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# Triangle of “Family, Land and God”: the Offer of Social Reading of the Old Testament

## Trijstūris “Ģimene, zeme un Dievs”: Vecās Derības sociālā lasījuma iespējas

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Affiliation of the family to the land, owner rights as necessary for sufficient means of existence on the one hand and God’s blessings on the other is a founding triangle constituting basic principles of every ancient society. The triangle is described also in the Old Testament, which is the first part of the Bible. For many centuries the triangle “nation – land – God” has been undisputed foundation for sustainability of every society. The ancient intuition foresaw unalienable constituents of society still worth to remind for the modern man. However, in the 21st century all three constituents could be described and named differently. Our reflections go far beyond the ancient book (or, rather, collection of 39 books) composed more than 2000 years ago for needs of society in Ancient Israel. House, household in the Biblical times was the key concept for both family, its posterity and economics, and so it is today. We tend to think that family ties and economic relationships are separate concepts, but they are made one by affiliation to the land, and changes in relationships between the three elements leave deep impact on stability of the nation with far going consequences for sustainability of community.

**Key words:** household, land, family, stability of the nation.

### Introduction

Relationships between the nation and land are much debated today when we experience mass migration beyond national borders around the globe. Migration provokes questions related to the land perceived as homeland, perception of humanity as family, the role assigned to the age-old cultural and national traditions when migration separates people from their original birth place, etc. The article deals with traditional layout of relationships between the land, the nation and God as seen in the Old Testament written more than ca 3000 years ago. The Biblical outlook was important for national identities in Europe at least until early 20th century and current human / national identity crisis is manifested in phenomena like “humanness without face”, “future without culture”, and alike.

## Methodology

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

## The ancient concept of “household”

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

The key term in Greek in the context of the present article is “household” or *oikonomia* (Greek *οικονομία*), usually translated as “governance”. The Greek word is composed of two parts: *oikos*, usually translated as “household”, and *nemein*, “management and dispensation.” (Dotan, 2016). Obviously the word described “household management” in Ancient Greece and the meaning was kept among early Christians (Househol, Family, 1997). However, besides the literal meaning related to mundane household management in whatever sense, Christian theological tradition uses this term to describes (1) “stewardship” or management of things for the benefit of one’s neighbor (meaning Christians as “God’s stewards” or “servants of the Lord”, sometimes “deacons” who serve) (Ayres, 2004); (2) the way how God keeps the created world together in Christ; 3) more specifically, *oikonomia* prescribes the manner how to educate and chastise humanity for the future Second coming of Christ. This is God’s “economy” which deals with people making ready to take the full revelation of the God’s Glory. Good stewardship is good management of things in the world for Christ’s sake, e.g., just distribution of goods, almsgiving, charity etc. In that sense *oikonomia* is “administration of salvation” according to the “plan of salvation” which has an eschatological dimension (*οικονομία*, 1967). Household is a challenge for which the Vicarious Death of Christ on the Cross is just the beginning and full implementation of it rests on the recipient’s shoulders.

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

## Family, clan and land

Stability of society is more complex than personal salvation (which is not “simple” either). “Laws providing for safety and positive contribution in economics are the

same which provide for stable family structure" (Shulz, 2013). Notwithstanding the fact that majority of literature dealing with the Old Testament is dedicated to theological issues. The present article invites readers to pay more serious attention to the Social reading of the Old Testament. (Brueggemann, 1994). Its potential for today rests on values kept and respected by the nation across many centuries.

Ancient societies were organized around three concentric circles, one larger than the other: (1) The smallest family unit was "nuclear family", in Hebrew *bēt āb*, literal meaning "father's house". This smallest unit was managed and ruled by the eldest male *āb*, "father", which roughly corresponds to "patriarch" in European perception. In traditional "patriarchal family" the father or male exerts all power and authority. Younger generations – children, grandchildren and women – function under his authority. *Bēt āb* could encompass up to 66 people who didn't doubt or oppose the authority of the patriarch (Gen. 46:26). Examples of this family are given in Gen. 50:22, Num. 18:1, Judg. 16:31, Is. 3:6, etc. Family ties within the "father's house" were reflected as sense of common heritage and collective responsibility for wrongs, i.e., the family functioned as one unit in both ethical, social and economical senses. Such descriptive systems were typically found where the nuclear family operated as a relatively autonomous unit both economically and socially.

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

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

Redemption law referred also to the land. The land redemption law rises from the concept "the Land belongs to the Lord". As mentioned above, land was "The Lord's", just like "a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed .. to work it and take care of it" (Gen. 2:8, 15). The Divine ownership of the land is mentioned several times (e.g., Gen. 13:15; Lev. 25:23; Deut. 19:14; Josh. 1:2 etc.). "Protection of the land" from interference of the snake (Satan, i.e., the one who destroys har-

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

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

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

To take the idea further, few words should be said about the clan system in the Old Testament times. The Hebrew term *mishpachah* denotes relatives connected to the core in the father's lineage (Mishpachah, 2016). The term in this sense is found in Ex. 6:14, Num. 3:20, 7:2, 17:1-3 etc. The concept roughly corresponds to both Latvian and Lithuanian *saiņe* ("larger family", where relatives from both father's and mother's side are accepted). Membership of the clan could reach 60 – 250 people (depending on geography and distance, number of children etc.). This number is not incidental though – this is average number of people we all know more or less personally and corresponds to approx. number of contacts in a mobile phone address book. This concept points out not only to the community of blood relatives, it reached also to meaningful social relationships. In passing it should be mentioned that within the *mishpachah* an effective functioning "gift economy" was active, i.e., ties of mutual support and solidarity characteristic for all ancient societies (Cheal, 1988). Members of the community offered nonrefundable help to the less successful members in case of calamity. The duty to offer help was binding for all members of the community (De Vaux, 1961).

