

Jewish Identity Part 2: Descent Through The Father

According to the Talmudic law, Jewishness is by the mother, or conversion. However the Old Testament seems to place Jewish identity consistently on a basis of descent through the father. What authority, Talmudic, Biblical, or otherwise, can answer the question of whether or not someone is a Jew in the flesh?

By both Bible, and the Talmud, Jewish DNA is neither necessary nor sufficient to make a Jew. A pure Jewish bloodline, if such a thing existed, would be insufficient to make an uncircumcised boy Jewish. A convert, meanwhile, is fully Jewish. So Jewishness in the “flesh” does not mean race or blood so much as peoplehood.

Now, if Jewishness depends on who your mom is, then the matriarchs must be the source of Jewishness of the first Jews. But Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were made the fathers of the Jewish people by the decision of God. The covenant (the mark of which was circumcision,) begins with these patriarchs through personal contact with God. Moreover God promises to bless *Abraham's* descendants through Isaac, not Sarah's descendants, and *not through a daughter*, proving that the Jewish line is through the man. (Genesis 17:19,21 and Genesis 21:12) Hashem often brings up the covenant He made with the patriarchs because He chose them and chose their seed through them. (Deuteronomy 4:37, Deuteronomy 10:15, Isaiah 51:1,2, Zechariah 13:8,9) If Jewish matriarchs made Jacob's lineage a Jewish one then the birthright would come from Zilpah and Bilhah (and Rachel and Leah) not Jacob.

It is true that Abraham and Isaac did not have only Jewish children, for example Ishmael and Esau. During the time of the Patriarchs, Jewishness was an inheritance of promise, and in Jacob's sons became the inheritance of all his offspring. At Sinai, this covenant was cemented not only by a promise of favor, but by law.

People say that in ancient Middle Eastern societies, and certainly in the New Testament, the most cherished, and sacred relationship, was between father and son, not between spouses, or siblings, or mother and child. (Proverbs 17:6) The heart of Genesis, at least in telling the story of the patriarchs, was how they begat and raised their sons. This was the genesis of and Israel of worship.

The root who sustains Abraham is a male God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is a God who first made Adam, a creature in His own image, as His own glory. Eve was made as the glory of man. (1 Corinthians 11:7) Women possess special talents, being the relational wonders of the world and builders of peace, saviors of homes, full of grace in demonstrating love in action. Many are lovers of Christ who would die for Him, daughters of God who are created for eternal life. Yet it is clear that God is consistent in the Bible in showing that both His theocracy and His desire for His church is a patriarchal one.

By patriarchy I refer to the Biblical endorsement of male leadership in the house, the church and Temple, and in the monarchy. (Numbers 30:2,8,15, Isaiah 3:12) The Temple service in sacrifice and prayer, most prophets, all the writers of scripture, (from what we know), the legal experts who heard cases, all were men not by custom, but because men led in the public sphere by God's desire. And while women can be prophets, evangelize, and teach informally as Priscilla did, God's express will in the New Testament still is that they are not to teach formally or speak in church. (1 Timothy 2:11,12, 1 Corinthians 14:34,35) Patriarchy was the theocratic context for descent by the father.

Crucially, a woman and her children belong to the tribe of the husband and father. (Numbers

36:8,9, and as for the daughter of a Levite, see Leviticus 22:10,12) This is not only custom but also law, as can be seen in a case concerning women's property rights. (Numbers 36 esp. verse 4) Or read the common idiom which says that men at death "rest with their fathers". In the religious realm, the Levitical roles as priests and temple singers was passed through the father. The Messiah who rules over His people, is shown by both lineages of Christ to descend paternally from David.

There are many cases when Hebrew men had foreign wives and produced Jewish children. (1 Chronicles 7:14) Examples include Boaz and Ruth (though she was most likely a convert), Solomon and his foreign wives, the sons of Jacob (at minimum Simeon had a foreign wife), the case of Zilpah and Bilhah, two of Jacob's wives, and Absalom's mother was a foreigner to Israel. Also, all the war brides of Shechem assimilated into Israel, and were named as converts in Genesis 46.

