Since honor "was always implicitly the claim to excel over others," it was the basis of precedence in what Pitt-Rivers called the "pecking-order" theory of honor.[22] Other ethnographers encountered similar attitudes. Thus Campbell observed that among the Sarakatsani there was no cooperative activity among men who were not related: everything else was competition: "outside the family and the kindred a man meets and expects only hostility and suspicion . . . Confidence, trust, and an altruistic concern about another individual's welfare can only exist between kinsmen."[23] As for non-kin, "the opposed families of this fragmented community are related through competition for prestige."[24] Pierre Bourdieu set out the "rules of the game" of challenge and response that governed how the men of the Kabyle tribe in Algeria competed with one another over matters of honor in a wide variety of situations from insults to gift giving.[25]

In 1981 Bruce Malina published *New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, a short work, modestly aimed at students "beginning to study the New Testament," [26]—a work that has nevertheless since had an enormous influence on biblical research. Malina's aim was to help those reading the New Testament documents understand their original meaning more accurately by emphasizing how different was the cultural context in which they were written from that familiar to most North American and northern European readers of the Bible. To achieve this he used the findings of Mediterranean ethnographers Pierre Bourdieu, J. G. Peristiany, and Julian Pitt-Rivers (but also of several other social scientists, such as Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, M.

20. Gilmore, "Introduction," 5.

21. See Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem*, 3, 92.

22. Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," 23.

23. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, 38.

24. Ibid., 39.

25. Bourdieu, "The Sentiment of Honour," with "rules of the game" mentioned at 197.

26. Malina, *The New Testament World*, iii.

A. K. Halliday, and Edmund Leach) to develop a reading strategy and theoretical pictures of subjects like honor and shame, personality, kinship and marriage, and purity for comparison with New Testament data. A striking feature of the book was the extent to which Malina adopted the theme of competition between men over honor that had been an important topic in the early Mediterranean ethnography. At one point he noted, "nearly every interaction with non-family members has undertones of a challenge to honor."[27]

As Mediterranean anthropology matured, it inevitably became subject both to methodological critique and a heightened degree of self-reflection on the part of those engaged in it. In 1977 John Davis critically reviewed the field, taxing it with failure to be sufficiently comparative (that is, with continuing to produce ethnographies of particular communities that did not relate to other ethnographic research), with ignoring historical development among the peoples studied, with focusing on marginal (mainly rural) communities, and with neglecting links between city and country, region and nation.[28]

In 1980 Michael Herzfeld criticized the use of "honour" and "shame" as representing "inefficient glosses" and "massive generalizations" on a wide variety of indigenous terminological systems—glosses that had become counterproductive, especially because they facilitated comparison between phenomena in different cultures that might not be comparable. Yet while concepts like "honor" and "shame" represent terminology at a certain level of abstraction that facilitates comparison between similar phenomena and should never be allowed to distort our understanding of such phenomena in their particular settings, Herzfeld went too far with this critique. At the outset, for example, he conceded that the earliest work (Peristiany's 1965 collection of essays, *Honour and Shame*) "avoided facile correlations through its scrupulous attention to the details of particularistic ethnographic description."[29] If Pierre Bourdieu was able to conjoin the general expression "honour" with the most finely observed account of the Arabic terminology of its various elements among the Kabyle,[30] as did other contributors to the 1965 collection, why cannot Herzfeld? In short, Herzfeld's approach on this point

27. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 1st ed., 30.
28. Davis, *People of the Mediterranean*, 5–10.
29. Herzfeld, "Honour and Shame," 339.
30. Bourdieu, "The Sentiment of Honour."

is unpersuasively "particularistic," as a number of other anthropologists have pointed out.[31] He is also inconsistent in ditching *honor* as a general comparative term, only to adopt *hospitality* instead, in relation to which just the same kind of objection could be made.[32]

The tendency in the early Mediterranean anthropology to view "honor" and "shame" essentially as balanced opposites attracted valuable criticism from Unni Wikan in 1984. Although she did not dispute the role of the two concepts as useful abstractions,[33] Wikan argued on the basis of her research in Cairo and Oman that often "shame" rather than "honor" was the more important value, and that people were more tolerant of "shameful" behavior than previous ethnographic research might suggest. Wikan also argued against the idea that had been expressed by the early ethnographers that only men, not women, could have or strive for honor.[34] She also showed how in Oman women who were friends with another woman who had sex with other men while her husband was away were largely willing to overlook her behavior because in other respects she was kind, hospitable, and helpful.[35] Wikan's work with communities in Cairo and Oman is an object lesson in the need to ensure that abstract language useful for comparative purposes is never allowed to supplant the realities of a situation discovered by close observation.

