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Chapter 5

A WOMAN'S WORLD IN LEHI'S JERUSALEM

Ariel E. Bybee

The scriptures leave little doubt that the public world of ancient Israel was a man's domain. The texts of the Old Testament are largely concerned with preserving the stories and deeds of great prophets, the dealings of God with men, and the civic and priestly laws by which men were to govern themselves and interact with each other. Of course, stories appear of particularly exceptional women, such as Esther, who saved her people from destruction; Ruth, who showed unusual devotion to her family; and Miriam, a prophetess and the sister of Moses. The Old Testament is more interested in preserving patrilineal genealogies and priesthood lines than it is with the daily functioning of families and households, where women's roles were most significant. Women in scripture were not systematically ignored any more than the majority of men were; they simply wielded their influence in a more intimate, less visible sphere.¹

In a similar fashion and often to an even greater degree, the authors of the Book of Mormon mostly recorded the broader dealings of God with men and of men with each other. For



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The name Hannah appears on this Israelite seal, providing evidence that women owned seals that were used for official transactions and to safeguard property.

example, 1 and 2 Nephi recount in great detail the struggle of Nephi's brothers Laman and Lemuel against the patriarchal and religious authority of God; their father, Lehi; and their righteous brothers as they journey in the wilderness outside of Israel. Only faint images appear in the account of the women who accompanied them: their wife or mother, Sariah, as well as the nameless wives and sisters of the sons of Lehi. Nevertheless, these women played significant roles in the story of this Israelite family. Unfortunately, little is known from the text about their specific contributions, personalities, and lifestyles—who they really were.

Only by piecing together bits of archaeological evidence that remain and by looking comparatively at earlier and later sources, especially from the world of the Old Testament, can we attempt to reconstruct a likely picture of how these women might have lived in the late seventh century B.C. Examining and

understanding the complexities of marriage, family relationships, and motherhood, as well as household, educational, and religious responsibilities within their society, will give greater insight into who Sariah and her daughters and daughters-in-law were and the critical parts they played in Lehi's family.

Marriage

As described and documented in several surveys of life in biblical times, the most significant event in the life of a woman in ancient Israel was marriage.² From birth, a woman was prepared by her parents to become a wife and mother. All of her training and education within the household was focused on the time when she would leave her parents' home and enter her husband's. Generally, a woman was considered to be of marriageable age at twelve to fourteen years. But marriage was not a matter of individual choice, especially for the woman herself. The choosing of a spouse, whether for a son or for a daughter, was a selective process that involved the entire household.³ A marriage was often contracted for the purpose of extending political or economic relations with new families.⁴ However, although a woman was brought into the house of her husband's family upon marriage,⁵ she remained somewhat of an outsider for the remainder of her life. It was, therefore, also desirable for her to marry into a household that was close in terms of consanguinity.⁶ For this reason, cross-cousin marriages were a time-honored Israelite tradition.⁷

The family patriarch had the final say in the selection process, and he, or the closest living male relative, negotiated with the suitor. The potential groom, who usually initiated these negotiations, might have become acquainted with the bride as a kinswoman or as a neighbor in the village and, with the prior consent of his own father, now sought to make her his wife.

Once an agreement had been reached between the groom and the bride's father, either a document would be drafted or witnesses would be called in and informed of the details. The contract of betrothal was considered legally binding upon both parties and often included such specifications as the amount of the *mohar*, or bride-price, which the groom would pay the bride's family; a bridal dowry (*zebed* or *silluhim*), which would be returned to the bride in the case of divorcement; and stipulations, such as whether the groom could take another wife.⁸ The betrothal generally lasted a year or more before the actual marriage was finalized by a wedding meal and the delivery of the bride to the groom's residence.⁹

Under ancient law, a man could take more than one wife. Several instances of plural marriage are mentioned early in the Old Testament (for example, Jacob in Genesis 29:15–30; 30:1–9; and Esau in Genesis 26:34; 28:9; 36:1–5). But by the time of the monarchy, monogamy seems to have been the most common practice outside the royal household. Most men were not economically able to support more than one or two spouses, and the Torah contains several discouraging accounts of the domestic strife that occurred within, or as a result of, multiple marriages. As mentioned, the contract of betrothal could—and often did—restrict the husband from taking another wife.¹⁰ Therefore, it was unlikely that most men in Lehi's day would marry more than once unless death or divorce occurred.¹¹ Lehi himself restricted his sons to having a single wife and no concubines (Jacob 3:5).

