READING 1

**Abstract:** This essay considers family and household units in Ancient Egypt and West Asia. Although historians have only fragmentary evidence to reconstruct the exact organization of families and households in the distant past, they do know that family groups were extremely important to these ancient peoples. Whether they lived in unions we would recognize today as marriage, chose mates among their close relatives, or took one or more spouses, ancient peoples were deeply concerned with both household units and fertility for a variety of economic, cultural, and personal reasons.

**Family and Household in Ancient Egypt**
Of the best-known states in Africa, ancient Egypt, from early dynastic times (ca. 3000 B.C.E.) to Alexander’s conquest (332 B.C.E.), has received the most historical attention. Yet the numerous surviving examples of hieroglyphic inscriptions and archaeological excavations (until recently, more than the rest of the continent’s research put together) provide virtually no information on the families and households of the majority of the population. Only limited evidence has been available to reconstruct the daily lives of even the elite classes. The one constantly important level of social organization among elite Egyptians throughout these centuries was the family group, which centered around a man, a woman, and their children. It is highly debatable whether there was a concept of “marriage”; the sole significant family-establishing act appears to have been cohabitation for reproduction. The concept of fertility was important to social and political orders that evolved along the Nile.

**Patriarchy**
Like many other societies, ancient Egyptian society was patriarchal: men and their male heirs controlled the majority of relationships. In the realm of the household, elite Egyptian women controlled property, business, ritual, and family matters. This is not always obvious from the surviving records, which are frequently biased and, in the case of documents composed by the all-male scribes, directed toward an all-male audience of readers.

Women were accorded theoretical equality under most laws relating to property and inheritance. However, the absence of women from government posts and the realities of patriarchy (including differences in the ability of women to inherit and own property) prevented equal access to influential positions and limited the independent accumulation of wealth. Subordination...
was linked to the concept of fertility, which ascribed to a woman the responsibility and duty of reproduction as service to her husband. This is revealed by Old Kingdom (third-millennium) authors, who advised men, “When you prosper, found your household. Take a hearty wife, a son will be born unto you” and “Gladden her [the wife’s] heart as long as you live; she is a fertile field for her lord.”

**Reconstructing the Egyptian Household and Family**

Archaeological studies have provided us with the physical plans of Egyptian houses and some clues to spatial organization—how the space was used in social interactions—from two sites: the town of Kahun (ca. 1897–1878 B.C.E.) and El-Amarna, a city built by Akhenaten (r. ca. 1350 B.C.E.). From these sites, we have an idea of the room sizes, functions, and furnishings of households. Using the data to answer questions of family residence patterns and household size has proved much more difficult. We do know that many children were desirable and that families were often large. A man typically established a household with his wife, children, and any other unmarried female dependents for whom he was responsible, which might include his grandmother, mother, sisters, and aunts.

**Women and Household Duties**

One of the most common female titles on monuments is that of “mistress of the house”; that women remained at home in charge of the running of household affairs is implied by passages from New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1050 B.C.E.) documents and supported by the idealized tomb scenes where women are shown engaged only in household duties of child rearing and food preparation, as opposed to men, who were engaged in activities outside the household (hunting, bureaucratic functions). Household activities such as beer brewing and baking are depicted on tombs as being overseen by the male tomb owner, but it was probably women or their servants who actually performed the tasks. Evidence also indicates that women engaged in weaving, grain storage, animal husbandry, and craft production within the household confines. For much of her life, the mistress of the house was pregnant; a woman often gave birth to twelve or more children, few of whom survived into adulthood.

**Children and Family Ideals**

Children were desired, and the state of childlessness is noted with concern by Egyptian authors and on tomb inscriptions. Children were important because they were responsible for the domestic altar and for performing rituals in the cult of the ancestors. Children were given special cylindrical charm cases to wear around their necks for protection. In turn, they were expected to show affection and respect for both parents. In the document *Teaching of Duaf’s son*
Khety from the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2100–1785 B.C.E.), the author tells his son to “thank God for your mother and for your father, who put you on the path of life.”

Household Economy
The employment of wet nurses and nannies freed elite women from some of the burdens of child rearing. Households were not self-sufficient. Women were responsible for supplying household needs through the exchange and sale of garden provisions, cloth, and other goods. It is likely that in managing the household economy, they could also accumulate wealth. According to written documents, women could own houses, but men owned households; that is, they controlled the production and activities that took place inside. Because men were typically landholders (land being “owned” by the pharaoh and usually controlled by men), they controlled the grain rations. They were responsible for the support of the female members of the household. Even a small landholder in the Middle Kingdom might support as many as sixteen people from the grain grown on his fields.

Although the establishment of nuclear families was the desired norm, some Egyptian men and women found themselves without spouses. Homosexuality was acknowledged among all classes but advised against by the scribes. Since homosexual cohabitation did not result in children, it did not conform to the ideal of family life based on fertility and was even thought to hinder the cycle of rebirth.

