

PRAISE FOR *Fatherhood*

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—Associated Press

“Sedgewick describes how thinking about dads has changed over time. What is striking is the sheer variety of nonsense that people have believed . . . [but he] concludes on a personal note. When he asks his young son what a father should be, the boy replies that a dad should be ‘funny and good at hugging.’ As parenting advice goes, that is hard to beat.”

—*The Economist*

“[A] winsome and erudite study of patriarchy . . . Sedgwick teases out the contradictions between patriarchy as a doctrine of benevolent control and its reality as a form of constraint and domination that often breeds resistance. He plays on these ironies in elegant, evocative prose. . . . It’s a fresh and insightful meditation on the paternal dilemma.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Sharp . . . Augustine Sedgwick is an undeniably talented prose stylist with estimable dot-connecting abilities. . . . This book engages in interesting ways with assumptions about fathers of nations, faiths, and families.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“What is a father, exactly? To answer this question, Augustine Sedgwick cracks open the lives of fathers before him, nearly all predating the great feminist thinkers who guide his inquiry. Absorbing, rigorous, and profoundly moving, *Fatherhood* is an exquisite narrative history that offers new ways of thinking about masculinity and the modern family.”

—Kate Bolick, author of *Spinster*

“We have mainly relied on feminist theory to tell the difficult truths and harms of patriarchy, but *Fatherhood* adds to that important canon. It is an invigorating, impressively researched, and honest read. Anyone doing the work of dismantling and reframing the heavy role of the father will find something here.”

—Raymond Antrobus, author of *Signs, Music*

“*Fatherhood* is a richly absorbing piece of history embedded in a wealth of wonderful storytelling. A pleasure to read.”

—Vivian Gornick, author of *The Odd Woman and the City*

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For my parents, and for my son

I am no god. Why would you think such things?
I am your father, that same man you mourn.
It is because of me these brutal men
are hurting you so badly.

—Homer, *The Odyssey*,
translated by Emily Wilson¹

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Fatherhood

INTRODUCTION

MEN BEFORE FATHERHOOD

In the late 1950s, painter Norman Rockwell and at least two of his three sons were in treatment with renowned psychologist Erik Erikson at the Austen Riggs psychiatric hospital in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and they had plenty to talk about. Rockwell was then one of the most famous artists in the world. His covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*, the most popular magazine in the United States at the time, had made his name synonymous with a sentimental ideal of home and community. Erikson meanwhile was well on his way to becoming “an intellectual hero,” as the *New York Times* described him in 1975, who reasonably hoped to win a Nobel Prize.¹ Soon he would write celebrated biographies of Martin Luther and Gandhi, formulate enduring theories of childhood and human development, and coin the terms “life cycle” and “identity crisis,” among others. But as a father, neither Rockwell nor Erikson was quite who he appeared to be in the public eye.

Erikson had grown up in turn-of-the century Frankfurt as Erik Homburger, the strikingly blond son of two dark-haired European

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Jews, Karla Abrahamsen and Theodor Homburger. Theodor was a pediatrician who had originally been Erik's doctor, not his father. When Karla and Theodor married in 1905, they assumed that Erik, then three, was still too young to know precisely who was whom. He learned the truth at age eight, and though he begged his mother to reveal the identity of his "biological father," she never did. After high school, Erik drifted around Europe, in and out of art classes, before landing in Vienna. There, in 1927, he was hired to teach at an experimental school founded by Tiffany heiress Dorothy Burlingham and her partner, Anna Freud, who encouraged Erik to train in child psychoanalysis under her father, Sigmund.

In 1933, having begun a practice and a family of his own, Erik, with his wife, Joan, and their sons, fled rising anti-Semitism in Vienna for Copenhagen and then Boston. Erik taught at Harvard and Yale before heading west to study Oglala Sioux parenting on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota and later take a job at Berkeley. Working among the Sioux, Erik was especially struck by the fluid concepts of self and group that united their community across generations, and he began to question Freud's emphasis on Oedipal conflict. On September 26, 1939, Erik became a U.S. citizen—Freud had died just three days before—and turned his naturalization into a name-giving ceremony for himself: Erik Erik's son. He named himself his own father, though he often said that his eldest son had come up with the name, which the rest of the family also, of course, adopted.

