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The Rabbinic Attitude to Intermarriage as Reflected in Midrashic Literature

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A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Jewish Studies.

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2005

This work has not been previously submitted in whole or in part for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____

Signed by candidate

Date: _____

1/9/2005

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved wife, Gillian Matitiani, in gratitude for her love and support and for patiently assisting me to check the manuscript.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town for the study bursary that enabled me to write this dissertation. I am also indebted to the *gabba'yim*, members and staff (especially my secretary, Liza Levor) of the Cape Town Progressive Jewish Congregation for their assistance and support during my studies. I am most thankful for the study leave granted to me so that I could finish this dissertation in time.

I am particularly grateful to Dr Azila Reisenberger, who not only supervised this dissertation, but was also a constant source of invaluable encouragement, advice and enthusiasm. Thanks also to Rabbi Dr. Elihu J. Steinhorn for five years of daily Talmud study which inspired me to write this dissertation. His mentorship instilled in me a love of rabbinic literature, both halakhic and aggadic.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the underlying attitude and *Weltanschauung* of the rabbis that motivated the *halakhah* concerning intermarriage. This is achieved through the analytical study of midrashic material relating to a selection of biblical figures who, according to the Bible, married foreigners. The study focuses solely on midrashic material because aggadic literature expresses the values of rabbinic Judaism that are upheld and promoted by means of *halakhah*. The study reveals that the rabbis' justification or condemnation of a specific intermarriage was motivated by a few main factors:

- a. The social standing of the biblical character.
- b. The character's importance to the values and survival of the Jewish People, as perceived by the rabbis, as well as the historical and social context of the rabbinic era.
- c. Social constructs such as Gender.

By demonstrating that the rabbis were influenced by the context of their times, their desire to promote their ideology, and taking into consideration the need to further the interests of the Jewish People, the study seeks to encourage Jewish leadership of the twenty-first century to re-assess their attitudes regarding foreigners and by implication intermarriage.

While the study focuses on *midrashim* relating to specific instances of intermarriage in the Bible, the final chapter does place the rabbinic aggadic traditions within the context of the *halakhah*.

Modern academic scholarship was consulted and is acknowledged at a few junctures in the thesis, but the study concentrates on examining the attitude of the rabbis towards intermarriage.

Each chapter of the study deals with a different biblical character. The marriages examined and discussed in the study are: Abraham and Keturah, Esau and his three wives, Joseph and Asenath, Judah and the daughter of

Shua, Moses and Zipporah, Boaz and Ruth, Ahab and Jezebel, and Esther and Ahasuerus.

The biblical text describing the marriage is quoted in English translation. The Midrashic material is gleaned from the major collections of midrashic literature, namely Midrash Rabbah, Mekhilta, Midrash Tanḥuma, Sifra and Sifrei, Midrash Zuta, Midrashim Shonim, Betei Midrashot, Yalkut Shimoni, Pirkei deRav Eliezer, the Zohar, the aggadic material of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmudim, the classical commentators to the Tanakh (Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Sforno, Or HaḤayyim, Da'at Zekeinim, Keli Yakar, Rabeinu Baḥya, Ḥizquni, Radak, and Ralbag) and the Aramaic translations of the Tanakh (Targum Yonathan / Targum Yonathan ben Uzziel).

The *midrashim*, which are quoted in the original Hebrew or Aramaic, together with a rendition in English, are discussed and the various traditions are summarised with comments and interpretations.

All Hebrew terms and names in the discussion are transliterated, following the traditional system of transliteration which is delineated in the Preface. Biblical names of people and places follow conventional spelling.

The concluding chapter is a comparative study of the midrashic material concerning the various unions. The trends in the rabbis' attitude towards intermarriage and the methods used to justify or explain the unions are discussed in light of the various considerations that influenced the opinions of the sages.

The comparative study demonstrates the fact that the rabbis' opinions were not always uniform and were based on the context of their times.

All English biblical quotations are from *Tanakh: A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985) and all quotations in the original Hebrew are from

the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1990).

An appendix provides a short glossary of the lesser known midrashic sources.