Gender Roles and Ideology
In contrast, motherhood and the related concept of fertility were greatly valued in ancient Egypt. The elaborate ritual and ceremony of kingship were based on fertility, and political controls exercised by the pharaoh rested on his kingdom’s agricultural achievements. The ruler’s ability to organize labor and perform proper rituals was believed to ensure agricultural success. When a pharaoh died, the concept of rebirth into an afterlife relied on female metaphors of childbirth and suckling. Gender distinctions existed as part of the formal structure of ancient Egyptian society. While men and women were complementary in concept and even in the roles they played, the subordinate status of women was epitomized on the great stone monuments by the secondary placement of women relative to their husbands and sons. Women were conceptually integral to both religious and political realms; in practice they were subordinated in both. Like the ideals described later for Chinese society, the dominant ideology of ancient Egypt demanded subservience of women to men, from the most basic social levels of family interaction to the public political realm.
Family and Household in West Asia Before Islam

Ancient Egypt in North Africa shared common historical, ecological, and social conditions with Mesopotamia and ancient Israel in West Asia, and, though their cultural traditions were distinct, they were linked in early times as well as after the coming of Islam. The Judeo-Christian Bible illustrates well the connections among the peoples and cultures of these regions; the history it tells moves from Egypt to the Sinai, from Syria to Babylon, and from pastoralism to urban life. The customs of marriage, disposition of household property, and kinship relations practiced by the peoples who inhabited West Asia before Islamic times did differ, mainly according to whether the people in question were nomadic and pastoral or sedentary and urban; at the same time, some common features can be noted throughout the region.

Property and the Family

Since many of the surviving documents record the disposition of property, these documents are also excellent sources for determining the nature of power and relationships that made up families and households. However, they tell us little about the personal and private realms of family and household life. The position of women in ancient Egypt was in some ways favorable to elite women’s accumulation of wealth, since land and household property could be inherited by women as well as men. Similarly, dowry inventories (the lists of property brought by the bride to her husband in order to finalize a marriage) from Mesopotamia include such things as ivory and furniture, and there is evidence to suggest that girls were entitled to inherit a share of their family’s wealth unless they had received a dowry, in which case they were considered to have been provided for. In the absence of sons, however, a daughter might inherit her parents’ entire property. The endowment of wives with property by their families sometimes allowed them to play important roles, even representing their ruler husbands during absences. Among the ancient Hebrews, the bride’s receipt of property from her husband was part of the marriage document, which also specified his obligations to her. Women, on the other hand, were expected to produce children and run the household.

Women’s Rights

In ancient Sumer, there is some evidence of the gradual erosion of women’s rights. This occurred as a result of chronic warfare (possibly reflecting scarcity of resources and an ecological crisis) and the growth of private property. Where kin-based control over resources existed, this control was centered in the household and dominated by women. The control over property by individuals rather than families tended to shift emphasis to the activities performed by men outside the household; this gave way to male control and female dependence. The code of the Mesopotamian king
Hammurabi (ca. 1792–1750 B.C.E.) is one of the earliest written documents that provides explicit regulations concerning the family. Among other things, the Code of Hammurabi (see Chapter 4) viewed the family as an economic unit and made definite gender relationships and parental authority, as shown in the following example:

If a man has taken a wife, and she has borne him children and that woman has gone to her fate, and he has taken a second wife, and she also has borne children; after the father has gone to his fate, the sons shall not share according to mothers, but each family shall take the marriage-portion of its mother, and all shall share the goods of their father’s estate equally.

**Patterns of Marriage**

Marriage practices in ancient Egyptian society permitted and encouraged brother-sister marriage among the upper classes and also among peasants. This practice can be documented in Egypt as early as the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E., and variations on brother-sister marriage were not unknown in other parts of the ancient Mediterranean world; Athenians permitted paternal half siblings to marry, and Spartans permitted the marriage of maternal half siblings. Even much later, after the Greek conquest of Egypt in the fourth century C.E., one of Alexander the Great’s successors who ruled Egypt divorced his wife to marry his sister.

One explanation for the marriage of siblings, and in general for marriages of close kin, is that such marriages help to keep property within the family, since either the indirect dowry (what a prospective groom would give to his bride’s family) or the direct dowry (property or wealth bestowed on a daughter at her marriage) remains within the family. Unlike women in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, women in ancient Israel received dowries from both sides of the family. When the biblical character Jacob worked to earn the hand of Laban’s daughters Rachel and Leah, both women declared their right to the property endowed to Jacob through his labor as well as through their inheritance of a share of their father’s property.

The laws of Moses, given by the Hebrew God to lead the children of Israel, specifically rejected the ways of Egyptian life, including the West Asian practice of brother-sister marriage. Although Moses himself was the product of a marriage between his father and his paternal aunt, Mosaic law prohibited such unions. The marriages of other close kin such as cousins, however, were allowed. Although ancient Israel distinguished its practices from those of Egypt—and perhaps also those of its surrounding neighbors—the motivation for close kin marriage remained powerful. Among the Israelites, both sororate (marriage of a man to two sisters, as Rachel and Leah to Jacob) and levirate (marriage of a widow to her dead husband’s brother) were ways of keeping property within limited family circles.