

THE WORD "GER" IN THE BIBLE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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The evolving permutations of the word "*ger* [resident]" present an opportunity to examine a panoramic history of Israelite/Jewish customs and religious amendments to the original Torah laws over the years. I intend to demonstrate that during the First Temple period *ger* meant only "stranger," and never implied "proselyte." I will show that the Israelites followed patrilineal descent and never developed the concept of conversion for women. As for men, their descent was significant only in the case of joining the Israelites for the Passover sacrifice.

GER IN THE TORAH

The word *ger*, which originally had the meaning of stranger, has been given new meanings and nuances in the last two millennia. What is the meaning of *ger* in the most ancient sources and why did new meanings evolve?¹ The earliest mention of *ger* is found in Genesis. *And He said to Abram, 'Know with certainty that your offspring shall be ger' (Gen. 15:13). And further on: 'I am a ger and toshav [dweller] among you' (23:4).* All sources agree that *ger* in these cases refers to a stranger. Rashi writes, "a stranger and sojourner am I with you."²

Nahmanides³ interprets *ger* as stranger whenever it is followed by *within thy gates*. Ibn-Ezra⁴ almost always interprets *ger* as stranger, except for participating in the Passover sacrifice, where the male stranger must undergo circumcision along with the other males in his family.

It is written in Exodus: *You shall not taunt or oppress a ger for you were gerim in the land of Egypt (Ex. 22:20).* It further states in Leviticus: *When a ger dwells among you in the land, do not taunt him. The ger who dwells with you shall be like a native among you, and you shall love him like yourself, for you were gerim in the land of Egypt (Lev. 19:33).*

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It is also written in Exodus: *When a ger sojourns among you he shall make the Passover offering for God; each of his males shall be circumcised, and then he may draw near to perform it and he shall be like the native of the land* (12:48-49). Many, if not most, of the translations of *ger* in the above verses render it as "proselyte." The *ger* could not be a proselyte until he underwent circumcision. It is only if the *ger* wants to partake in the Passover offering that he has to be circumcised. This is not a conversion in the present concept of religious conversion. To assume even in this case that *ger* refers to a proselyte ignores a host of problems that will be explained later on.

Already in the patriarchal period of Israelite history, we are informed that the sons of Jacob could not give their sister Dinah in marriage to someone uncircumcised:

They said to them, 'We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to a man who is uncircumcised, for that is a disgrace for us. Only on this condition will we acquiesce to you: if you become like us by letting every male among you become circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you, and take your daughters to ourselves: we will dwell with you and become a single people' (Gen. 34:14-16).

The wording is very similar to – almost identical with – the words about circumcision in Exodus. The episode with Dinah occurs a few hundred years before the Torah was given, yet the sons of Jacob stipulate that marriage to a foreigner can take place only if he is circumcised, and furthermore all the males of his family must be circumcised. This is similar to the Passover sacrifice where only if all the males undergo circumcision does the *ger* become 'like the native.' Note that there is no ban on a woman '*ger*' partaking of the Passover offering or marrying an Israelite so long as the males are circumcised. In this period, only the males were required to undergo any change for religious participation or marriage. This will be explained later.

The final example is from Deuteronomy:

'You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God: your heads, your tribes, your elders and your officers, all men of Israel. Your little ones, your wives, and your stranger [gerkha] that is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water (29:9-10).

There is a "vav [and]" preceding the word stranger, third in the list after *little ones* and *wives*. The phrase that follows is a modifier that defines the *ger* as a non-Israelite who lives and works among the Israelites in Israel. In this specific case, they range from hewers of wood to drawers of water, with perhaps many other types of workers in between. They are not visitors nor are they temporary workers from a foreign country. The word *ger* is placed in verse 10, not in verse 9 that includes only Israelite males. The men in verse 9 are obliged to observe all the laws of the Torah, but those in verse 10 are not. If *ger* had the meaning of proselyte he would have been placed in verse 9. This demonstrates that the Torah is defining *ger* to mean a non-Israelite stranger who lives and works in Israel. He gains the privilege of full citizenship if he undergoes circumcision.⁵