The increasing maturity of Mediterranean anthropology surfaced in a collection of essays edited by David Gilmore that appeared in 1987: *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean.* Most of the contributors continued employing "honor" and "shame" as useful concepts for comparable (although highly diverse) phenomena appearing in societies around the Mediterranean.[36] Nevertheless, they objected (with

31. See Gilmore, "Introduction," 6–7; Davis, "Family and State," 23 ("His refreshing skepticism leads to an extremely particularist position . . . to which few people pay more than lip service, although they do admire the discriminating precision of his ethnography"); and Giovannini, "Female Chastity Codes," 61.

32. See Herzfeld, "'As in Your Own House.'"

33. Wikan, "Shame and Honour." At page 637 she notes that she is not throwing doubt "on the overall importance of a concept of honour in many societies of the Mediterranean and the Middle East."

34. Ibid., 638–9. Pitt-Rivers, for example, had expressed the view in relation to women and honor that their "feminine status precludes their striving for it by might" ("Honor," 505).

35. Wikan, "Shame and Honour," 640.

36. Those of this view were David Gilmore, John Davis, Carol Delaney, Michael Marcus, Maureen Giovannini, Mariko Asano-Tamanoi, and Stanley Brandes; Michael

good cause) to the reification of these concepts, especially if that entailed homogenized versions of honor and shame substituting for finely focused and discriminating ethnography in particular contexts. Several of them commented upon the impact of social change, with Giovannini noting that a useful research question was the differential survival of the Mediterranean cultural codes "in contexts of urbanization, industrialization, migration, and political change."[37]

A number of the contributors in the 1987 collection took issue with the picture of unremitting male competition that had characterized some of the work in the 1950s and 1960s and argued that other moral principles (such as generosity and honesty) were at times more prominent than honor as a masculine ideal.[38] Pitt-Rivers had himself attempted to circumvent this objection by distinguishing between the competitive "precedence honor" and the noncompetitive "virtue honor" that covered values like honesty and loyalty.[39] Peristiany expressed a somewhat similar view.[40] In 1992 they confirmed the distinction yet now referred to it as a "paradox."[41] There are, however, real problems with this distinction.[42] Chief among them, as Gilmore has noted, is that this "arbitrary division is probably logically valid, but it begs the question of what Mediterranean honor is by dividing it up into contrasting categories and by calling different things honorable."[43] It would have been preferable for Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany to have reserved "honor" for the aggressive ideal and behavior of masculine competition, and to have simply conceded that it coexisted with other ways of valuing males that

Herzfeld was the solitary exception.

37. Giovannini, "Female Chastity Codes," 71.

38. So Gilmore, Introduction," 3; and Marcus, "Horsemen," 50.

39. See Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," 61; and Pitt-Rivers, "Honor," 510.

40. Peristiany, "Honour and Shame,' 189–90.

41. Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany, "Introduction," 5.

42. Louise Lawrence has utilized "virtue honor" quite extensively (*Ethnography, passim*) but without giving much attention to the problems inherent in the concept. Lawrence's *Ethnography* is an important book that critically engages with existing scholarship applying Mediterranean anthropology to biblical interpretation and then uses fresh anthropological and literary-critical perspectives to interpret Matthew's gospel. Zeba Crook has published two substantial reviews of *Ethnography,* in 2006 and 2007: "Method and Models" and "Structure vs. Agency," the second of which has attracted a response from Lawrence, "Structure, Agency and Ideology."

