

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

A recent paper (Arthur J. Wolak, "Ezra's Radical Solution to Judean Assimilation", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40:2, 2012, pp. 93-104) showed that the period of Ezra is the matrix out of which emerged the now established rule that Jewishness depends on having a Jewish mother or entering the community by means of conversion.

However, there were signs of a matrilineal policy long before Ezra. Although the criterion of Israelite identity in early times was patrilineal, based on *bet av* (the father's house) (Ex. 1:1, Num. 3:2), that rule was not firm or immutable. The matrilineal definition is foreshadowed when the Bible already speaks of not only a *father's* but a *mother's* house: e.g., in Exodus 1:21. God rewards women's piety by *making them houses*. Similarly, Rachel and Leah *built the house of Israel* (Ruth 4:11). This contrary view, the exact history of which cannot be pinpointed, led to a halakhic *midrash* which sees *your son* (i.e., grandson) in Deuteronomy 7:3-4 as the child of an Israelite mother. The son of a non-Israelite mother is not deemed *your son*. In time, the matrilineal rule was accepted by all halakhic schools of thought (TB *Kid.* 65b/68b; Maimonides, *Hil'khot Issurei Bi'ah* 15:4; *Shulhan Arukh, Even Ha-Ezer* 8:5). "House" is a metaphor for family or progeny, as pointed out by Hizkuni on Exodus 1:21. The compliment the Bible is paying to women is that through them the Jewish heritage is maintained, whereas pagan women (e.g., in Judges 3:5-6) affect it adversely. Especially in time of war, there must have been many widows whose responsibility it was both to look after the children and to keep them within Israelite culture.

Originally, there was a state of fluidity in which patrilineality and matrilineality operated side-by-side until there came a time of crisis in which the people were ready to recognize the negative influence of *foreign wives* and to support Ezra's rulings (10:2-4, 9:11) against *the daughters of strange gods*. The people now wished the *putting away* of gentile wives and their children to be done *according to the law* – perhaps the law about divorce procedures (Deut. 24:1-4) or, perhaps, the law against mixed marriage (Deut. 7:3). In excluding gentile wives and their children, Ezra claimed (9:11) to be following prophetic teaching, although he did not quote a precise source, and the

Sages did not list the negative status of gentile wives among Ezra's or the prophets' enactments.¹

Moore² finds a parallel in Greek history, citing Pericles' (495-429 BCE) restriction of Athenian citizenship to the child of an Athenian man and an Athenian woman. We do not know if Ezra (who lived at about the same time) saw this as a precedent; he presumably knew of it. Zeitlin³ thinks the ruling is a response to Sanballat's action in marrying his daughter to a son of the high priest (Neh. 13:28). According to Zeitlin, Judaism had to block the child of a non-Jewess from being a priest – or a Jew.

Matrilineality took time to become entrenched. By the period of the Mishnah (*Kid.* 3:12), it was clear that a child follows its mother's status. Commenting on the blessing, *The Lord make you as Ephraim and Manasseh* (Gen. 48:20), the Sages declared that the boys' mother, Asenath, was not a gentile but the daughter of Dinah, sister of Joseph.⁴

In the Roman period, there were many conversions and semi-conversions to Judaism and there needed to be a clear definition of Jewish status; otherwise, according to Schiffman, Judaism would have been swamped by the children of gentile Christian mothers.⁵

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NOTES

1. Z. H. Chajes, *The Student's Guide through the Talmud*, trans. & ed. J. Schachter (London: East and West Library, 1952) ch. 10.
2. George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era.*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1927) p. 20.
3. Solomon Zeitlin, "The Offspring of Intermarriage," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 51, part 2 (1960) pp. 135-140.
4. For notes and sources see Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946) p. 38; vol. 5 (1947) pp. 336-7.
5. Lawrence Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1985) ch. 2.