PATRILINEAL DESCENT

The concept of conversion does not appear until almost a millennium after the giving of the Torah. Nowhere in the entire Bible is the concept of formal conversion actually mentioned, although it is said in Isaiah 56:3-6 that a foreigner could join the Israelites once he accepted God as the only God. During the period of the First Temple and the first few hundred years of the Second Temple, a person's religious identity appears to be by patrilineal descent. The male *ger* must be circumcised to join the Israelites, but there is no mention that a female need perform any ritual to join the Israelites and accept their God. This would seem to support the idea of patrilineal descent. The monarchy, the leaders, and often the priests were generally lax in enforcing the laws that prohibited the Israelites from intermarrying with seven indigenous nations or with Moabites and Ammonites.

Kings were notorious for making foreign matches forbidden in the Torah, beginning with King David's marriage to Maacah, daughter of King Talmai of Geshur. Thereafter,

King Solomon loved many foreign women in addition to Pharaoh's daughter – Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Phoenician, and Hittite women, from the nations the Lord had said to the Israelites; 'None of you shall join them and none of them shall join you lest they turn your heart away to follow their gods' (II Kg. 11:1).

Solomon's consort Naamah of Ammon was the mother of his heir Rehoboam. Ahab took to wife Jezebel, daughter of Phoenician King Ethbaal.

The Book of Ruth presents the special case of a righteous *gera*, pleading with her Judean mother-in-law: '*Do not urge me to leave you . . . your people shall be my people and your God my God*' (Ruth 1:15). Yet, when she comes to Bethlehem, she is addressed as a Moabite girl (though in rather friendly terms) (2:6), and she introduces herself to Boaz as a "*nokhriah* [foreigner]." Only when Boaz marries her is she fully accepted in the community and glorified as the ancestress of King David.

Another indication that the Judeans followed patrilineal descent is found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah: *The following were those who came up from Tel-Mel They were unable to tell whether their father's house and descent were Israelite* (Ezra 2:59). Note that of these people who could not be counted as Judeans only descent of the father is mentioned, and not of the mother. The term *their father's house*, which is used 14 times in the Bible, refers exclusively to male lineage. This biblical usage indicates that early in the period of Ezra and Nehemiah the Judeans still defined lineage by patrilineal descent.

Other indications of patrilineal descent are the rare records of mixed marriages among the Jewish community at Elephantine, an island in the Nile in the far south of Egypt. There, the Jewish temple official Ananiah married an Egyptian slave named Tamut on July 3, 449 BCE.⁶ Also in this community, a Jewish widow named Miblachiah bat-Machseiah married as her second husband an Egyptian named As-Hor, an architect of the king. In the marriage certificate he is given the Jewish name Nathan, and his sons also bore Jewish names.

In the first match, marriage of a Jewish man and an Egyptian woman, the woman did not change her name. In the second match, marriage of a Jewish woman and an Egyptian man, he took a Jewish name. In a patriarchal society, the non-Jewish man would have to demonstrate some commitment to become part of the Jewish society and, presumably, for his sons to be Jews.

The beginnings of a transition from patrilineal to matrilineal descent is noticeable in an edict in Ezra-Nehemiah. Nehemiah, disturbed by the indiscriminate intermarriage of Judeans with foreign wives that threatening the integrity of returning exiles, writes:

At that time they read to the people from the Book of Moses and it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite might ever enter the congregation of God; since they did not meet Israel with bread and water and hired Balaam against them to curse them When they heard the teaching, they separated all the alien mixture from Israel .

. . .

I saw that Jews had married Ashdodite, Ammonite, and Moabite women. A good number of their children spoke the language of these various peoples, and did not know how to speak Judean. I censured them . . . saying, 'You shall not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take any of their daughters in marriage to their sons or yourselves. It was in just such things that King Solomon of Israel sinned. How then can we acquiesce in your doing this great wrong, breaking faith with our God by marrying foreign women' (Neh. 13:1-3, 23-27).

Ezra wanted to expel *all these women and those who have been born to them* (Ezra 10:3). Ezra and Nehemiah never mention the possibility of conversions by the women, since the notion of such a process had not yet come into existence. Surely, some of those women would have wanted to convert had there been such a possibility. Nor is there mention that only children born of Jewish women are considered Jewish, for they were still following patrilineal descent.