In 1942, Erikson published an article arguing that Adolf Hitler had tapped into a strain of adolescent rage latent in German culture. Erikson proposed countering Nazism by promoting stable paternal authority, and his idea informed the Allied approach to psychological warfare and made him an increasingly public figure.

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Two years later, Joan Erikson, under heavy sedation, delivered their fourth child, a boy named Neil who was severely disabled with Down syndrome. While Joan was still unconscious, the doctors told Erikson that his newborn son would live two years at most and should be institutionalized immediately rather than integrated into the family.

Normally Joan took charge of family decisions. Without her, Erikson called his close friend Margaret Mead, famous for her study of the comparatively conflict-free patterns of family life in Samoa. Mead agreed with the doctors. Erik told his children that the baby had died, hoping to protect them. Joan was haunted by the decision made on her behalf but accepted it, recognizing that Neil's disability would have complicated her husband's image as the head of a thriving family.

Seeing patients in California after World War II, Erik Erikson began to feel an unexpected kinship with veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. He started to think that he shared with them a common experience: the loss of one sense of self and the search for another, what he would later call an identity crisis. In 1950, Erikson resigned from the University of California after refusing to take a Cold War loyalty oath. He accepted a job at the Austen Riggs hospital in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and moved his family across the country, leaving behind Neil, who lived to be twenty-one.²

Norman Rockwell and his family arrived in Stockbridge at the end of 1953, when Norman was in the middle of an identity crisis of his own. Rockwell thought of himself as a kind of twentieth-century Charles Dickens, his hero.³ Like Dickens, Rockwell worked on newsprint. Between 1916 and 1963, he created more than three hundred *Saturday Evening Post* covers, included some that featured his sons as models. His paintings arrived in millions of homes by

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mail, postcards from a quainter neighborhood in a slightly better town, where Sunday mornings, sick days, diving boards, ice cream, haircuts, and bedtime were all just slightly more poignant. As an artist, Rockwell's trick was to saturate the mundane with color and meaning, finding enchantment in even the quietest corners of everyday experience, but he struggled to do the same in real life, with his real family, just like everyone else.

The Rockwells—Norman, his second wife, Mary, and their three college-age sons—had moved to Stockbridge to be closer to the doctors at Austen Riggs. Mary was already getting treatment at Riggs for alcoholism and depression, and she would live there for a time as an inpatient, as would their middle son, Tom, who dropped out of Princeton with overwhelming anxiety. Intrigued, Norman entered analysis, too, with Erikson, who had recently published his first book. Rockwell thought that a fellow artist might be especially sympathetic to his problems.

Though he occasionally used his sons as models, Rockwell's family life wasn't anything like the domestic scenes he painted. He and Erikson started meeting twice a week, and the agenda was often the same: Norman complaining that Mary was drunk and overcritical and dragging him down. Rockwell's first wife, Irene, had killed herself after divorcing him in 1930 for "mental cruelty"—she claimed that he hardly looked at her during their marriage, preferring the company of his male friends and models. Now Norman feared that he would never be free of Mary and she would never get better. To pay for her intensive treatment, he had started taking jobs that he felt were beneath him, painting cherubic faces to sell cornflakes. By the summer of 1954, family stress had pushed Rockwell to the brink of a breakdown.

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Miserable at home, Norman was thrilled when his son Tom's prospective father-in-law, the owner of an advertising business, invited him on a late-summer trip to Europe. Norman very much wanted to go—alone. Yet Mary also thought a few weeks in Europe would be just the thing. Rockwell complained to Erikson, who intervened with Mary's doctor on Norman's behalf, to stop her from traveling.