However there are some even more telling cases. For example, the law on taking a war bride allows one to marry a foreign woman with no prerequisite religious education or Hebrew faith. (Deuteronomy 21:13) In that case the children are Jewish because of the father.

Or consider the following story from Leviticus in light of descent.

"Now an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel fought in the camp, and the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name, and cursed. Then they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan." (Leviticus 24:10,11)

These verses compare an Israelite with "an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian." The Israelite woman did not automatically bear a Jewish child, as one might expect if the Talmud accurately reflected the oral law of that time. The woman belonged to the tribe of Dan, but the son seemingly had no tribe.

Deuteronomy 7:3 and 4, make a gendered distinction on the consequences of intermarriage. "Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and He will quickly destroy you." Notice verse 3 says that sons stay, but daughters are given away, and in verse 4 the concern is over sons, perhaps because the daughters have already been lost to the foreigner. The family belongs to the man's family, and the Jewish man's children belong to Israel.

Counter-Argument 1:

Ezra 9 and 10 is a strong counter-argument against what I have been presenting. It tells of Ezra's outrage at intermarriage with Gentile women. It seems that the children were considered to belong to the women, therefore were they pagan or Jewish? But the text never calls the children pagan.

The text says that they had children by these pagan women, so a subtle distinction is made between the Gentile women and the children, though they meet a similar fate. I argue that the children were cast out in order to preserve the nation, as a desperate measure and rough justice. In the same way, the articles of the Temple were sold to save lives; and King David allowed the men of Gibeon to destroy seven descendants of Saul because that was necessary to prevent famine.

Thus the language refrains from calling the children Gentiles, and indeed the boys we assume

were circumcised, so must at least have been converts. But Ezra said, “separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the pagan wives.” (Ezra 10:11) And Shechaniah says, “put away all these wives, and those who have been born to them.” (Ezra 10:3)

Counter Argument 2:

The second objection is that the Talmud is a legitimate authority in Jewish law. Its authority arises from Jesus Himself. He told the crowd in Jerusalem that the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat and that they therefore must be obeyed. (Matthew 23:2,3) This is a provision established in Deuteronomy 17:9-13. Unsaved Jews thus remain under the rule of contemporary judges. These are the Jews “under the law”. (Romans 3:19)

But there are limits to Talmudic authority. Does God seal a ruling in His court when it flies in contradiction to His word? A Talmudic tale pushes this issue, (in the wrong direction), telling about a time when the Sanhedrin was discussing a case and God took up for the argument of a single man in opposition to the entire remainder of the court. God performed the miraculous signs that this sage requested, but lo, the Sanhedrin voted down both the sage, and the speaking God.

How could the Torah’s patrilineage cease when, “till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled”? (Matthew 5:18) I don’t believe descent through the father, (patrilineage), has ceased, but I believe that matrilineal descent is 100% just as legitimate through the word of Christ that the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat, because this expands on the law but does not in of itself contradict it. I believe that either a Jewish mother or father suffices to make a Jewish child, provided the boys are circumcised.

Conclusion:

Israel of scriptures was patriarchal, even in its religious practice. God is a Father, King, Husband, and He created headship through Adam. While it was possible for a woman to be Queen, this was lamented. (Isaiah 3:12) While patriarchy is only circumstantial evidence for patrilineal descent, it is a universal standard in the Bible. Tribal belonging, priesthood, birthright, passed from father to son.

The promise of Abraham was election through patrilineage. A war bride had Jewish children, as did the Gentile mothers of the Patriarchs, and other Gentile mothers in Biblical history. Intermarriage meant the immediate loss of a daughter, but only the potential loss of a son.

The law of patrilineal descent everywhere evident in the Old Testament cannot be annulled by the Talmud. Nonetheless, the Talmud has authority to supplement the law by providing for a matrilineal descent in addition to the Biblical law, provided that circumcision is still performed.