Zeitlin maintains:

The Judeans enacted a law that, if a Judean married a woman of a foreign nation, the offspring of this union would not be considered Judean. This new law was enacted during the time of Sanballat III and Alexander the Great. Before this time it was accepted that Judeans could take foreign wives, notwithstanding the Torah laws.⁷

Once one ponders the concept of conversion the thought arises: Are we considering patrilineal lineage as appears in the Bible, or matrilineal lineage as promulgated in the Talmud and by the Pharisees before that? Historical

records and the Dead Sea scrolls favor the notion that there were no conversions, at least in the modern accepted sense of the word, until perhaps around the fifth century BCE or as late as the third century BCE – the more likely date.

The change from patrilineal to matrilineal lineage is followed within a relatively short time by the concept of proselytes. Is there a direct connection? As noted by Zeitlin, during the latter years of Ezra, the Judeans instituted the law that only matrilineal lineage will be used to determine who is a Judean, and that there were political and religious reasons for the new law. It is first recorded when Sanballat III gave his daughter in marriage to Manasseh, grandson of the High Priest Eliashib, but it may have started a few decades earlier.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah do not complete the story of the Judeans and their non-Jewish wives. There were excuses for delay in sending away their families: *However, many people are involved, and it is the rainy season; it is not possible to remain out in the open, nor is this the work of a day or two, because we have transgressed extensively in this matter* (Ezra 10:13). I suggest that this situation inspired a law permitting conversions for females, and that the foreign women were never expelled. According to this theory, the conversion laws would precede matrilineal descent, while Zeitlin placed the law on matrilineal descent law before the one on conversion.

It would seem that the Diaspora rabbis of the talmudic period, particularly in Babylonia, concerned with the question of "Who is a Jew?" rather than "Who is a Judean?" promulgated the law of matrilineal descent which became part of normative Judaism. A person whose mother was Jewish is Jewish; and a non-Jew can become Jewish by conversion. That this halakha has been challenged in recent times is not a matter within the purview of this article.

These amendments to the laws could only be instituted after the Pharisees won their battle with the Sadducees in declaring that the Judeans believed in a universal God. The Sadducees retained their belief in a tribal God. People who believe in a universal God would be in favor of accepting proselytes.

CONCLUSION

The connotation of *ger* in the Torah is stranger or non-Israelite resident who is obligated to follow many of the Torah laws. The concept of a non-Israelite being able to convert was a post-exilic idea.

The Israelites practiced patrilineal descent at least until the fifth century BCE, and during that period only men had to make some act of commitment, such as circumcision or change of name, to become a citizen.

The institution of matrilineal descent determining the status of the *ger* can be traced to Ezra-Nehemiah but became fully crystallized with the sages in Babylonia when the question shifted from "Who is a Judean" to "Who is a Jew".

NOTES

1. The 60 or so mentions of *ger* fall into six categories: הגר 16 times; גר הייתי six times; גר לגר וליתום five times; גר ותושב five times; גר בשעריך seven times; גר באזורח seven times; גר בארץ מצרים 10 times; גרים בארץ מצרים 5 times. A number of these have multiple references. The CD: The Responsa Project from Bar Ilan University, Version 2.0 enabled me to procure the above information. The relevance of these categories is that *ger* is most often connected to another word. Could *ger* be a convert within your gates but not outside your gates?
2. Rashi on Exodus 23:4.
3. Nahmanides on Exodus 20:4.
4. Ibn Ezra on Exodus 23:2; Leviticus 17:14, 19:33
5. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Central Press, 1967) p.150.
6. It appears that a group of Judean mercenaries were living on Elephantine Island. The Elephantine Papyri were written in Aramaic between 495 and 399 BCE. One of the documents states that they were there for a long time before Cambyses invaded Egypt. It is probable that the Israelites came during the First Temple period. Ananiah, 11 legal documents, 471-410 B.C.E. The Brooklyn Museum.
7. Solomon Zeitlin, *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish State, Vol. 3* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1962) p.323.

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