43. Gilmore, "Honor, Honesty, Shame," 90.

were different in character and, furthermore, not necessarily distinctive to the Mediterranean area. On the other hand, the foregrounding in the early ethnography of gender separation, female chastity, and the shame incurred through loss of premarital virginity was endorsed by several of the contributors.[44]

Julian Pitt-Rivers and J. G. Peristiany themselves returned to the character of Mediterranean anthropology in the introduction to a volume of essays they edited that appeared in 1992: *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*. While mainly concerned with the connection between honor and the sacred, which had been neglected in the 1960s (except by J. K. Campbell), they commented on a number of other issues. On honor, for example, they noted how warring conceptions of honor (representing the "varied and conflicting interests of rival groups") appeared in communities, with their respective champions. As a result, it was "an error to regard honor as a single constant concept rather than a conceptual field within which people find the means to express their self-esteem or their esteem for others."[45] They insisted that when they had associated "the Mediterranean concept of honor" with "a tendency to associate masculine honor with female sexual purity," they had been speaking "rather vaguely," since in some areas near the Mediterranean (as in northern Spain) or in parts of Algeria this connection was not made at all. There was also considerable variety within what was loosely described as "the Mediterranean concept of honor."[46]

The role of women in Mediterranean societies has come to be seen as much more active and influential than the 1950s and 1960s ethnography allowed, especially because so many female anthropologists have worked in the area and gained access to women in a way that would have been very difficult for their male colleagues, especially in Muslim communities. Finnish anthropologist Hilma Granqvist (whose ethnography will be used heavily in chapter 4, below) had shown the possibilities here as long ago as the 1920s and 1930s, as had Elizabeth Fernea, who, as her husband finished his own anthropology book, distilled into the celebrated book, *The Guests of the Sheik*, published in 1969, her experience of Iraq during the two years they lived in a village there. Ernestine

44. See Gilmore, "Introduction," 3–4; Delaney, "Seeds of Honor," 35–36; Giovannini, "Female Chastity Codes."

45. Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany, "Introduction," 4.

46. Ibid.," 6.

Friedl was the only woman among the anthropologists who published in the collections of 1963 and 1965 edited by Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany respectively, her subject being aspects of dowry and inheritance in Boeotia. Even at that early stage Friedl was able to show an intersection between virtue and financial considerations ("an ugly, older girl, with a bad reputation would have to bring a large dowry to compensate for her personal deficiencies"), and that among the Boeotian farmers, "male honor depends not only on male protection of the chastity of women, but also more explicitly and obviously on the provision by men of adequate dowries for their women."[47] More recent ethnography, conducted by anthropologists like Unni Wikan (1984), Susan Carol Rogers (1975 and 1985), Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), Alice Schlegel (1990), Sally Cole (1991), and Jill Dubisch (1995), has continued to show that the cultures in view are more complex than was previously thought, by bringing out the important role of women in the domestic economy, the economic dimensions of their procreativity, the power they can exercise in particular local settings, and their capacity to form social networks to achieve their ends. Having reviewed much of this material, Carolyn Osiek concluded recently that honor and shame must be understood within a complex matrix of other societal factors.[48] On the other hand, it does women in particular contexts a disservice not to recognize that sometimes the type of culture Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany described in the 1950s and 1960s can persist as far as they are concerned with almost their full vigor and effect. Such was the case with the Iraqi women closely interviewed by British sociologist Sana Al-Khayyat, herself born in Iraq, in the early 1980s.[49] Similarly, although it has been asserted that "Lila Abu-Lughod's celebrated *Veiled Sentiments* illustrates how Egyptian Bedouin women assert their acceptance or defiance of the system of social hierarchy through poetic discourses on emotion that are linked to the ideology of modesty,"[50] the subject matter of many of the songs in question is how a woman was in love with a man only to be compelled to marry her cousin![51]

47. Friedl, "Some Aspects of Dowry," 124 and 133.
48. Osiek, "Women, Honor, and Context."
49. Al-Khayyat, *Honour and Shame*, especially 21–55.
50. Lawrence, *An Ethnography*, 48.
51. See Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 208–13.

In an article published in 1989 João de Pina-Cabral took issue with a number of the contributors to the 1987 volume, especially with Gilmore himself.[52] Pina-Cabral was particularly critical of the attempt to describe the Mediterranean as a "culture area" and linked that attempt to the demands of academic politics (this point, however, clearly being irrelevant to the merits of the argument).[53] He also (and with good cause) rejected Gilmore's attempt to link particular cultural features of the Mediterranean to individual psychological development. Yet whatever one thinks of the Mediterranean as a "culture area," a notion originally developed by Conrad Arensberg and recently defended by Sydel Silverman,[54] it is possible to benefit from the individual essays in Gilmore's 1987 book without subscribing to this idea. Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany have observed that the notion of "culture area" played no part in their ethnography in the 1960s, since "our aim in treating the Mediterranean as a whole was epistemological only and we never attempted to define it geographically."[55]

