

WRITINGS

RUTH

The book of Ruth doesn't contain any specific information regarding the subject of matrilineal versus patrilineal descent, but it is worth discussing because of the absurd myth that has arisen around her as the first "convert." We must be clear that there was no such thing as a conversion in biblical times. The only ritual that was required for membership into the Israelite tribe was circumcision for males. Women weren't anything, that is they had no independent identity apart from their father or husband. The marriage of Ruth to Boaz was merely a Levirate marriage. This is the biblical commandment that if a man dies childless, as did Ruth's first Israelite husband, then his brother or closest male relative is suppose to marry his wife or wives in order to impregnate her and symbolically pass on his lineage. However, this obligation, according to Rabbinic "law", only applies to the Jewish wives of paternal brothers. So, this obligation does not apply to a situation where a Jewish man has "married" a non-Jewish woman because, according to Rabbinic "law," no marriage has taken place. Also, the brothers must have the same father, so it would not apply to maternal half-brothers. The children belonged to the male line. This poses many obstacles to the theory that Ruth was a "convert." The assertion is that she "converted" when she said to her mother-in-law, Naomi, after her first husband dies, "For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me." (Ruth 1:16). So, if this is when she converted, then she wasn't Jewish during her marriage to Mahlon and the obligation of levirate marriage doesn't apply to her. But clearly it does, because when she goes to Israel with Naomi, Boaz makes this claim. So, Rabbinic "law" has changed what Biblical law was. Many non-Israelite women married Israelite men and bore them children before Ruth, which you can find enumerated on the "Torah" page of this web site. Ruth's legend is the figment of someone's imagination.

ESTHER

The book of Esther, just as in Ruth, contains no specific information on our topic, but it is an example of an intermarriage between a Jewish woman and non-Jewish male. Esther helped her people and succeeded in elevating her uncle to a position of power, however, she was most certainly the possession of her non-Jewish husband. She spoke and moved as he dictated. There is no mention of any children produced by her union with King Ahasuerus. However, there is no question that whatever children might have been produced were raised exactly as this absolute monarch wished. The social structure was such that children were a possession.

EZRA

The book of Ezra recounts the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple after their Babylonian exile, the story of which ended the books of the Prophets. Much of the text is devoted to listing the names and numbers of the people returning. Only the male names are listed. Some issues of identity come up, which are similar to the issues in modern Israel. Chapter 2:59-63 reads as follows:

“The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer- they were unable to tell whether their father’s house and descent were Israelite: the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda-652. Of the sons of the priests, the sons of Habaiiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai who had married a daughter of Barzillai and had taken his name-these searched for their genealogical records, but they could not be found, so they were disqualified for the priesthood. The Tirshatha ordered them not to eat of the most holy things until a priest with Urim and Thummim should appear.”

There were some in the group who couldn’t prove their Jewishness (sound familiar) and were then separated out from the group. Please note that it says that they had to prove that their “father’s house and descent were Israelite.” Not their mother’s. In spite of this, we soon run into some problems which initially appear to derail our defense of patrilineal descent. Ezra takes note of the fact that many of the returning Israelites have brought with them wives from the countries they had been exiled in and had had children with them. This disturbs Ezra because it violates the commandment given by God to the Israelites in Deuteronomy not to intermarry. The commandment applied to both the men and women, as spelled out. But only the males returned to Israel. Any Jewish women who had been given in marriage to men in the countries they were exiled to were the possessions of their husbands and could not have been brought back to Israel. The Israelites soon find a solution in Chapter 10:2-4:

“Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel of the family of Elam spoke up and said to Ezra, ‘We have trespassed against our God by bringing into our homes foreign women from the peoples of the land; but there is still hope for Israel despite this. Now then, let us make a covenant with our God to expel all these women and those who have been born to them, in accordance with the bidding of the Lord and of all who are concerned over the commandment of our God, and let the Teaching be obeyed. Take action, for the responsibility is yours and we are with you. Act with resolve!’”

Easy! They’ll just get rid of ‘em. As the story is told, they do in fact do this. However, God had commanded them in Ezekiel 47:21-23 [see the “Prophets” page under the title “Jeremiah & Ezekiel” for the full citation] to bring back with them any foreigners who had settled with them and their children upon their return to Israel. This is contained in Ezekiel’s prophesy and the Israelites clearly violated this commandment when they committed such a despicable act as abandoning their own children. We all know that the rebuilt Temple was short-lived and the Israelites never knew peace again. We can all rest easy with the knowledge that the doom that befell them was certainly in part due to the commission of such an atrocity, in direct violation of God’s com-

mandment.

In summary, the book of Ezra teaches that during the first return from the Babylonian exile, BOTH parents had to be Jewish in order for one to be accepted in the tribe. This is demonstrated in the example in Chapter 2:59-63, where returning Israelites had to show proof of their fathers genealogy and later in Chapter 10:2-4, where we see children rejected for not having Israelite mothers. All of the genealogical lists that are given do not mention any Israelite women returning, only men. Certainly there is no case of any person with a Jewish mother and non-Jewish father, let alone one who was accepted in the tribe.

NEHEMIAH

The book of Nehemiah contains an example of both male and female intermarriage. A Jewish woman has married one of the Persian guards who's duty it was to watch over the Jews named Tobiah. This is recounted in chapter 6:17-19:

“Also in those days, the nobles of Judah kept up a brisk correspondence with Tobiah, and Tobiah with them. Many in Judah were his confederates, for he was a son-in-law of Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berechiah [Jews]. They would also speak well of him to me, and would divulge my affairs to him. Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.”