Nephi's account in the Book of Mormon refers only vaguely to the marriage of his brothers and himself to Ishmael's daughters: "And it came to pass that I, Nephi, took one of the daughters of Ishmael to wife; and also, my brethren took of the daughters of Ishmael to wife; and also Zoram took the eldest daughter of Ishmael to wife" (1 Nephi 16:7).¹² It is not

unimaginable that Nephi, his brothers, and Zoram were married in a simplified version of the traditional fashion that would have included an oral agreement with Ishmael, a wedding meal, and the deliverance of the bride to the bridegroom's tent. However, it is likely that Sariah had become Lehi's wife in a more elaborate and formalized manner, as Lehi was a man of significant wealth, had connections with political power and prestige, and dwelt in or near the city. Her marriage contract, perhaps both written out and witnessed by significant family members and friends, was probably concluded with the immediate payment of the bride price by the bridegroom and with the giving of rich gifts to both the bride herself and her family. Sariah's father might also have bestowed an elaborate dowry upon her, such as a piece of land, if he were prosperous. The nuptials would have been celebrated with many guests, feasting, and an elaborate procession, such as that which became more common in New Testament times.¹³

The daughters of Ishmael were patriarchally descended from Ephraim,¹⁴ while Lehi's family was of the tribe of Manasseh (see 1 Nephi 5:14; Alma 10:3). However, it is not known whether some sort of blood relationship existed between the two families through Sariah or the wife of Ishmael. The Israelite tradition of cross-cousin marriage makes this kinship both possible and likely. But whether the two families shared a blood relationship or not, consanguinity was technically achieved in both physical and spiritual senses because they both claimed Israel (Jacob) as a common ancestor and held his God as their own. It is also possible that Lehi and Sariah were closely related.¹⁵

Family Relationships and Motherhood

For an Israelite woman, marriage meant the transfer of her guardianship from her father (or the male relative who was the

head of the house) to her husband.¹⁶ In ancient Israel, as a son was subject to the authority of his father for the duration of the father's life, so a woman also came to be just as much under the guardianship of her father-in-law as of her husband, if not more. Often a newly espoused couple resided in the house of the groom's father, either in the same building or in another part of a larger complex. Sometimes a married couple would live in a new residence away from the father's property, but he continued to have absolute authority over them until his death.¹⁷

Cultural and archaeological evidences show that during the First Temple period, the average *bet 'ab*—the “house of the father,” or ancestral household—consisted fundamentally of two parents and between two and four children. In addition to her father- and mother-in-law, a new bride could often expect to find within her husband's larger household his grandparents; his brothers and their wives and children; his unmarried, divorced, or widowed sisters; one or more adopted children; household servants and slaves; or other dependents, such as resident aliens.¹⁸ Her greatest challenge as a new wife was to find her place within this household hierarchy.

The most effective and long-lasting way for a woman to establish status and a sense of belonging within her husband's family was to bear children. In an era when both infant and maternal mortality rates were extremely high, child bearers had “an importance . . . nearly inconceivable to those of us living in an age facing overpopulation.”¹⁹ Children were not only critical to the continuation of the family bloodline but were also economically important for a society based on subsistence agriculture. Motherhood was expected of every wife and was rewarded with great honor, insomuch that children, especially sons, were associated with great prestige. Conversely, barrenness was considered the greatest curse upon a woman, and

ancient biblical laws generally provided for the divorce or expulsion of a wife who bore no children.²⁰

Sariah seems to have been fortunate in her marriage to Lehi. Lehi's house was located on his inherited lands, but by the time that he and his family left Jerusalem, it is clear that they were living separately from any other relatives (see 1 Nephi 2:4–5). Perhaps all his relations had already passed away. But it seems more likely that this piece of land was his by inheritance. In any case, since Lehi and Sariah lived there at least from the time of Lehi's father's death and perhaps earlier, Sariah would have been spared the politics of her father-in-law's household for at least some of her marriage. The pressure and prestige of childbearing, though still a big factor in her life, would not have been as severe as it must have been in a larger household. The fact that Lehi's land was in or near the city also eased the pressure that would have existed for her to bear children to become agricultural laborers. It was perhaps due in part to these favorable circumstances that the family that Sariah and Lehi brought into the desert—namely, a nuclear family dwelling separately, consisting of two parents, four sons, and at least two daughters—though small in comparison to those of earlier generations, seems to have exceeded the average family size for the time period.²¹