"Norman Rockwell is now rather depressed," Erikson wrote to Mary's doctor, "to the point of suicidal ideas. . . . He desperately needs a vacation *without Mary*." The timing wasn't ideal, Erikson conceded, anticipating the objections of Mary's doctor. By the start of the trip, the three Rockwell boys would be back at school, and Mary would be left alone. "Yet this period will be a trying one for Norman, too," explained Erikson, "and I am now definitely worried about him."⁴

For all his tender attention to life's sweet and vulnerable moments, Norman Rockwell didn't really paint families, at least not families in the "Norman Rockwell" sense. At most, nine of his three-hundred-plus *Saturday Evening Post* covers depict father, mother, and children together. It would have been one more, but Rockwell altered the picture he was working on during that tense summer of European-itinerary hostilities: *Breaking Home Ties*.

The painting took the title of a famous one from 1890, showing a son bidding goodbye to his family and their hardscrabble farm, presumably on his way to the city or points west, where the money would be better. In Rockwell's update, a father and son sit on the running board of a dusty truck, waiting for a train. The son, upright and alert in a bright suit and tie, peers expectantly out of the frame to the viewer's left, toward college, a suitcase and a companionable

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dog at his feet, saying goodbye. The father—“probably the most sad-looking man to appear” in Rockwell’s work, according to Deborah Solomon—slumps in the opposite direction, shoulders hunched inside a faded denim work shirt, cigarette dangling from his closed mouth, eyes down, hat in hands, impatient but going nowhere.⁵ The diverging futures of father and son pull the painting into tension that will never be resolved. Originally Rockwell had included a third figure, too, a woman, a wife and mother. But that summer, as he was trying to leave Mary and Stockbridge behind, he painted her out, and filled the space with a large red flag, meaning stop the train, so we can get on.⁶

In the end, neither Norman nor Mary went to Europe. Both stayed home and suffered their own ailments under the care of their own doctors. *Breaking Home Ties* was published on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* at the end of September, which was to have been the month of the trip. The father in the painting isn’t glum because he’s losing his son to a world he doesn’t understand or appreciate or belong to. Instead, he’s jealous. He wants to break home ties, too, and go away with his son—or, more specifically, with his son’s father-in-law-to-be.

Erik Erikson believed that people tried to resolve their identity crises in the simplest possible way. Norman Rockwell once told his son Tom that he’d kill himself if not for them, his boys—and that he was mad at Erikson for taking his gun away and refusing to give it back. The father responsible for some of the most iconic modern images of domestic life was looking for a way out of his own. For help, he turned to the father whose secret family crises would lead him to become a world-famous authority on identity. “You know,” Erik Erikson wrote to Norman Rockwell, “I think your family has logged more hours of psychiatric care than any other family in America.”⁷

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* * *

The history of fatherhood is a succession of identity crises spanning thousands of years. Across the centuries, in times of historic transformation, upheaval, and revolution, our foundational stories about men, love, and power have collapsed, leaving us searching for new stories to take their place and quiet the forces that shook the old ones.

I use the word “story” in a specific sense. By any measure, fatherhood is one of the most meaningful concepts in human culture, which anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined as the stories we tell ourselves to understand ourselves.⁸ Fatherhood is a story of the kind Geertz had in mind: a story of who we are and where we come from, who we’re related to and different from, what we’re capable of and limited by, what we have and what we lack—a story about inheritance and legacy in all its forms. And everyone has at least one fatherhood story of their own.

Yet through the middle of this common human experience of fathers runs a curious divide. Our private, individual stories about fathers tend to be full of complication and conflict, sometimes even more than we realize. In contrast, our public, shared stories tend to be fantasies, melodramas, and parodies populated by heroes, villains, clowns, and ghosts. This “Rockwell paradox” has a cost: distorted, misleading, unattainable ideas of what it means to be a man, a father, a family.

