

# **My Father's Keeper**

## **A Biblical Perspective on Eldercare**

by Fe Fernandez-Hevener

She sits by the road, disguised as a harlot, waiting to seduce her father-in-law. Her name is Tamar, the widow of Er. Her father-in-law is Judah, son of Jacob. And she is going to get from him what is rightfully hers. Thus begins the classic Biblical tale of levirate marriage, a messy, ancient ritual for providing a childless widow with an heir. With plot twists replete with killings, pathos, fornication, incest, and betrayal, this cringe-worthy story ends on a note of a grace--Judah becomes the direct ancestor of Jesus; Perez, one of the twin products of this incestuous affair, is next in line;<sup>1</sup> and Tamar is one of five mothers mentioned in the in Matthew 1 genealogy of the Savior of mankind.<sup>2</sup>

Judah transgressed and Tamar upheld the ancient law of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5,6):

5: If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the widow of the dead man shall not be married to a stranger outside the family; her husband's brother shall go in to her, take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.

6: And it shall be that the firstborn son which she bears will succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

Levirate marriage (Hebrew: *yibbum*) provided a way to preserve a deceased son's family line. And more importantly, for the purpose of this study, it was instituted "so the widow would have children to support her. Apart from this, she would likely live the rest of her life as a destitute widow."<sup>3</sup>

Over and over again the Bible emphasizes the importance of caring for one's parents. Jump to the New Testament and you will find Paul exhorting Timothy (and the Ephesians) thus (1 Timothy 5:4,8):

4: But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God.

8: But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

The Bible is clear about eldercare: we are under sacred obligation to care for our parents.<sup>4</sup>

### **CORBANed**

The Scribes and Pharisees are at it again--seeking to prove that Jesus does not have authority from God, but as evidenced by their ability to make Jewish law, they do. This time they are after him for allowing His disciples to defile bread by eating it with unwashed hands. Under discussion is *Netilat Yadayim*, a ritual handwashing ceremony that has nothing to do with stopping the spread of germs.<sup>5</sup>

And Jesus is very emphatic as He rebukes them (Mark 7:6-8):

6: He answered and said the them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors Me with their lips but their heart is far from Me.

7: And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

8: For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men . . .

He then abruptly leaves the discussion about ritual washing and pivots to another man-made tradition--*Corban* (Mark 7:9-13).

9: He said to them, "all too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.

10: For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'he who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.'

11: But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is *Corban*"--' (that is, a gift to God),

12: then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother,

13: making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."

The Jewish Encyclopedia defines *corban* as a vow-offering, something devoted to God. By saying, "let my property be to you *korban*--that is, a gift consecrated to God--a man could prevent another from deriving any benefit from what he possessed . . ." <sup>6</sup>

With the Mosaic law (including the 10 commandments) as its foundation, Biblical Jewish society required that one honor one's parents. One could be justified in speculating that those who declared *corban* over parent-directed gifts must have had good reason for shunning them. But Jesus makes it clear that nothing can nullify the fifth commandment.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of self-justification to the contrary, the Bible requires us to care for our parents.

## **WHAT DID JESUS DO?**

How did Jesus care for His own parents?

Though His mother, Mary is often seen during the time of His public ministry, Joseph, His earthly father is not. We assume that he had died by then, else such a righteous man would still have been part of the narrative. After all, this is the man who moved his family from Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth in order to protect the Son of God, and who is forever honored with a genealogy that names him as the father of the Christ (Matthew 1:16).

There are numerous Biblical and extra-Biblical passages that reference the brothers of Jesus, as well as an interesting passage (Matthew 12:46-50) where He seemingly chooses His spiritual family over blood relatives. Why Mary did not end up in the care of her biological (or step-) children is a puzzle still unsolved.

What we do know is that Jesus entrusted his mother's care to the disciple John. Why John? Tradition holds that 11 of the disciples (including the Matthew who replaced Judas the Betrayer) died of crucifixion, stabbing, stoning, or various combinations of the three. John was the only one to enjoy the (dubious) honor of dying of old age.

And what we also know is that one of the last acts Jesus performed as He hung on the cross was to ensure His mother's welfare (John 19:25-27).

25: Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

26: When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!"

27: Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" AND FROM THAT HOUR THAT DISCIPLE TOOK HER TO HIS OWN [HOME].<sup>8</sup>

This is a dramatic pause.

This is *still* a dramatic pause.

Ok, so it wasn't in all-caps in the NKJV.