It is difficult to assess the effect that the interfamilial marriages had upon the status of Ishmael, his wife, and his children. However, it does seem that Ishmael's family as a whole was brought into a type of wilderness *bet 'ab* and became subordinate to the will and inspiration of Lehi as patriarchal head, even though rebellions against this authority periodically occurred. Without knowing the prior relationship between Lehi and Ishmael, it is reasonable to assume that Ishmael accepted Lehi's leadership due to his prophetic call rather than any familial precedence. Because Ishmael himself is never said

to have rebelled against this order of things, presumably he felt comfortable with his own place in the hierarchy. This extended family-tribe consisted, then, of a patriarchal head, his wife, their sons and their wives and children, their daughters (who were presumably unmarried, or they would have been mentioned in terms of their husbands rather than themselves), and several other dependents. The latter included the two sons of Ishmael and their wives and families (1 Nephi 7:6); Zoram, who had served as an important administrator in the house of Laban and who became like an adopted son in the house of Lehi; and Ishmael and his wife, who, due to their age, probably held status comparable to that of grandparents in the house of Lehi. This type of tribal organization clearly resembled earlier models in ancient Israel and would not have seemed more than slightly unusual to those within it.

Posterity was clearly of great importance to Lehi's family. His sons returned to Jerusalem to get Ishmael and his daughters so that they could "take daughters to wife, that they might raise up seed unto the Lord in the land of promise" (1 Nephi 7:1). The birth of children to the family both ensured the perpetuation of the bloodline and provided additional laborers to till, plant, hunt, and build upon their arrival in the New World, thus making it economically advantageous as well. Because this type of frontier subsistence relied so heavily upon the reproductive abilities of its women for success, motherhood would have afforded women within Lehi's family as much status as it did in Israel at that time period, if not more (see Genesis 30:22–24; 1 Samuel 1:10–20). Sariah apparently bore at least six sons and two daughters under the pressures of agrarian and nomadic living, perhaps even while accompanying her husband to Egypt or other lands. In her world, children were important to the survival of the household and the economy (see 1 Nephi 18:7).

Considering the high infant and maternal mortality rates within the cities during ancient times, Nephi's account of child-birth in the wilderness becomes even more significant:

And we did travel and wade through much affliction in the wilderness; and our women did bear children in the wilderness. And so great were the blessings of the Lord upon us, that while we did live upon raw meat in the wilderness, our women did give plenty of suck for their children, and were strong, yea, even like unto the men; and they began to bear their journeyings without murmuring. (1 Nephi 17:1–2)

The increased risk for these women, who were living under the harshest nomadic conditions and even subsisting on raw meat, added greatly to the prestige and respect they received within the household—even so much that Nephi, with sincere admiration, thought that their physical abilities almost equaled those of men (1 Nephi 17:2). And Lehi, in blessing his two youngest sons before his death, referred to their births in the wilderness in terms calculated to remind them of their mother's hardship and risk on their behalf (2 Nephi 3:1, 3; see also 2:1–2).

Household, Educational, and Religious Responsibilities

The household was the center of a woman's life in Israel and the place in which she held the most power.²² Even though a child was born into “the house of the father,” the mother was the first and most abiding influence upon the child's life from the day of birth, instilling the most basic sociocultural values, modes of behavior, and religious beliefs. In Proverbs, the mother is seen as both a nurturer and educator whose teachings are complementary to those of the father (see Proverbs 1:8; 6:20). Since there is no evidence concerning formal schooling in Israel before the Hellenistic period,²³ it is most likely that children were taught to read and write at home.²⁴ In a family setting,



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Excavation of an Israelite house in Beersheba from the late Iron Age. Israelite homes usually consisted of four rooms built around a courtyard. In this photo, the remains of the columns in the courtyard are visible as well as the stairs leading to the upper story of the home. (See pages 118–21 of this volume for a discussion of Israelite homes at the time of Lehi.)

both girls and boys would have been taught the rudimentary skills of literacy, probably by both parents.²⁵

Children would also have learned to perform primary chores at the side of their mother. Early on, both girls and boys would have been taught to contribute to the functioning of the family household, perhaps by performing such small labors as caring for the younger children, gathering fuel, or helping to prepare food.²⁶

As the children matured, work diverged according to gender. At a certain point, a boy was taken out of the household and into his father's workplace, whether it was in the field or in a trade. A girl, however, remained at home under the tutelage of her mother, where she was taught to perform the domestic labors associated with running a household. Not only were women responsible for the care and the discipline of the children, but also for the

feeding and clothing of the entire household. Food preparation alone was exceedingly time-consuming. Six days a week, women sorted, cleaned, parched, and ground grain, kneaded and baked bread, drew water, collected fuel for cooking, butchered and cleaned small animals, milked, churned butter, made cheese and yogurt, tended vegetable gardens and fruit trees, and preserved meat and fruits for storage. The women prepared raw wool and flax fibers, which were then spun, woven, sewn, and tailored into clothing for their families. They often produced many of the common household tools, such as cooking and cleaning implements, lamps, and candles. The burden of daily cleaning and washing also fell on the shoulders of the women in the household (see Proverbs 31:10–31).²⁷