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Chapter One — Preface

As a candidate for the Progressive rabbinate I have come across many Jews that count non-Jews among their family members, either because of intermarriage or conversion. These situations have presented challenges to my functioning as a spiritual leader who, while upholding the traditional views of promoting and furthering Jewish continuity, also wishes to be pluralistic and as inclusive as possible without compromising my values or that of the non-Jewish members of the family. This problem has practical consequences for the various life cycle events that are so pivotal in every individual's life. Since Jewish status is conferred through the mother, a child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother is not considered Jewish according to *halakhah*. This presents problems when the child reaches any of the rites of passage¹, as these rituals are overseen by a Jewish religious leader usually in the context of a Jewish community.

The tension between maintaining the religious integrity of the Jewish People (as a community committed to the observance of the rituals and beliefs of Judaism) and the desire to deal with the reality of a far more integrated Jewish community necessitates a re-evaluation of the attitudes of professional and non-professional Jewish religious leadership towards Jews who have married out of faith and children born of such unions.

Before dealing pragmatically with such a challenge to the modern rabbinate, one has to understand the intellectual and spiritual ramifications of the issues by studying the primary sources of Jewish value concepts and legislation, namely the Tanakh, the Talmudim and other traditional sources. The study of these texts in order to determine a practical course of action conforms to the millennia-old methodology of the Jewish people who, faced with changing times and circumstances, turned to the teachings of the sages, as redacted in the Talmud and the various commentaries, for direction in legislating for the new challenges of life.

¹ *Berit milah*, *bar / bat mitzvah*, the sanctification of marriage, and finally burial.

The studies that have been undertaken and published in this field have focused on the legal (halakhic) discussions and decisions on the issue of intermarriage and conversion, examining the development of the *halakhah* from biblical times to the final redaction of rabbinic law in the form of the Talmud. These studies have examined biblical, Second Temple period and Talmudic texts (both Babylonian and Jerusalem) diachronically with the purpose of determining the historical development of the law.

This study deals with the issue of intermarriage in midrashic text, as opposed to halakhic text, because these rabbinic interpretations and expositions of the biblical text offer insights into rabbinic attitudes and values that shaped the rabbinic mind and which, in turn, shapes the *halakhah*.

Aim of this Study

The aim of this study is to ascertain the underlying attitude and *Weltanschauung* of the mishnaic and Talmudic sages that motivated them to legislate one way or another regarding intermarriage and thereby to demonstrate the necessity of re-assessing our modern approach to this issue, given the changed circumstances and worldview of the twenty-first century. Bearing this aim in mind, the study focuses on the aggadic material of rabbinic literature, material which expresses the value system of rabbinic Judaism, the promotion of which influenced rabbinic legislation (*halakhah*). Of particular interest are the inclusion of various opinions in the Talmud and *midrashim* (since they point to possible alternative approaches to the issue) and the impact of the historical and social context on the discourse. By placing the opinions of the rabbis in the context of their times, one can suggest that the changed social and historical dynamic of the twenty-first century calls for a new approach to intermarriage. The fact that divergent attitudes and opinions are expressed in the *midrash* opens the way for a modern re-appraisal of attitudes towards the issue of intermarriage and the parties involved in such unions. The importance of this study lies in the fact that the analysis of the midrashic material may strip away the social, historical and cultural contexts

of the rabbinic era, uncovering the core Jewish values that determined the attitudes of the sages and that characterised Judaism throughout its history. By relating these values to the social, historical and cultural context of the twenty-first century, the study aims to contribute to the ideals of Liberal Judaism which attempts to be as inclusive as possible while preserving religious and cultural integrity. By demonstrating that the attitudes of the rabbis towards intermarriage were dictated by the circumstances of their times and their need to promote their particular ideology and the interests of the Jewish People, this study seeks to encourage Jewish leadership of the twenty-first century to re-assess their attitudes regarding intermarriage, based on the very same considerations.

Historical overview of this field of study

The issue of intermarriage is usually discussed in religious circles but it is also dealt with in academic research, although usually not as the main focus of the study. Thus Robert Goldenberg (1998) and Shaye Cohen (1999) examine the issue as part of a greater study of Jewish attitudes to non-Jews and the beginnings of Jewish identity, respectively.