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

### **Genealogies and integrity of tradition**

Another aspect of traditionally inherited family structure is reflected in Biblical genealogies. They take the topic much further. Registers may slow down the action tempo and the reader may lose his or her interest to the purely historical information without contemporary meaning, however, they were far more important than just registers for posterity. Genealogies fixed descent from influential and powerful ancestors and finally they went as far as "God Himself". The descent testified to the highest value of the God's presence in the lineage which was forwarded and cherished from generation to generation, and land use was derived from that. More than that, nation and the land were seen as synonyms. Registers speak about close sticking to the land, family's mighty ancestors and finally to the one chosen nation of Israel separated from others (cf. Gen. 9-10, Gen. 25, Gen. 36, etc.). Genealogies made history of the nation and legalized the land use rights.

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

Strict Mosaic laws were written with purpose to guard the "fathers' house" from immoral deviations. First of all – "the house" must not deteriorate in its posterity. E.g., it is reflected in instruction regarding "stubborn and rebellious son": "If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and

bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.” (Deut. 21:18-21).

Even more integrity of the “fathers’ house” is illustrated by decree to marry widow of the deceased brother (Latin *levirate* law, Heb. *yibbum*). This is an example of ancient “social security” system. It prescribed adoption of fatherless children: “If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. (Deut. 25:5-10.) This is one of the most brilliant examples illustrating “social security system” in ancient Israel (today *yibbum* in Israel is prohibited). Namely, because widow didn’t inherit property of the deceased husband, she literary was left out on the street with nothing and being accepted in the family offered covert for her. Surely brother could try to get away from it, but the community – villagers or family at large – looked down on him with contempt: “If he persists in saying, “I do not want to marry her,” his brother’s widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, “This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother’s family line.” (Deut. 25:9.) Levirate marriage has been practiced by societies with a strong clan structure in which exogamous marriage (i.e. marriage outside the clan) is forbidden.

### **Affiliation with the land as prerequisite for God’s blessings**

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

Above it was mentioned that king Solomon initiated large building projects in his kingdom. These projects required more centralized government and army of state officials to run them. Giving up the old tribal formula of “the land given by God” was seen as necessary for execution of the more progressive and up-to-date reforms (Anderson, 2001). Reforms prescribed to alter old tribal land territories occupied by many generations since Joshua times (ca. 300 years). The implemented reforms also optimized tax policy, in other words – reforms were executed with cold rationale which tore away families from their inherited land. Land was turned into object for sale and trade, it became an object of economic relations, and the reformed concept had nothing to do with the concept “land given as a blessing”, nothing to do with traditions and history. New army of state clerks not affiliated with the land was created. They prospered from corruption and dishonest profit, as it happens always in times of the land measuring all over the world. The warning pronounced by the judge and prophet Samuel was fulfilled: “[The king] will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants” (1.Sam. 8:14 sec.) This is very simple and clear show of origins of corruption in the Bible: corrupt are people who have no respect to the sacred. Until that time the field husbandry was in hands of one family and clan who respectfully cared for the ancestor’s heritage, whereas from the Solomon’s time on cold calculation and economic considerations sandwiched in between the land and people. They became separated and the triangle was no more, there was no place for God. Man became alienated from the land; the land was not essentially important as property of

Yahweh and living on the land was not dependent on keeping the Mosaic law. The law from Decalogue "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12) lost its meaning.

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

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

## **Conclusions**

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

1. Family as an element in the triangle "People – land – God" is an important provider for both economic and social protection of the nation;
2. If the state uses its power to strengthen privileges of the office clerks, it is at risk to generate alienation from their land and work; they are alienated also from their history and traditions.

Struggle for the land and closeness to the land always has been instinct for Latvian people through ages, it was something more than just fight for economic independence. In Latvian classical literature (beginning of the 20th cent.) the triangle "God, nature, work" was described by Latvian genius writer Anna Brigadere, it manifests itself as being in harmony with nature (as in prose of Eduards Virza and poetry of Fricis Bārda

among others), and finally in political pragmatism of the founders of Latvian State after the WWI who praised peasantry as the holder of the Latvian traditional lore and virtues against the debauched inhabitants of industrialized cities uprooted from the land.

These insights in the Old Testament may sound strange to the reader as a fruit of researcher lost in the ancient text studies. It would be true if the outlined dilemma would end at the 19th century. When Latvia was literary grinded between major superpowers of Russia and Germany in WWI and WWII, thousands of Latvian people flee from the country to disperse around the globe. The questions remains: can the ancient text be read as a prophetic message for today? Surely “yes” on one condition – if “belonging to the land” means something more important for the national sustainability than mere economic prosperity and goes deeper into awareness of identity of both personality and family, and the land and its history. This is an echo of our origins, even if there is no one who gives a call. Our part is to listen to the voice of the call.

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### **Trijstūris "Ģimene, zeme un Dievs": Vecās Derības sociālā lasījuma iespējas**

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*Atslēgas vārdi:* zeme, tradīcija, ģenealoģija, nams (kā nācijas dzīves telpa).



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