Norman Rockwell and Erik Erikson hid their private conflicts behind public images of fatherhood and family that they could never live up to. Today Rockwell’s work in particular is often seen as simplistic, unrealistic, and unrepresentative, even as it continues to shape the sentimental architecture of domestic life. Yet

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from another angle, a Norman Rockwell father is also something else, something more like the father in *Breaking Home Ties*, like Rockwell himself, and like Erikson too: a conflicted figure whose real nature has seldom been fully visible. And in that way, he is a fitting image of the history of fatherhood after all. We need better shared stories about fatherhood—about what it means and why it matters—even when better means worse. Not because fatherhood must be salvaged or redeemed or restored one more time, but because without a deeper and more humane understanding of the role of men in the world we will continue to struggle to see and know ourselves, one another, and the richest parts of our lives. The goal of this book is to find just that.

The trouble, intriguingly, is that though fatherhood is often used as a metaphor for origins and history, it has none of its own.

Most every living thing has parents, but only a small minority of animals exhibit any degree of paternal care. Almost none approach the amount of male investment in children that characterizes human societies, and some of our closest primate relatives appear to be especially unlike us in this regard.

Precisely where and when this aspect of human uniqueness took shape will probably never be known. Men writing about men have dominated the field of history from its beginnings thousands of years ago all the way to the present. A 2016 study found that more than 75 percent of popular history books were written by men, while more than 70 percent of historical biographies were written about men.⁹ Nevertheless, or more likely for that reason, the history of men as men—exploring the origins and transformation of the very ideas of men, and manhood, and masculinity—has

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hardly been written. Feminist theorists and historians pointed in that direction in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly after Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book, *The Second Sex*, which traced the "man-made" inventions of womanhood and motherhood. Yet even as extraordinary books about motherhood have multiplied, fatherhood has been comparatively overlooked.¹⁰ We remain a mystery to ourselves, without even realizing it.

Recently a team of scholars proposed that around 5 million years ago, the drying of the African savanna caused food scarcities that prompted male hominins to begin contributing to the care of children in exchange for the benefits that came with group membership, including access to mates.¹¹ As plausible as this story sounds, there is no concrete evidence to support it. The conclusion was based on computer simulations of game theory that presumed male hominins had acted rationally, and of course no team of scholars is needed to find abundant evidence of men acting irrationally.

For much of the history of our species, there was likely no idea of conception that could have supported what we now think of as "biological fatherhood"—the idea that a single act of sex could lead to a pregnancy that only became unmistakably evident months later. In fact, only in the 1980s, with the development of gene-based testing, did it become possible to establish paternity with absolute certainty.

Formal definitions are not much help in tracing fatherhood's historical lineage. Dictionaries say that fatherhood is "the state of being a father." Etymologies agree that "father" and its close cousins, common in languages across Eurasia, derive from a "nursery word," such as "fa," "pa," and "da." Theories of infant language hold that hard consonant sounds are generally easier to form than "ma," and tend to become attached to the first thing the infant

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recognizes outside of itself, which is not how babies are thought to see their mothers. Evolutionary biologists have suggested that parents care for children in part because children ask them to, activating by their murmurs and cries parts of the parent brain that may have first evolved in male fish.¹² But it was men who made this infantile sound into a metaphor for history itself, who made it mean founder, inventor, creator, God. The questions are why, how, and at what cost.

This book tells the story of the transformation of fatherhood, from its earliest traceable beginnings in the Bronze Age to what has been alternately hailed and decried as its end today. I focus on Western culture because, in that time, the West has been the world's dominant patriarchal tradition, and I focus more specifically on the chief beneficiaries of that tradition: men who, as a result of the histories of power and care they helped to shape, could now be described—though not simply or without ambivalence—as white dads.