The sample of studies in the field of intermarriage which I have examined focuses on the development of the *halakhah* regarding the prohibition of marrying foreigners, beginning with the proscriptions of Exodus 34:15-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-3. They examine the rabbinic interpretation of these biblical passages which extends the prohibition from the seven Canaanite nations to all non-Israelite (non-Jewish) ethnic groups. While Robert Goldenberg investigates the rabbinic attitude towards other religions and explains the rationale behind the fear of idolatry (which in turn provided a reason for prohibiting intermarriage), Shaye Cohen's interest lies in tracing the historical development of Jewish identity from biblical to Talmudic times by examining ancient texts. Christine Hayes (2002) discusses the attitudes of the ancient Jews towards conversion and intermarriage influenced by their attempt to establish a group identity and by the notion that Gentiles were a source of impurity. Hayes proposes that strict boundaries were maintained between

Jews and non-Jews due to four distinct modes of impurity associated with Gentiles, but that these boundaries could be crossed through intermarriage and conversion. She maintains that ancient Jews displayed varying attitudes towards conversion and intermarriage due to the different Jewish views of Gentile impurity.

These studies examine biblical, apocryphal, pseudepigraphal, and rabbinic (both halakhic and midrashic) texts to support their hypotheses and all three employ a diachronic reading of the text to indicate the historical development of their field of study

Robert Goldenberg (1998) traces the historical development of the Israelite (Jewish) religion from that which recognised the validity of other gods and at times even permitted the worship of them alongside the worship of YHWH, to the radical monotheism which developed in the time of Jeremiah. While the Bible does not present a consistent attitude towards other religions and their gods, rabbinic literature expresses extremely anti-pagan sentiments and the rabbis found it impossible to bestow any merit on Gentiles or on their religion. Any records of a righteous Gentile are, according to Goldenberg, exceptions that prove the rule. According to the Talmud all pagans are depraved and immoral and the opinion is expressed that they have no share in the World to Come. Goldenberg (1998:86) states that in the rabbinic mind idolatry and sexual anarchy were inextricably linked because both seemed to stem from the inescapable sexual attraction of Jewish men towards Gentile women. Thus the rabbinic legislation regarding the interaction of Jews and Gentiles was based on a distrust of the Gentiles and was aimed at avoiding all unnecessary social intercourse, which might lead to intermarriage and, so the rabbis believed, idolatry. To strengthen his point Goldenberg (1998:114) cites biblical texts (e.g. Exodus 34:13-16) that link intermarriage and idolatry.

Shaye Cohen (1999:241-262) addresses the issue of intermarriage by discussing five biblical passages that were used as source texts for the prohibition of intermarriage (Deuteronomy 7:1-4, Exodus 34:11-17, Deuteronomy 23:2-9, Leviticus 18:21 and Deuteronomy 21:10-14). He demonstrates that the Bible does not prohibit general intermarriage, but only

intermarriage with the seven Canaanite nations (Deuteronomy 7:1-4 and Exodus 34:11-17) because, living in the land to be conquered by the Israelites, they were a bigger threat to Israelite identity. Moabites and Ammonites were forbidden to enter the congregation of YHWH, as were the first two generations of Egyptians and Edomites. There is uncertainty as to whether this law is a prohibition of conversion or of intermarriage. Cohen goes on to demonstrate, through analysis of text, that the general prohibition of intermarriage originated with Ezra and was formulated in the Hasmonean period and that the pseudepigraphic Book of Jubilees considered intermarriage a transgression punishable by execution. Similarly Philo and Josephus extended the prohibition of intermarriage to include all non-Jews, and the rabbis of the Talmud developed a sustained and detailed interpretation that justified the general prohibition of intermarriage. Cohen (1999:298-303) in discussing the origins of the matrilineal principle, offers an interesting analogy between intermarriage and the law of prohibiting the mixing of seed (*kela'im*²), which he claims provided the ideological context for the matrilineal principle (and the prohibition of intermarriage).

Hayes (2002) links the Israelite perception that non-Israelites are a source of impurity with the prohibition against intermarriage which was extended by Ezra to include all foreigners. She maintains that Ezra wished to extend the strict laws of purity that were applied to the priests (*kohanim*) to all Israel, forbidding them to marry foreign women who were considered a source impurity. The notion of purity and impurity also influenced the rabbinic attitude towards intermarriage. Hayes therefore studies her source texts with the intention of proving that the biblical and rabbinic attitude towards intermarriage was governed by the concept of purity and impurity.