Later, Nehemiah becomes enraged when Tobiah has been allowed to live in the Temple. Chapter 13:4-9 reads:

“Earlier, the priest Eliashab, a relative of Tobiah, who had been appointed over the rooms in the House of our God, had assigned to him a large room where they used to store the meal offering, the frankincense, the equipment, the tithes of grain, wine and oil, the dues of the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, and the gifts for the priests. During all this time, I was not in Jerusalem, for the 32nd year of King Artaxerxes of Babylon, I went to the king and only after a while did I ask leave of the king. When I arrived in Jerusalem, I learned of the outrage perpetrated by Eliashab on behalf of Tobiah in assigning him a room in the courts of the House of God. I was greatly displeased, and had all the household gear of Tobiah thrown out of the room; I gave orders to purify the rooms, and had the equipment of the House of God and the meal offerings and the frankincense put back.”

The fact that this Tobiah had married a Jewess did not make him acceptable to the Jews. Nehemiah is still suspicious of him. When it says that Nehemiah had all his “household gear” thrown out of the Temple, the Hebrew used is merely the “house of Tobiah,” (beit-tobiah) which would include his wife, children, slaves and any

other entourage.

The closing lines of Nehemiah tell of the marriages of Jewish men to non-Jewish women with equal disdain. Chapter 13:23-28 reads:

“Also at that time, I saw that Jews had married Ashdodite, Ammonite, and Moabite women; a good number of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and the language of those various peoples, and did not know how to speak Judean. I censured them, cursed them, flogged them, tore out their hair, and adjured them by God, saying, ‘You shall not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take any of their daughters for your sons or yourselves. It was just in such things that King Solomon of Israel sinned! Among the many nations there was not a king like him, and so well loved was he by his God that God made him king of all Israel, yet foreign wives caused even him to sin. How, then, can we acquiesce in your doing this great wrong, breaking faith with our God by marrying foreign women?’ One of the sons of Joiada son of the high priest Eliashab was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite [another Persian guard appointed to watch over the Jews]; I drove him away from me.”

So, here we see that it was equally abhorrent for Jewish men and women to intermarry.

1&2 CHRONICLES

The books of Chronicles are a retelling of the stories of David and Solomon that were given in 1 & 2 Kings. There are a few minor details that are changed, but nothing significant. There are a few examples of miscegenation in Chronicles. The first comes in 1 Chronicles, chapter 2:34, which appears during a genealogical listing:

“Sheshan had no sons, only daughters; Sheshan had an Egyptian slave, whose name was Jarha. So Sheshan gave his daughter in marriage to Jarha his slave; and she bore him Attai.”

The genealogical listing then continues to insinuate that these children of his daughter and the Egyptian slave are considered part of his (Jewish) tribe. This inclusion has to be viewed through the prism of the contemporary social structure. Firstly, and most importantly, Egyptians are allowed to be included as part of the Israelite tribe in the third generation, as stated in Deuteronomy, chapter 7, so these children were acceptable. Secondly, we have to understand the economic structure, of which slaves were an important part. Slaves were a

possession and financial asset, and any children of these slaves were the possession of the slave's master.

Later in the genealogical listings comes an example of a Jewish man having included his child with a non-Jewish woman as part of his tribe. This appears in chapter 7:14:

“The sons of Manasseh: Asriel, whom his Aramean concubine bore; she bore Machir the father of Gilead.”

King Hiram of Tyre reappears in 2 Chronicles. His name has changed slightly, to Hiram, and another character is introduced, also named Hiram. Chapter 2:10-13 reads:

“Hiram, king of Tyre, sent Solomon this written message in reply, ‘ Because the Lord loved his people, He made you king over them.’ Hiram continued, ‘ Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, who made the heavens and the earth, who gave King David a wise son, endowed with intelligence and understanding, to build a House for the Lord and a royal palace for himself. Now I am sending you a skillful and intelligent man, my master Hiram, the son of a Danite woman, his father a Tyrian.”

I found this passage to be confusing at first. When they refer to the king of Tyre as Hiram I just figured it was a scribal error or discrepancy. But I didn't understand who they were talking about with this second Hiram. I initially thought it was the same person, that King Hiram or Hiram was going himself to help build the Temple. But after reading Josephus it became clear to me that it is a separate person. This craftsman is described as having a mother from the tribe of Dan, whereas in the book of Kings, King Hiram is described as having a mother of the tribe of Naphtali. Josephus, interestingly, describes this Hiram, the craftsman, as having a Danite mother and an Israelite father, whereas in Chronicles his father is Tyrian. We don't know who is right, but we have to accept the version in Chronicles because that has been the version accepted into the canon. So this Hiram, the craftsman, is another example of a half-Jew on the mother's side who belongs to his father's tribe, the Tyrians.

This concludes our analysis of the Hebrew sacred writings. We have found dozens of examples of Jewish men producing children with non-Jewish women and having them included in the Israelite tribe. There are only two examples of a child produced by a Jewish woman and a non-Jewish man arguably being included in the Israelite tribe. These come in Leviticus, chapter 7 and 1 Chronicles, chapter 2, both of whom had Egyptian fathers. I will repeat here that Egyptians are allowed to assimilate into the Israelite tribe and participate fully in religious rituals in the third generation. The most logical conclusion that can be derived from this information is that it was the father that determined one's membership in the Israelite tribe, quite the opposite of the contemporary Orthodox and Conservative positions. The most generous argument that could be given to matrilineal descent is that, because there are two examples of a matrilineal Jew being accepted, the biblical law was exactly what the Reform position is. That is bilineal, if you are living amongst Jews. Either way, there is no excuse for the current stance among the Orthodox, Conservative and Israel and it must change immediately. The Reform isn't off the hook either, as it's practice of “letting each synagogue decide for themselves” is in some ways more absurd than the others. It's over, guys!