Women not only taught their children literacy and labor skills but were also a critical part of their religious education.²⁸ Children learned the proper observance of important features



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Reconstruction of a home interior from the fourth century A.D., located in northern Israel. Most homes were furnished simply with facilities for food preparation, provisions for sleeping, and a place to keep animals in the winter.



Replica of a typical cooking stove from Roman Jerusalem.

of ancient Israelite religion by watching their mother's daily ritual of washing herself, offering sacrifice with her husband, and praying.²⁹ A good deal of this religious teaching would also have taken place on the Sabbath, when both women and men laid aside their daily chores to worship. The Sabbath was a day of rejoicing and rest, particularly for the labor-weary woman. Both she and her husband spent the day reading from the Torah, singing hymns of praise, and teaching their children the beliefs and rituals of their religion.³⁰ Children living in Jerusalem around 600 B.C. probably would have observed their mother attending local assemblies or gatherings to worship alongside their father. Women actively participated in religious festivals and national celebrations (Deuteronomy 31:12)—singing and dancing—and brought sacrifices of thanksgiving to the temple, teaching their children through their example.

The women within Lehi's household would have been occupied from daybreak to sundown performing such daily tasks as these and perhaps more, depending on where they lived and

what the circumstances of the family were. It is likely that Sariah's specific responsibilities changed once she came into the desert; in the city, she had been a rich man's wife, probably with several servants and some leisure time. In the desert, she would have carried more responsibilities, and her tasks might have varied. It is likely that the women also contributed to many uncommon tasks that Nephi and his brothers undertook in the desert. Perhaps the women and children gathered fuel for the fire or brought water to aid Nephi as he made tools to build the ship. Women would have been instrumental in the gathering of seeds, fruit, meat, and other provisions for the journey to the promised land, and they would have helped to till, plant, and harvest crops or tend flocks, especially during their first years in the promised land.

Nephi makes it clear from the first verse of his account that he was grateful to both of his parents for his upbringing. "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father" (1 Nephi 1:1). Apparently his education was given to him by these "goodly parents," righteous and devoted people who had taken the time to teach him reading, writing, the language of the scriptures, and the learning of his father. But the implication of Nephi's statement is even deeper than that. He also refers to an inherited spiritual knowledge and a familiarity with religion and the God whom his parents worshipped. In his account of her sons' return from Jerusalem with the brass plates, Nephi recalls the powerful words of Sariah, who had been extremely troubled and anxious for their safety during their absence:

Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness; yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power

whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them. (1 Nephi 5:8)

Against all odds, her sons had succeeded, which built Sariah's testimony into a sure knowledge that God's hand was directing Lehi and the family's course. Sariah and Lehi then offered sacrifice and burnt offerings in thanks for the safety of their sons. Her fervent statement of belief obviously made an impression on Nephi, who painstakingly inscribed the account in considerable detail. This manifestation of Sariah's faith was probably only one example of many that served as religious teaching devices to her children and influenced their own belief systems.

Conclusion

We have examined the Israelite woman in her most important roles within the ancient world: wife, mother, housekeeper, and educator. Each of these roles was critical to the success of the family, in terms of both perpetuation and economic viability. Thus the tremendous importance of women in the ancient world can be better understood.

In particular, the nature and significance of the lives of the women in Lehi's family are clarified, and new dimensions are added to the characters of Sariah, her daughters, and her daughters-in-law. What is so often forgotten about the realities of the social context of the Israelite family is that it was an interdependent unit, despite the decidedly male orientation of the written record. These women who toiled beside their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons through the wilderness, over the ocean, and in the promised land were not mere, passive shadows in the context of men's lives. On the contrary, Sariah and her faithful daughters and daughters-in-law became women of quiet but powerful conviction, hand-chosen

by the Lord to help found a new and fruitful branch of Israel. It is interesting that Nephi's detailed accounts of murmurings and rebellions rarely include the women. This is negative evidence, certainly, but coupled with it are Sariah's testimony (1 Nephi 5:8), at least two of her daughters' decision to follow Nephi (2 Nephi 5:6), Ishmael's wife's and daughter's defense of Nephi in a moment of violent crisis (1 Nephi 7:19), and Nephi's admiration of the women's strength in the wilderness (1 Nephi 17:2). They were active and contributing members of a family unit that was as dependent on them for survival as it was on its male members.