The fathers in this book are well known, but less so as fathers. Their names are already familiar: Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Henry VIII, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and Bob Dylan. To use a similarly fraught and fragile image, these men make up a kind of Mount Rushmore of two thousand years of Western culture. It would be hard to overstate the importance of their ideas of how the world works, how it should be governed, what it means to live a good life, and what it means to be a man. Yet these ideas, often presented as simply ideas, were in fact deeply connected to intimate experiences of and anxious questions about manhood and fatherhood. By tracing out these less familiar connections, I show how, in moments of historical crisis

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and transformation that unsettled the existing grounds of masculine power, authority, and identity, the men in this book developed new ideas and models of fatherhood that helped to sustain “the power of the fathers,” as Adrienne Rich defined patriarchy, across generations.¹³

Fatherhood’s successive crises of identity have been sparked in two ways: by larger upheavals in the wider world, and by focused challenges to the existing terms and models of masculine power and authority. The corruption of Athenian democracy. The fall of Rome and the rise of Christianity. The Protestant Reformation and the European encounter with “the new world.” The overthrow of monarchy and the invention of the nation-state. The Industrial Revolution and the spread of capitalism. The discovery of natural selection. Decades of world war. The social revolutions of the 1960s. Across profound historical transformations, men have held on to disproportionate power and authority in part by developing new ideas of fatherhood.

Fatherhood has proven vulnerable to recurrent crises for at least two reasons.

First, fatherhood has historically been conceived as a form of “power over others,” as Adrienne Rich put it, thereby inviting dissent, challenge, and outright revolt.¹⁴ In the Western tradition, male power and authority has taken shape not only around shifting concepts of sex, gender, and class difference, as might be expected, but also and especially around race and slavery. As two forms of blood logic—paternity and race—were spliced together, racism and patriarchy fused into a single system of social power through which true fatherhood was cast as white, and white fathers claimed

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a trinity of privileges: race, gender, and class, all at once. These were the terms on which white fathers claimed and exercised power and authority over others, by which they defined and enforced their social standing. Yet this power has never gone unchallenged, and it has always been more tenuous than advertised.

The second reason that fatherhood has proven so vulnerable to crisis is that its claims to hierarchal power and authority are rooted in extraordinary, even impossible promises—and this is one place that love enters the picture. As anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy points out, there is more variation within practices of human fatherhood than there is among the more than three hundred other primate species combined.¹⁵ Yet these variations are anchored in an underlying set of expectations widely shared across societies and cultures: protecting and providing, now for status as much as for survival.

Fathers have often likened themselves to gods, begetting, bestowing, smiting, and saving at will. But for mortals, such expectations can only end in failure and frustration. Protection will fall short. Provision will run out. At some point someone is going to die, and there's nothing any man can do about it. A key theme across the history of fatherhood is that men have defined their own obligations and responsibilities in terms that cannot be sustained—perhaps in order to secure extraordinary privileges by elevating themselves above women, whose power to create and sustain life was vividly clear.¹⁶

The story of fatherhood is not just about when, where, and why men started to treat children as their own—how fathers embodied arguably the greatest human value, caring for those who could not survive without. But nor is it merely the story of patriarchy—arguably the oldest and most widespread form of social hierarchy.

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Instead, it is the story of how these strands of history, care and dominance, love and power, became so entangled that they are often indistinguishable.

Most accounts of the origins of human fatherhood begin with the obvious: walking. Our last tree-dwelling ancestor came down to the ground roughly 5 million years ago. Over the next several million years, the human body changed to favor life on the earth, narrowing the pelvis, and stacking the ankles, knees, hips, spine, and head directly above the feet, which became arched, with fixed rather than opposable toes. These changes put an upper limit on fetal development: babies could only get so big if they and their mothers were to survive birth. At least since *Homo erectus*, who emerged roughly 2 million years ago, human infants have been born into a uniquely long period of helplessness—one only extended by the significantly larger brain sizes of *Homo sapiens*, who emerged roughly three hundred thousand years ago and became the sole surviving human species within the last fifty thousand years.