Since the 1980s fine works of Mediterranean anthropology have continued to be produced, some of them ethnographic and others more theoretical in character. They include an important collection of essays edited by Peter Loizos and Evthymios Papataxiarchis, *Contested Identities: Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece* (1991); Anne Meneley's *Tournaments of Value* (1996); and David E. Sutton's *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (2001). Sutton states that the latter "is not meant as an ethnography of food and social life on Kalymnos." Rather, he is using "grounded ethnography to consider issues of current theoretical concern," in the belief "that such a grounded and simultaneous consideration of the topics of food and memory will shed light on current diverse theoretical approaches, ranging from structure and history, to 'embodiment,' to consumption."[56] A major collection of

52. Pina-Cabral, "The Mediterranean."

53. For further criticism of the Mediterranean as a "culture area," see Herzfeld, "The Horns."

54. See Arensberg, "The Old World Peoples"; and Silverman, "Defining the Anthropological Mediterranean," 48–50.

55. Pitt-Rivers and Peristiany, "Introduction," 6.

56. Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts*, ix. David Horrell misreads the intention of this work (against the clearly expressed aim of its author) when he states "Sutton's book is primarily an ethnographic study of 'the relationship between food and memory on the island of Kalymnos, Greece" ("Whither Social-Scientific Approaches," 14).

essays and review of the field, *L'anthropologie de la Méditerranée*, edited by Dionigi Albera and others appeared in 2001.[57] This work (and the conference that preceded it) marked a fresh start for Mediterranean anthropology, avoiding the pitfalls of the past and pushing on in new directions. Since 2001, indeed, review essays and contributions on particular topics have continued to appear, with Dionigi Albera, in his judicious way, suggesting in 2006 that Mediterranean anthropology was located "between crisis and renewal."[58]

Where does all this leave the use of Mediterranean ethnography in the task of biblical exegesis? *First*, Carolyn Osiek has recently made this important observation: "many newer anthropological studies now focus on the changes brought about by globalization and economic transformation in traditional societies . . . Thus there is the dilemma that in most cases the older ethnographic studies are more directly helpful for the study of ancient cultures that were not at all influenced by similar phenomena, yet the newer ones bring the reader up to date in anthropological thinking and research."[59]

Accordingly, the Mediterranean ethnography from the 1950s and 1960s—undertaken largely in relation to rural and peasant communities at an agrarian stage of development, but which have now been greatly influenced, if not utterly transformed, by the forces of modernization—is likely to retain its usefulness. This is especially true of Old Testament narratives, which have a largely rural setting, unlike most New Testament documents, which were written for urban communities. *Second*, the use of this ethnography in no way implies, let alone necessitates, any historical link between the biblical data we will be examining and the ethnography of recent times. Certainly a reasonable fit is needed between the anthropology and the biblical material for the comparison to have any point, but that is all. *Third*, Mediterranean anthropology can either be deployed at a reasonably high level of generality, as when we use theoretical perspectives or models derived from the ethnography (and we will see this particularly in relation to the pattern of challenge-and-riposte), or at more empirical level, by comparing ethnographic research

57. See Albera et al., *Anthropology of the Mediterranean.*

58. See Sant Cassia, "Review Article: Navigating" Albera, "Anthropology of the Mediterranean"; Bromberger, "Towards an Anthropology"; Bromberger, "Bridge, Wall, Mirror"; and Hauschild et al., "Syncretism in the Mediterranean."