## **THE WAY WE WERE**

My mother grew up in a typical Filipino multi-generational household full of parents, siblings, cousins, and at least one grandmother. Nana Juliana was blind, and would stay awake at night and sleep the day away. This condition did not sit well with her housemates, who did not appreciate being awoken from a deep sleep to find themselves being groped by a senile old lady. To remedy the situation, various family members took it upon themselves to slowly drip-drip-drip water onto her forehead when they found her sleeping during the day, until she would wake abruptly, cursing the lizards who had peed on her.

My parents' move to metro Manila isolated us from my mother's sprawling clan. The household I grew up in was tiny by Filipino standards: my parents, my brother, myself, my grandmother, and the maid. It was practically unheard of to only have two children. We lived in a two-bedroom, one-bath home. The second bedroom went to my grandmother and the maid; my brother and I had our beds in the partitioned-off dining room. And though it was just off our bedroom, we would call for our grandmother to accompany us to the bathroom post-bedtime, because monsters played in the dark.

Since we lived close to Manila, we were a convenient rest stop for friends and relatives who needed to transact business in the big city. Sometimes we would host former parishioners of my parents. We saw off waves of relatives who needed to use the international airport as they emigrated to Hawaii. We even hosted my cousin's husband's brother and his family on their way to the States. They, too, were considered relatives and did not even have to ask for permission to stay at our home. There was always room for one more.

Eventually, my mother was the last of her siblings left in the Philippines and we, too, prepared to go to America. In his distress, my grandfather asked my mother who would see him off when his time came. She told him, "When you think you're dying remember to breathe. Just keep breathing until I get back." Sadly, he forgot to breathe. And relatives told her that he would call out her name as he lay dying.

This all may sound like a foreign culture to people in America, but the reality is that, even less than a hundred years ago, the American family lived the same way.

Moreover, a Pew Research study conducted in 2021 found that 54% of adults aged 40-49 have a parent aged 65 or older in their household while also supporting a child. 36% of people aged 50-59 have an elderly parent and still support a child. By age 60+ the percentage drops to 7.<sup>9</sup>

After the death of his grandfather, Dennis' grandmother lived in a separate home on his parents' farm for about 15 years. Eventually, as she weakened, she moved to an assisted living apartment; then, when her mind went on permanent vacation without her, to a nursing home.

My family unit consists of a western husband, a western-leaning eastern wife, and an orange cat of uncertain provenance. He came to us almost fully formed, with a bottomless belly and a well-developed fear of men. But he and my father are pals.

If we were to pose for a family portrait today, where would my father stand?

## **IN A PLACE OF HONOR**

In a place of honor. This is his birthright as a father, an old man, and a child of God.

Leviticus 19:32: You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the Lord.

Proverbs 16:31: The silver-haired head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness.

What does a place of honor look like?

## **THE WAY WE ARE**

When the elderly can no longer care for themselves, they are happiest and feel most secure living with people whom they trust.<sup>10</sup> Most often these will be their children. But one child cannot undertake this job alone, if only for the practical reason that he cannot be available 24 hours a day. Ideally, it requires contributions from a large, extended family.

In "The Counterintuitive Lesson of Caring for Yourself First", author and pastor Steve Cuss puts forth an interesting theory: you cannot help others unless you help yourself first.<sup>11</sup>

"You cannot help another person when you are starving for oxygen in your own soul. You cannot be an effective servant for God when your own triggers and assumptions are speaking louder to you than the guidance of the Spirit."

He likens this to what you are told on a plane: first, put on your oxygen mask. You cannot save others if you are dead.

Then of what use is 2 Corinthians 12:9?: And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

Or, Philippians 4:13: I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Or Isaiah 40:31: But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Or even Exodus 20:12: Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

Prayerfully and with humility I consider what Jesus did. When He could no longer care for His mother He entrusted her to someone else.

## NOTES

(1) Interestingly, Perez' twin, Zerah, is also mentioned in the Matthew 1 genealogy. One commentary provides this explanation:

Benson Commentary, Bible Hub. <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/1-3.htm>.

"Some have observed that these sons of Judah are mentioned together because they were twins born at the same time: but if this had been a reason for assigning Zara the honour of being named in this genealogy, Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, ought to have obtained it likewise. He seems rather to be mentioned to prevent any mistake. For if he had not, considering the infamy of Pharez's birth, we might have been apt to imagine that not the Pharez whom Judah begat in incest, but another son of Judah, called Pharez, was our Lord's progenitor, it being no uncommon thing among the Jews to have several children of the same name."