The disproportionate size of human brains and pelvises has posed two critical challenges to human survival and flourishing. First, extraordinary physical danger for mothers. Even today, giving birth remains statistically the most acutely deadly thing that any human adult will ever do. No species risks so much in labor.¹⁷ Second, and relatedly, human infants, born comparatively young and small, require extraordinary amounts of care, often well beyond what their mothers are immediately capable of providing alone.

There is no obvious reason why this necessary care should have been provided by men—especially by just one “father.” Particularly in

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the absence of a nuanced understanding of reproduction, other men and women, especially older women past childbearing age, might have stepped in to provide “alloparental care,” and in many cases they surely did.¹⁸ This is sometimes called the grandmother hypothesis, which describes menopause as an evolutionary adaptation allowing older women to make crucial contributions to the care of children.¹⁹

One notable pressure point for nomadic early humans would have been “infant carrying.” *Homo erectus* roamed long distances, hunted with tools, made and maintained fires. Yet their upright posture, added to the loss of body hair and gripping toes, made it more difficult for children to help out by hanging on as their parents moved about. Some scholars have proposed that infant carrying, which among humans would have been necessary for up to five years, may have helped to recruit men for paternal care, as has been observed in other species of primates especially.²⁰

The fossil record can fill in some of the picture. It seems likely that the relatively shorter length of human forearms compared to those of other great apes, the elbow dividing the arm effectively in half, is an adaptation to the problem of infant carrying. This proportion is generally equal in male and female bodies, though women’s elbows tend to fall nearer to the upper ridge of their hip bones, leverage at the point where it is most convenient to carry and feed a baby.

Another piece of evidence, the Laetoli footprints, dates from nearly 4 million years ago, perhaps 1 million years before the use of stone tools. Discovered in present-day Tanzania in 1976, the prints show a group of three early humans, walking upright, equipped with chimpanzee-sized brains, moving through fresh volcanic ash. Interpretations of the tracks have suggested that one of the three members of this party, the smallest of the group, was carrying a weight on the left side of the body.

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The symbolic record, much shorter than the fossil record, seems to confirm the importance of prehistoric mothers. All known evidence of human meaning making is less than one hundred thousand years old, and interpretations of this evidence are necessarily speculative. Even so, among the most suggestive prehistoric artifacts are carvings known collectively as “Venus figurines.” Found across Eurasia, these include perhaps the earliest likenesses of human form: relatively small statues, generally under six inches tall and rendered from stone, ivory, wood, and ceramics, whose round breasts and bellies seem to represent female reproductive power.

One or two of the figurines may be hundreds of thousands of years old—as old as *Homo sapiens* herself—but the oldest verified findings cluster in a later period, between fifty and ten thousand years ago. Many of the sculptures are headless, faceless, and lack defined feet, characteristics that have led some scholars to speculate that they were made by women looking down at their own bodies. Possibly their features signify pregnancy and fertility—possibly they signify worship. The Venus figurines are perhaps the most important material evidence in support of claims for prehistoric matriarchies—the contention that early societies worshiped female creator gods and venerated women, whose role in group survival was unmistakable.

Compared to such “maternal” artifacts, imagery that could be described as paternal is strikingly rare. The cave paintings at Lascaux, dating from around 17,000 BCE, include an ithyphallic figure, to use the technical term, combing a bird’s head, a human body, and a large, unbirdlike erection. But this is something of an outlier. Other phallic images date from around twelve thousand years ago, and were found at Göbekli Tepe, one of the oldest known

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temple sites, in present-day Turkey. One historian has claimed that the “cult of the phallus” didn’t take shape until around 8000 BCE, possibly marking a new understanding of paternity.²¹ Then again, it’s not obvious what a visual representation of fatherhood would look like, or what its absence might signify. Freud, for one, proposed that the apparent lack of understanding of paternity in prehistoric cultures may have been the result of self-interest rather than simple ignorance, allowing men to claim that children were put into women by ancestral spirits, thereby extending the line of the clan back into the imagined past, where it could become heroic.²²

Then there is a shift. As soon as there is writing, there is fatherhood. Many of the oldest known written texts, dating from roughly five to six thousand years ago, dedicate themselves to specifying in painstaking detail the privileges and obligations of fathers.