59. Osiek, "Women, Honor, and Context" 324.

into a particular community or communities with Old Testament data. The latter type of comparison is essentially immune from the criticisms that have been made against tendencies in Mediterranean anthropology to reify concepts like honor and shame since such abstractions are not required in this comparative mode. *Fourth*, and this applies especially when we are employing the former of the two modes just mentioned, abstract conceptions must never ride roughshod over the detailed evidence in the text under consideration. We should be alert to the possibility, for example, that shame rather than honor will reflect the dominant mode in which the worth of individuals is assessed by the local community that we are presupposing as the audience for the narrative. While theoretical perspectives are useful in uncovering important phenomena and patterns in the text, and in helping us organize the data we find there in plausible ways, they must not substitute for or supplant the data or its close examination. The plausibility of a reading will continue to depend on close examination and analysis. *Fifth*, although we must be alert to ensure that strongly competitive interpretations of interactions in a given narrative are closely based on the textual data and not merely assumed to exist there, the fact that more recent ethnographers have discerned noncompetitive values (like honesty and generosity) operative in some Mediterranean communities must not divert us from recognizing and responding to instances of "honor precedence" when they appear in the text before us. Thus, Gary Stansell has taken up the issue of honor and shame in relation to certain narratives concerning David (1 Sam 18:23; 20:30–34; 25; 2 Sam 6; 10:1–6; 19:1–9; 13; and 16:20–23) in an essay that offers new and culturally realistic interpretations of these texts.[60] *Sixth* and last, while issues relating to gender separation, sexuality, and female chastity remain prominent themes in Mediterranean ethnography, we should be open to the possibility of women engaging in competition over honor. A number of the narratives considered in this volume will show women taking the initiative when their honor is threatened.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

The time has now come to set out a broad profile of the social context of ancient Israel that I will return to repeatedly in discussing the narratives considered below. I will move from the microcosmic to the macrocos-

60. Stansell, "Honor and Shame."

mic, first exploring the physical realities of life for families in the villages of Israel; then the strong group bonds, social structures, and values that held them together in a world where all goods were thought to exist in finite and stable quantities; then patterns of kinship, inheritance and marriage; before moving to the macro level: to the broad set of relationships whereby the elite controlled and appropriated the surplus of the non-elite in a manner typical of "agrarian" and "advanced agrarian" societies (terms explained below). The chapter will conclude with a consideration of Israel as a high-context culture and what this means for the mode of representation we encounter in biblical narratives.

Material Conditions: Families and Villages

The ancient Israelite audience probably imagined that Judah was living in the sort of villages known to us now through archaeological surveys and excavations of Iron I settlements conducted after the Six-Day War (1967) in what was western Canaan. Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin have noted that "archaeologists have identified more than 300 village sites in the hills which date from the Iron I period (1250–1000 BCE)." In the next two centuries the population expanded to about eighty thousand, and "more than 100 new villages were founded in the hills of Samaria, Galilee to the north and Beersheba to the south."[61] The archaeological findings have been invaluable because, as Benjamin and Matthews note, the "Bible seldom explains farming, but simply assumes the audience knows it so well that no additional details are needed."[62] Apart from well-watered parts of Galilee, in most places farming conditions were very difficult, with crop failures frequent. In spite of this, Israelite farmers built up a close understanding of the land and its often harsh ecological niches, as Ellen Davis has brilliantly explained.[63] The Israelites grew wheat and barley; figs, grapes, and olives; and raised sheep, goats, donkeys, and some other animals. A remarkable glimpse of the ancient Israelite agricultural cycle for crops is provided by a text scratched on an archaic Hebrew potsherd from about 1000 BCE from Gezer, in which someone was practicing writing Hebrew. The so-called Gezer almanac provides for the picking of olives in August and September, sowing bar-

61. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 4.

62. Ibid., 37.

63. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*.

ley in October, sowing wheat in December and January, pulling flax in February, harvesting barley in March and April, harvesting wheat and feasting in April, pruning the vines in May and June, and picking the summer fruit in July.[64] Technology was developing, for example, by farmers introducing new dry-farming techniques like terraces on hillsides and cisterns to increase agricultural production and to improve the viability of life in the hill country.[65]

According to Carol Meyers, the archaeological investigations since 1967 "have provided a wealth of new information about the dwellings, artifacts, subsistence strategies, and other aspects of daily life of the agrarian communities in which virtually all the early Israelites lived."[66] These Israelites lived in small villages, with the area most of them occupied ranging only from about half an acre to two and half acres, with some fifty inhabitants in the smaller ones (more like hamlets) and 150 in the larger. Probably the majority were agglomerative in character, made up of an irregular collection of clusters of homes roughly arranged in an oval, while others showed some planning, with an elliptical ring of houses spread around a central space.[67] These villages seem to have been coterminous with the *mišpahâh*, which is hard to translate but refers to a kinship group, a group of related families usually sharing a common male ancestor.[68] Most of the houses in such villages were small rectilinear structures, with access through a door leading to the main room, with a row of pillars often appearing on one or both sides of the door. At the end of this room, one or more doorways led to one, two, or three more rooms. Stairways, frequently attached to outside walls, indicate the original presence of upper stories. Probably the ground floor was for animal and storage needs associated with subsistence agriculture,

64. A drawing of the potsherd and an interpretation of the text are provided by Matthews and Moyer, *The Old Testament*, 83, in a useful summary of life on the land at this time (81–86). See also "The Gezer Almanac" online: www.kchanson.com/ANCDOCS/westsem/gezer.html.

65. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 43, in a chapter on the "The Farmer" (37–51)

66. Meyers, "The Family," 7. For conditions during the First Temple period, see Blenkinsopp, "The Family."

67. See Meyers, "The Family," 12, relying on Shiloh, "Population"; and Finkelstein, *Archaeology*, 238–50. Also illuminating is Finkelstein's report of the excavation of a single village, *'Izbet Sartah*.

68. Meyers, "The Family," 13.

while the living quarters were upstairs. Cooking seems to have taken place in sheltered, outdoor space.[69] These dwellings constitute evidence for a family unit larger than that of the nuclear family (which matches with biblical data on patrilineality, to be discussed in more detail below), suggesting that the core of the compound family in one of these houses would have been a senior married pair with their children and grandchildren.[70] But what was life like for the people who lived in such houses in these villages?

Group Orientation

Unfortunately, we can learn little of the character of the relationships between the family members who inhabited such houses merely from the archaeological remains. Nevertheless, comparative experience from elsewhere suggests, and literary evidence from biblical texts confirms, that ancient Israelites were group-oriented and not individualistic. This should really not cause us too much surprise, given that individualistic cultures are fairly uncommon in the world and really only appeared in comparatively modern times, initially in northern Europe. Yet this is so important a feature of the context of the texts and so alien to the experience of most of those reading this book that it is necessary to spend a little time on this issue.

Collectivistic cultures require that individuals belong to groups that provide protection and identity in return for loyalty. Assertions of identity are usually linked to groups like families, tribes, and villages. Collectivistic cultures emphasize the aims and needs of the ingroup over those of the individual and seek to maximize collaboration between members rather than achievements by individuals. Indeed, individual initiative and innovation are generally not encouraged in collectivistic cultures. One aspect of the pronounced ingroup/outgroup differentiation typical of collectivistic cultures is the tendency to apply different standards to the behavior of members of the ingroup, on the one hand, and of outgroups on the other, with ingroup members favored and outgroup members negatively stereotyped and discriminated against. By way of contrast to all this, in individualistic cultures (like those of North

69. Ibid.,14–15, citing Shiloh, "The Four-Room House"; Holladay, "House" and "Stable"; Herzog, *Beersheba II;* and Braemer, *L'architecture domestique*.

70. Meyers. "The Family," 16–17.

America, northern Europe, Australia, and New Zealand) individuals aim for self-realization and self-fulfillment; for example, leaving home when of a certain age is seen as a necessary and desirable step in the process of maturation. People look after themselves and their immediate family. Individual initiative is positively encouraged. Statements of identity are likely to focus on the qualities of the individual, not his or her important ingroups. Value systems are regarded as universalistic and do not discriminate between ingroup and outgroup.[71] Harry Triandis has noted a good indicator of the difference between the individualistic USA and the collectivistic Japan: in the USA delinquent children are punished by being "grounded" (made to stay in the home), but in Japan they are punished by being put out of the house.[72]

It is worth noting, however, that while cultures tend to be predominantly collectivistic or individualistic, both types of behavior can occur in any given culture. Harry Triandis has explored some of the complexities here. He uses the words "idiocentric" and "allocentric" to refer to the orientations adopted by individuals in, respectively, individualistic and collectivistic cultures. He points out that sometimes we find idiocentric individuals in collectivist cultures and allocentric individuals in individualistic cultures. Individuals like this may be countercultural, but they do occur. Collectivist cultures have a preponderance of allocentric responses, and individualistic a preponderance of idiocentric responses.[73]

We actually have some evidence for the appearance of individualistic phenomena in collectivistic contexts in the modern and ancient Mediterranean. A. M. Abou-Zeid, one of the leading figures in social-scientific research in the Middle East (and a participant at the meetings convened by Julian Pitt-Rivers and J. G. Peristiany in the 1960s), has described what happened when the Kharga Oasis, lying in a low depression 150 kilometers to the west of the Nile and largely inaccessible to the Nile valley, was connected to Cairo by railway around the beginning of the twentieth century. In essence, this meant that young men could now leave the tightly collectivistic villages of the oasis, where

71. See Triandis, "Collectivism vs. Individualism" and "Cross Cultural Studies" for the views expressed in this paragraph. For group-oriented personality in the New Testament, see Malina, *New Testament World*, 3rd ed., 60–67.