NOTES

1. See Camille S. Williams, "Women in the Book of Mormon: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Interpretation," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11 (2002): 66–79.

2. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 1:24–34; Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 54–57; Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250–587 BCE* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993), 13–17; Leo G. Perdue et al., *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997). For a brief survey and bibliography of recent scholarship on marriage in the Old Testament, see Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), 1.

3. See John H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Woman in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 32–37.

4. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 13, 31.

5. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 1:28.

6. Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 59.

7. The Old Testament is especially rich in examples of this. For a fuller discussion of cross-cousin marriage, see Robert A. Oden Jr., *The Bible without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to It* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 106–30.

8. James R. Baker, *Women's Rights in Old Testament Times* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 39. Also see Ze'ev W. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press and Eisenbrauns, 2001), 135–50, for a more detailed discussion of marriage contracts.

9. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 145. The weddings of Isaac to Rebekah (Genesis 24) and of Jacob to Rachel and Leah (Genesis 29) are early demonstrations of these types of contracts, as well as of cross-cousin marriages.

10. Baker, *Women's Rights*, 39.

11. Monica Alama Laparra, “Mujer, familia y matrimonio en el antiguo Israel bíblico,” in *Actas del primer seminario de estudios sobre la mujer en la antigüedad* (Valencia, 24–25 abril, 1997), ed. Carmen Alfaro Giner and Alejandro Noguera Borel (Valencia, Spain: Universitat de Valencia, 1998), 27–28. Laparra discusses the difficult relationships of Sarah with Hagar and Rachel with Leah and then points out that in the books of Samuel and Judges, which cover the monarchy period, there is only one recorded instance of plural marriage outside the royal house, that of Samuel's father and his two wives.

12. Of interest is how Nephi's repeated usage of the wording “took . . . to wife” parallels Old Testament phrasing: Jacob is commanded not to “take a wife” of the daughters of Canaan (Genesis 24:3); Abraham commands his servant to “take a wife” for Isaac (Genesis 24:4, 7); the sons of God “took them wives” of the fair daughters of men (Genesis 6:2).

13. A good example of this is the marriage in the parable of the ten virgins (see Matthew 25:1–13).

14. Erastus Snow, *Journal of Discourses*, 23:184, reported: “The Prophet Joseph informed us that . . . Ishmael was of the lineage of Ephraim, and that his sons married into Lehi's family, and Lehi's sons married Ishmael's daughters.”

15. See generally Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 73.
16. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 123–24.
17. Laparra, “Mujer, familia y matrimonio,” 8.
18. Blenkinsopp, “Family in First Temple Israel,” 52.
19. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed*, 49–50. He cites the facts that Rehoboam’s seventy-eight consorts bore only eighty-eight children (2 Chronicles 11:21) and Abijah’s fourteen wives bore only thirty-eight (2 Chronicles 13:21) as evidence for the high mortality rate of both women and children.
20. Phyllis A. Bird, “Women, Old Testament,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:953–54. Bird fully discusses biblical references to this subject.
21. Nephi mentions his sisters after their arrival in the promised land (2 Nephi 5:6), but it is not known how many of them there were or when and where they were born. John L. Sorenson, “The Composition of Lehi’s Family,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:174–96, is of the opinion that the daughters were born in Jerusalem before their departure and speculates—based on the statement of Elder Erastus Snow quoted in note 14 above—that at some point they married Ishmael’s sons. If so, they apparently left their husbands and followed Nephi when the Nephites and Lamanites separated.
22. See Carol Meyers, “The Family in Early Israel,” in *Families in Ancient Israel*, 24–47, for a fuller discussion and reconstruction of ethnographical information on this subject.
23. James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 86.
24. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 27–28.
25. Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 149–54.
26. Meyers, “Family in Early Israel,” 27.
27. Bird, “Women, Old Testament,” 954; Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 142–48. For an illuminating exposition of the proverbial portrayal

of the ideal woman in the Persian period, shortly after Sariah's time, see Christine Roy Yoder, "The Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10–31," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122/3 (2003): 427–47.

28. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World in Ancient Israel*, 28–29.

29. See Abraham P. Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies* (New York: Ktav, 1980), 61–65, for a more detailed description of daily religious observances.

30. *Ibid.*, 107–40. Deuteronomy 6:7 requires parents to teach their children the words of the law. That requirement would have applied to mothers as well as to fathers, as the law was read to the entire population.