Method of this Study

This study is interested in depicting the rabbinic attitude to intermarriage from the perspective of the sages and is therefore cognizant of the fact that the rabbis understood the Tanakh as a synchronic whole and that they superimposed their socio-historical context on the biblical text. An example of

² Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:9

the difference between rabbinic understanding of the biblical text, and that of modern academic scholars is illustrated by Shaye Cohen (1999: 122-123) who quotes Yehezkel Kaufmann's claim that Ruth was not a religious convert because she remained a foreigner even after she adopted the ways of Judean society. The rabbis, however, understood that Naomi instructed Ruth in the *mitzvot* and that Ruth formally converted to Judaism, fulfilling the requirement of conversion as specified in the Talmud³. Similarly the rabbis maintained that Abraham knew of and observed all the commandments of Jewish tradition, both biblical and rabbinic⁴.

Though I took cognizance of modern scholarship, I have consciously limited this study to the rabbinic attitude towards intermarriage as it has been formulated in *midrash* without regard to historical development because it best describes the attitude which still regulates the approach of traditional Judaism to this day. Since the aim of this study is to better understand the rabbinic mindset which motivated the legislation of *halakhah* concerning intermarriage, it is necessary to view the biblical text and the midrashic response to it through the eyes of the rabbis. Once the rabbinic attitude is determined the study seeks to analyse it in the light of the concerns of the rabbis and the socio-historical context in which they lived.

Bearing in mind the rabbinic prohibition of marrying a non-Jew, this study utilises the midrashic text by investigating various biblical personalities who married non-Israelites and the rabbinic responses to these instances of intermarriage as portrayed in the collections of rabbinic *midrashim*. Each chapter is devoted to a different character, the biblical narrative is quoted and all the *midrashim* connected with it are presented and explored for trends and alternative views. The final chapter is a comparative study of the rabbinic attitudes towards the intermarriages of the various biblical characters studied, as reflected in the *midrashim* in order to demonstrate that such attitudes vary and are motivated by the rabbis' view of the moral character of each biblical

³ *Vide* Chapter Six — Boaz and Ruth.

⁴ *Vide* Chapter One — Abraham and Keturah.

figure and their importance to the promotion of Jewish values and the furtherance of the Jewish People.

Sources

This study is limited to midrashic material found in the major collections of midrashic literature, namely Midrash Rabba, Mekhilta, Midrash Tanhuma, Sifra and Sifrei, Midrash Zuta, Midrashim Shonim, Betei Midrashot, Yalkut Shimoni, Pirkei deRav Eliezer, the Zohar, the aggadic material of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmudim, the classical commentators to the Tanakh (Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Sforno, Or HaHayyim, Da'at Zekeinim, Keli Yakar, Rabeinu Bahya, Hizquni, Radak, and Ralbag) and the Aramaic translations of the Tanakh (Targum Yonathan / Targum Yonathan ben Uzziel). All English biblical quotations are from *Tanakh: A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985) and all quotations in the original Hebrew are from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1990)

All transliterated Hebrew and Aramaic words are typed in italics, except when they are part of a title of a *midrash* or collection of *midrashim*. All Hebrew and Aramaic words are transliterated using the transliteration system delineated below. Conventional spelling is used, however, for commonly used Hebrew or Aramaic terms (e.g. *mitzvah*, *mitzvoth*, *mikvah*) or biblical names or places. A short glossary of the lesser known midrashic sources is included as an appendix.

Transliteration System

The transliteration of Hebrew and Aramaic is based on the following system:

' = א	f = פ
v = ב	p = פ
b = ב	z = צ
g = ג	q = ק
d = ד	r = ר
h = ה	sh = שׁ
v = ו	s = שׂ
u = ו	t = ת
z = ז	t = ת
ḥ = ח	a = א
t = ט	a = א
y = י	e = ע
kh = כ	e = ע
k = כ	e = שׂוא נע
l = ל	ei = י
m = מ	i = י
n = נ	o = ו
s = ס	o = ו
' = ע	u = ו

The glottal stop (א) is not indicated if the phoneme is sufficiently represented by an English vowel (e.g. *am* for אֵמ). Dagesh forte is represented by a double letter, except after the definite article.

Chapter Two – Abraham and Keturah

[After Sarah's death]...

“Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan begot Sheba and Dedan. The descendants of Dedan were the Asshurim, the Letushim, and the Leummim. The descendants of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Enoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were descendants of Keturah. Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac” (Genesis 25:1-5).