This is the aim of a text known as *The Instructions of Shuruppag*, cuneiform inscriptions on clay tablets made nearly five thousand years ago in Sumer. The instructions themselves are prefaced by an origin story that dates them to a much earlier time (“those far remote days . . . those far remote years” before a great flood swept almost everything away) and presents them as advice from a father to his son.²³ The father, the instructor, is Shuruppag. Identified as the son of Ubara-Tutu, Shuruppag has no clear historical counterpart. The known Shuruppag was a place rather than a person: a large city-state on the Euphrates, at the southern edge of present-day Iraq. Shuruppag’s son, the instructed, is Ziusudra, meaning “the one who survives”—thanks, by implication, to the instructions of his father. Ziusudra shows up in *Gilgamesh* as the

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wise boatbuilding prince Utnapishtim, and as Noah in the Old Testament version of the same story.

The text belongs to a genre that scholars of the ancient world call “wisdom literature”—not law, exactly, but exerting a similar pressure. Father and son stand in for ruler and ruled, but anxiously. From the outset, Shuruppag knows he is swimming upstream. “My son,” he begins, “let me give you instructions: you should pay attention! Ziusudra, let me speak a word to you: you should pay attention! Do not neglect my instructions! Do not transgress the words I speak! The instructions of an old man are precious: you should comply with them!”

His subjects are the eternal ones: where to live, who to marry, how to maintain a household, what to do about work, sex, drinking, friends, and family. But property comes first: “You should not locate a field on a road. . . . You should not make a well in your field: people will cause damage on it for you. You should not place your house next to a public square: there is always a crowd there.” Personal conduct goes hand in hand with the management of resources. “My son, you should not commit robbery . . . you should not sit alone in a chamber with a married woman . . . you should not have sex with your slave girl . . . you should not curse strongly . . . you should not use violence.”

Twice more Shuruppag pleads for his son’s attention and obedience, before turning to his final set of instructions: how to manage a happy household. “The elder brother is indeed like a father; the elder sister is indeed like a mother. . . . The mother, like Utu, gives birth to the man; the father, like a god, makes him bright. The father is like a god: his words are reliable. The instructions of the father should be complied with,” Shuruppag insists one more time. The books that make up the Old Testament, said to have been first

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recorded between one and two thousand years later, resolve all of Shuruppag's anxiety with a single phrase: "Noah did everything just as God commanded him."

Between *The Instructions of Shuruppag* and the Ten Commandments sit the oldest surviving bodies of law. The Code of Hammurabi is a set of 282 dictates—crimes paired with punishments, written in four thousand impossibly minute lines of Old Akkadian cuneiform—that were carved into a strikingly phallic seven-foot-tall pillar of black basalt in Sumer around 1750 BCE.

The intricacy of the text, laid out in a format already antiquated when it was carved, possibly to suggest continuity with the past, helps to create its meaning. Hammurabi was a Babylonian king, sixth in his line, who greatly expanded his realm through ambitious conquests along the Tigris and Euphrates. By the time of his reign, there was probably a basic Babylonian legal tradition already in place. What his code recorded were the parts of it that he wanted to emphasize, perhaps especially in the newly conquered areas.²⁴

Hammurabi claimed to have transmitted his laws to his subjects directly from the Babylonian god of justice. The substance of the code, like its form, was made for travel. First, the text explains its intent and authority. Hammurabi describes himself as "a father to his people" who aims to "enlighten the land, to further the well-being of mankind," and especially to bring about "the well-being of the oppressed."²⁵ Here fatherhood means law, it means justice, it means welfare, it means care.

Second, the code is formulaic and standardized, making no allowance for local conditions or customs. It focuses not on compensation for victims but on prescribed punishments for offenders, apportioned on the Hammurabic principle—later a biblical one—of "an eye for an eye." The code's promises of justice and welfare