(2) The other four are Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba), and Mary.

(3) David Guzik, 'Study Guide for Genesis 38'.

[https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik\\_david/study-guide/genesis/genesis-38.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik_david/study-guide/genesis/genesis-38.cfm).

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Here is another source:

Ronald L. Eisenberg, 'Levirate Marriage and Halitzah'. [www.myjewishlearning.com/article/levirate-marriage-and-halitzah](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/levirate-marriage-and-halitzah).

"The institution of levirate marriage also served to protect the wife. In numerous verses, the Torah lumps widows with orphans and strangers as the disenfranchised members of society to whom special kindness must be shown. The situation of a widow without children was especially dire, for she had no one to care for her and provide material support."

(4) See: '100 Bible Verses about Taking Care of Parents'. <https://stillfaith.com/topics/taking-care-of-parents/>.

(5) 'Ritual Hand Washing Before Meals'. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hand-washing/>.

"Traditionally, Jews are required to wash their hands and say a blessing before eating any meal that includes bread or matzah. The ritual, known as *netilat yadayim*, is typically done using a two-handled cup, but any vessel will do. There are various customs regarding how the water should be poured, but a common practice is to pour twice on the right hand followed by twice on the left (this is reversed for those who are left-handed). Hasidic custom is to pour three times on each hand."

The article goes on to point out that "The tradition is unrelated to personal hygiene, and a person is still required to perform this ritual even if his or her hands are clean."

(6) Joseph Jacobs and Kaufmann Kohler, 'Korban (lit. "an offering")': .  
<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9468-korban>.

It is interesting to note that the Jewish sources I consulted about *korban* all mentioned Jesus' commentary and concurred with Him. Here is a more extensive quote from the source above:

"The term "korban" was frequently used in vows. By saying, "Let my property be to you korban"—that is, a gift consecrated to God—a man could prevent another from deriving any benefit from what he possessed (Ned. i. 4). This, of course, led to great abuses, as, in fact, all inconsiderate vows did, and, therefore, was much opposed by the sages

(see Eccl. v. 1-5). Jesus (Mark vii. 11-13; comp. Matt. xv. 5-9) had such a vow in view when he said: "If a man say to his father or mother, That wherewith thou mightest have been profited by me is *Ḳorban*, ye no longer suffer him to do ought for his father or his mother, making void the word of God by your tradition" (Greek). But the charge of hypocrisy, or lip-service, raised against the Pharisees in this connection is entirely unfounded; for pharisaic tradition did actually provide a remedy against rash vows by empowering any sage consulted to dissolve the vow in case it could be shown that it was not made with a full consideration of all its consequences; this very power "to loosen that which is bound" by the Law being declared to be a privilege of the Rabbis, derived from the spirit of the Law while seemingly against the letter ("hetter nedarim"; Hag. i. 8).

It is expressly declared, however, by R. Eliezer that if a vow infringes upon the honor due to father or mother, the right procedure is to endeavor to convince him who made it that he failed to consider the consequences sufficiently, and then to dissolve the vow; others, however, dissented, holding that God's honor ought to be considered first (Ned. ix. 1). Against this, R. Meir declares (Ned. ix. 4) that "wherever a vow is made which infringes the laws of humanity, the vow should be dissolved by the sage." Thus the Mishnaic code shows the instance quoted in the New Testament to be, instead of a reproach of pharisaism, as contended by Oort in "Theol. Tijdschrift," xxxviii., a vindication of the humane spirit prevailing among the Rabbis; possibly Jesus had only the rigorous class of teachers in mind, while his more humane views were those shared by others."

(7) Here is an interesting rabbinic study on the fifth commandment:

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, 'Parents and Children – "Honor your father and mother." (Exodus 20:12)' <https://www.aju.edu/ziegler-school-rabbinic-studies/our-torah/back-issues/parents-and-children-honor-your-father-and->

(8) Notice that in the NKJV the word *home* is in brackets. The Greek word *idia* (root word *idios*) is translated as *own*. Used in context, *home* is implied. While the NKJV brackets *home*, the New American Standard version translates it as *own household*. In another usage of *idia* in Luke 18:28 the NAS translates it as *own homes*.

[John 19 Greek interlinear, parsed and per word translation, free online \(abarim-publications.com\).](http://www.abarim-publications.com/John-19-Greek-interlinear-parsed-and-per-word-translation-free-online)

JOHN 19:27

Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own [home.]