According to the Torah, Abraham married a woman by the name of Keturah after mourning for and burying his beloved wife Sarah, who died shortly after the *Aqedah*¹. While the Torah does not tell the reader much about Keturah, the rabbis (Bereishit Rabbah 61:4, Targum Yonathan on Genesis 25:1, Tanḥuma *Ḥayyei Sarah* 8, Zohar Bereishit 133b) and medieval commentators (Rashi on Genesis 25:1,6) extrapolated that Keturah was Hagar, Sarah's maidservant whom she gave to Abraham as a concubine:

“Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her.’ And Abram heeded Sarai's request. So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine.” (Genesis 16:1-3).

“ושמה קטורה” רב אמר זו הגר אמר ליה רבי נחמיה והכתיב ויוסף א"ל על פי הדבור
נשאה היך מד"א (ישעיה ח) ויוסף ה' דבר אלי עוד א"ל והכתיב ושמה קטורה א"ל
שמקוטרת מצות ומעשים טובים א"ל והכתיב ולבני הפילגשים אשר לאברהם א"ל
פלגשם כתיב בעודנו חי אותה שישבה על הבאר ואמרה לחי העולמים ראה בעלבוני
א"ר ברכיה אע"ג דאת אמר ותלך ותתע במדבר וגו' תאמר שנחשד עליה בריה

¹ “The binding of Isaac” (Genesis 22)

ת"ל ושמה קטורה מן קטר כזה שהוא חותם גנוכה ומוציאה בחותמת קשורה וחתומה.

(Bereishit Rabbah 61:4)

ואוסיף אברהם ונסב איתא ושמה קטורה היא הגר דקטירא ליה מן שרויא:

(Targum Yonathan on Genesis 25:1)

ר' אומר היא הגר היא קטורה ולמה נקרא שמה קטורה שהיתה קשורה כנוד, ורבותינו אומרים אשה אחרת לקח, ומה טעם של רבי שאומר הגר היא קטורה שכתוב ביצחק ויצחק בא מבא באר לחי רואי (בראשית כד), אותה שכתוב בה ותקרא שם ה' הדובר אליה אתה אל ראי (בראשית טו) מכאן אתה למד שהיא הגר, דבר אחר למה נקרא שמה קטורה שנאים מעשיה כקטרת.

(Tanḥuma Ḥayyei Sarah 8)

ויוסף אברהם ויקח אשה ושמה קטורה, קטורה דא היא הגר, דהא תנינן בתר דאתפרשא הגר מניה דאברהם וטעת בתר גלולי דאבוה לבתר אתקשרא בעובדין דכשרן ובגין כך אשתני שמה ואקרי קטורה בעובדין דכשרן ושדר אברהם ונסבה לי' לאנתו מכאן דשנוי שמא.

(Zohar Bereishit 133b)

קטורה. (ב"ר) זו הגר ונקראת קטורה על שם שנאים מעשיה כקטרת ושקשרה פתחה שלא נזווגה לאדם מיום שפרשה מאברהם.

הפילגשים. (ב"ר) חסר כתיב שלא היתה אלא פלגש אחת היא הגר היא קטורה.

(Rashi on Genesis 25:1,6)

There is a tradition cited in Bereishit Rabbah (chapter 45) and Rashi (on Genesis 16:1) that Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh or Abimelech, King of Gerar. After witnessing the deeds that were done in Sarah's household, Pharaoh gave his daughter to Sarah as a servant, because he believed it was better for his daughter to live as a servant in Sarah's household than to be a princess in another's house. Similarly Abimelech also gave his daughter to Sarah as a maidservant for the same reason:

אמר ר"ש בן יוחאי הגר בתו של פרעה היתה וכיון שראה פרעה מעשים שנעשו לשרה בביתו נטל בתו ונתנה לו אמר מוטב שתהא בתי שפחה בבית זה ולא גבירה בבית אחר הה"ד (בראשית ט) ולה שפחה מצרית ושמה הגר הא אגריך אף אבימלך כיון שראה נסים שנעשו לשרה בביתו נטל בתו ונתנה לו אמר מוטב שתהא בתי שפחה בבית הזה ולא גבירה בבית אחרת הה"ד (תהלים מה) בנות מלכים ביקרותיך נצבה שגל לימינך בכתם אופיר:

(Bereishit Rabbah 45)

