

Chapter Seven

Jewish Genealogy

If the issue of Jewish/gentile identification became confusing, then the history of the changing definitions of what constitutes being “Jewish” adds more confusion to our understanding.

There is an inconsistency in the historical definitions of what defines a person as “Jewish”. This may surprise some people. After all, there does not appear to be any question or controversy over the ethnicity of someone with various other backgrounds in their pedigree such as German, Russian, Chinese, French, etc. We recognize people with mixed parentage to have an ethnic connection to both sides of their genealogical heritage. In fact, most of us have genealogical connections to many ethnic groups. For example, I am German-Jewish and Irish.

The rabbis have developed a specific definition of being “Jewish” that has changed over time. The current traditional view from the Orthodox community views the term “Jewish” as applying only to a person born of a Jewish mother, defined as “matrilineal descent”. This definition, it should be pointed out,

is a flip-flop from their definition during the second temple time which was “patrilineal descent”, meaning the father's ethnicity was determinative. The Orthodox rabbis today require matrilineal descent, circumcised if male, and not a convert to another religion. They also apply the term “Jewish” to the gentile who undergoes the process of ritual conversion previously mentioned. And so go the traditions of men.

What does the Word of God say about this issue?

According to the examples in the Bible, Jewish descent is based on patrilineal descent (through the father). The covenant was originally made with Abraham and promised to extend through Isaac and Jacob. See Genesis 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:1-2,7; 26:4; 28:14. It was the father who determined the religious identity of his family. After all, circumcision was performed on the males, indicating that the covenant identity applied to the physical descendants of the father.

Some other Biblical examples of patrilineal descent:

- Moses took a wife who was a Cushite and his sons were considered Jewish according to 1 Chronicles 23:14,15, “But as for Moses the man of God, his sons were named

among the tribe of Levi. The sons of Moses: Gershom and Eliezer.”

- Joseph had an Egyptian wife and yet his sons Ephraim and Manasseh became two tribes in Israel.
- King David was Jewish and yet his great-grandmother Ruth, a Moabitess, and his great-great-grandmother Rahab were both gentiles.

It seems clear from the Biblical witness that the rabbinic tradition regarding determining Jewishness is another tradition of men that is devoid of support and, in fact, contradicted by the Scriptures.

In the final analysis, I suggest the following¹: Using the framework of the Abrahamic covenant, it is essential to identify both Jews (as Jews) and gentiles (as gentiles) as being together in the covenant of the promise. The enlargement of Israel to accommodate the influx of gentiles was always the plan of God. Israel was to be a light to the nations. Their tent was to be open to seeking gentiles. It is critical to see gentiles being grafted in as a fulfillment of the promise. These seeking gentiles do not “become Jews” through a man-made ritual. They remain as gentiles as evidence of the promise of God. Ephesians 3:6 states” that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and

fellow partakers of his promise in Messiah Yeshua through the Good News”.

I Corinthians 7:19, 20 states: “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is keeping God’s commandments. Let each man stay in that calling in which he was called.” Since “circumcision” was a way of saying “Jewish”, Paul is saying it does not matter if you are a Jew or a gentile. What matters is faith in the Messiah.

Galatians 3:28 states: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua.” This passage does not negate the facts of actual descendancy of being Jewish or being gentile. There remain distinctions between being Jewish and being gentile just as there remain distinctions of being male or female, despite current societal attempts to blur or remove those distinctions. It emphasizes the spiritual equality between Jewish believers and gentile believers. Our identification is “in Messiah” which makes us part of the “one new man”.

-
1. See the excellent book titled, “Fellow Heirs - Jews and Gentiles Together in the Family of God” by Tim Hegg at www.torahresource.com and Amazon.