72. Triandis, "Theoretical and Methodological Approaches," 49.

73. Ibid., 41–51.

they were subject to their fathers and to village sheikhs, to seek work in Cairo or other Nilotic towns. Sometimes they went with the approval of their family with the aim of making money and eventually returning, but sometimes they went for the "individualistic" reason that they were in conflict with "the family or the whole community." Thus there were two contrasting situations—one reinforcing group orientation, the other a rebellion against it: "The planned type of migration (sc. of young men to the Nile valley) manifests the solidarity of the family and its integrity as one corporate unit, while the individualistic type is a manifestation of the struggle within the family and an expression of its disintegration."[74]

Influenced by Harry Triandis's identification of individualistic pockets in otherwise collectivistic Latin America, and writing in relation to the first century CE, Bruce Malina has pointed to what he calls "quasi-individualist" behavior exhibited by two types of people: the extremely wealthy and the extremely downtrodden. The first group indulges in "all kinds of conspicuous consumption, carnivals, trade, luxury goods, and so on," which is motivated by pleasure, personal needs, or aspirations.[75] Malina could have cited the freedman Trimalchio, immortalized by Petronius, as an excellent case in point. Such people have left group belonging and loyalty far behind them. At the other end of the spectrum, we find people who cannot maintain their social status and are forced to fend for themselves: "beggars, prostitutes, disinherited sons, family-less widows, orphans or children that families cannot support who are abandoned to the streets to fend for themselves." These are the most marginalized people in their societies who are cut from their usual ingroups that would otherwise guarantee their survival.[76]

Old Testament narratives offer numerous signs that they originate in and assume a collectivistic culture, and it will be useful to set out some of the evidence here. The way characters are introduced, the first information that we receive, which the narrator obviously considers that his readers or listeners need to know, takes us straight into a group-oriented world. We are so used to such introductions in the Bible that we have probably become quite blasé about how much they tell us of ancient Israel. Consider the very first verse of 1 Samuel: "There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name

74. Abou-Zeid, "Migrant Labour," 49.

75. Malina, "Collectivism," 23.

76. Ibid.

was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephraimite" (1 Sam 1:1, RSV).

Here we have five descriptors of a man, only one of which is personal (his own name), whereas all the rest are group-oriented: his village, his region (hill country), his tribe and his family—with the latter described in terms of his patrilineage. His male forebears are mentioned back to his great-great-grandfather, "the sign of a noble and well-known family,"[77] a good example of both the patrilineality and the honor attached to it that we consider in more detail below. Nothing is said about his age, physical attributes, character, or interests, such as one would expect if he were being described in an individualistic context.

Or consider the following description: "There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish, the son of Abiel, son of Zeror, son of Becorath, son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth" (1 Sam 9:1, RSV). Once again the family of Kish, in terms of his patrilineage, is taken back four generations. We learn his tribe (Benjamin), although not at this point his village (Gibeah), and also the fact that he was wealthy. Nothing is said about his age, personality, appearance, or interests.

The next verse may seem to contain a surprise, however, in the description of the son of Kish: "[A]nd he had son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; from his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people" (2 Sam 9:2, RSV). At first sight this might seem to be the description of someone in terms of his individual appearance that we would expect to find in an individualistic culture. But appearances can be deceiving (as God will remind the prophet Samuel later in the narrative; see 1 Sam 16:7). These details are only provided because they serve to differentiate Saul from all other male Israelites in such a way that will serve to explain why God should have directed Samuel to anoint him as king (1 Sam 10:1). Even here, moreover, we learn nothing about Saul's character. A further sign of a collectivistic mindset appears in David's reflecting what the rest of Israel could be expected to think of him given his origin in an insignificant family: "Who am I, and who are my kinsfolk, my father's family (*mišpahâh*) in Israel, that I should be son-in-law to the king?" (1 Sam 18:18, RSV); and later, "Does it seem a little thing to become the king's son-in-law, seeing that I am a poor man and of no repute?" (1 Sam 18:23, RSV).

77. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 22.