εἶτα	λεγει	τω	μαθητη	ιδου	η	μητηρ	σου	και	απ	εκεινης	της	ωρας	ελαβεν	ο	μαθητης
afterward	he says	to the	to student	you see	the	mother	of you	and	out of	of that	of the	of hour	he took	the	student
adverb	verb	def art	noun	verb	def art	noun	2nd pers pron	conjunction	preposition	dem pron	def art	noun	2aor-act-ind	nom-si-mas	nom-si-mas
	pres-act-ind	dat-si-mas	dat-si-mas	2aor-mid-imp	nom-si-fem	nom-si-fem	gen-si			gen-si-fem	gen-si-fem	gen-si-fem	3rd-p si		
αυτην	εις	τα	ια												
her	in(to)/un(to)	the	his own												
3rd-p pers pron	preposition	def art	acc-pl-neu												
acc-si-fem		acc-pl-neu	acc-pl-neu												

Thayer's Greek Lexicon, [Strong's Greek: 2398. ἴδιος \(idios\) -- one's own, distinct \(biblehub.com\).](http://www.biblehub.com/Strong's-Greek/2398.htm)

Thayer's Greek Lexicon also assigns the meaning in this context as "what pertains to one's property, family, dwelling, country etc." and agrees with the John 19:27 translation of *home*.

Fun fact: the Greek word often translated as *home* or *household* in the New Testament is *oikos*, like the yogurt brand.



**(9)** Juliana Menasce Horowitz, 'More than half of Americans in their 40s are 'sandwiched' between an aging parent and their own children' . <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/04/08/more-than-half-of-americans-in-their-40s-are-sandwiched-between-an-aging-parent-and-their-own-children/>.

“As [people are living longer](#) and many young adults are [struggling to gain financial independence](#), about a quarter of U.S. adults (23%) are now part of the so-called “sandwich generation,” according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in October 2021. These are adults who have a parent age 65 or older and are either raising at least one child younger than 18 or providing financial support to an adult child.

Americans in their 40s are the most likely to be sandwiched between their children and an aging parent. More than half in this age group (54%) have a living parent age 65 or older and are either raising a child younger than 18 or have an adult child they helped financially in the past year. By comparison, 36% of those in their 50s, 27% of those in their 30s, and fewer than one-in-ten of those younger than 30 (6%) or 60 and older (7%) are in this situation.”

**(10)** Soohyoung Rain Lee and Laurie S. Kim, 'Coresidence of Older Parents and Adult Children Increases Older Adults' Self-Reported Psychological Well-Being'. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8813294/>.

“3.2. Path Analysis: The Partial Mediation Effect from the Whole Sample

Overall, path analysis with excellent goodness of fit (CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, SRMR = 0.01). As shown in Figure 1, the whole sample path analysis revealed that single parents at the time of the survey (e.g., widowed and divorced) were less likely to coreside with their adult children (STDYX = -0.32; 95% CI [-0.36, -0.29],  $p \leq 0.01$ ). Living alone is negatively associated with physical health (STDYX = -0.23; 95% CI [-0.26, -0.19],  $p < 0.01$ ), and single older adults were likely to report having a low mental health score (STDYX = -0.04; 95% CI [-0.08, -0.007],  $p < 0.05$ ). Contrarily, older parents living with their children scored significantly higher for mental health (STDYX = 0.18; 95% CI [0.15, 0.22],  $p < 0.01$ ) and scored significantly higher for self-acceptance level (STDYX = 0.23; 95% CI [0.19, 0.27],  $p < 0.01$ ). There are partial mediation effect of living with their adult children and physical health and mental health. The negative association remained significant, when coresiding with their adult children (STDYX = -0.23; 95% CI [-0.26, -0.19],  $p = 0.01$  and STDYX = -0.04; 95% CI [-0.081, -0.007],  $p < 0.05$ , respectively), whereas coresidence status mediated the negative association between living alone and self-acceptance (refer to Table 2). “

**(11)** Steve Cuss, 'The Counterintuitive Lesson of Caring for Yourself First', *Christianity Today*, July/August 2024. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/07/caring-for-yourself-first-wellness-psychology-therapy-grief/#:~:text=The%20Counterintuitive%20Lesson%20of%20Caring%20for%20Yourself%20First.>

*I love you, Dennis Hevener!*