שפחה מצרית. בת פרעה היתה כשראה נסים שנעשו לשרה אמר מוטב שתהא בתי שפחה בבית זה ולא גבירה בבית אחר:

(Rashi on Genesis 16:1)

Rabbeinu Baḥya explains that Pharaoh gave his daughter, Hagar, to Sarah as a reward for her modesty when he took her into his harem, after being told she was Abraham's sister:

ולה שפחה מצרית. ולא לו, דרשו רבותינו ז"ל נכסי מלוג היתה ולא היה רשאי למכרה ושמה הגר. מבית פרעה נתנה לה ולכך נקראה הגר הא אגריך, כלומר הגר שכר על צניעותיך:

(Rabbeinu Baḥya 16:1)

Since Sarah had given Hagar to Abraham as a concubine the rabbis assume that she converted to Judaism. This assumption is reflected in the remarks of the commentary Da'at Zekeinim (on Genesis 25:1). The commentator refers to the Deuteronomic (23:8-9) law that prohibits Egyptians and Edomites from entering the congregation of God until the third generation:

"You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land. Children born to them may be admitted into the congregation of the Lord in the third generation" (Deuteronomy 23:8-9).

In light of the above law, Da'at Zekeinim questions whether Hagar, the daughter of Pharaoh and therefore a first generation Egyptian who has entered Abraham's household, could become the patriarch's wife. He is compelled to draw the conclusion that the passage in Deuteronomy refers to Egyptian men, and not to women. Thus Hagar could convert to Judaism and marry Abraham.

ויקח אשה ושמה קטורה. ואע"ג דישראל אסור במצרית דכתיב בנים אשר יולדו להם דור שלישי הא דור שני לא יבא. והגר בת פרעה היתה כדפירש"י לעיל. איכא למימר גר הוא וגר מותר במצרית ובמדרש איתא על פי הדבור עשה: (Da'at Zekeinim on Genesis 25:1).

Da'at Zekeinim makes a point of stating that a female Egyptian convert is permissible because he needs to justify Abraham marrying Hagar after Sarah's death, following the accepted tradition that she and Keturah are one and the same person.

Rashi, interpreting Genesis 21:14, understands that after Hagar was banished from Abraham's household, she returned to worshipping the idols of her father: תלך ותתע. חזרה לגלולי בית אביה. Keli Yakar, understands Hagar's return to idol worship (*avodah zarah*) as the reason for Sarah's harsh demand that her servant and her son Ishmael be banished from Abraham's household. According to Keli Yakar (on Genesis 25:1), Sarah was a prophetess who had an intuition that Hagar would revert to *avodah zarah* and that is why she banished her from the house. Keli Yakar then has to solve the problem posed by such a tradition. If Hagar did return to idolatry and she was Keturah, then how could Abraham marry her? Keli Yakar solves the dilemma by proposing that Hagar and Ishmael repented from their idolatry, allowing Abraham to take Keturah / Hagar back and marry her. According to Keli Yakar this act of returning to God occasioned the name change from Hagar to Keturah. The commentator compares a *ba'al teshuvah* with incense (*ketoret*). Just as frankincense has a bad smell when it first burns, but becomes pleasant

exonerate Abraham for marrying a non-Jewish woman. Since Hagar is Jewish by virtue of having converted, the marriage between Keturah and Abraham is perfectly acceptable.

Rashi (on Genesis 25:1) explains the change of name as follows: "Hagar's deeds were as pleasant and good as incense (*ketoret*) and she remained faithful to Abraham, not sleeping with another man from the time that Abraham banished her". Hagar restrained herself from other men and was therefore known as Keturah:

קטורה . זו הגר ונקראת קטורה על שם שנאים מעשיה כקטרת ושקשר
פתחה שלא נזדווגה לאדם מיום שפרשה מאברהם:

(Rashi on Genesis 25:1).

This chaste behaviour allowed Abraham to remarry Hagar without transgressing the Torah command that forbids a man to remarry his estranged wife if she has married and divorced another man (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Since the rabbis read the Torah synchronically rather than diachronically, it was inconceivable to them that Abraham did not observe all the commandments of Jewish tradition, both Torah and rabbinic (Bereishit Rabbah 64:4, 95:3, Shemot Rabbah 1:1, Vayiqra Rabbah 2:10, Tanḥuma Lekh-Lekha 11):

מנין עק"ב שמע אברהם בקול בוראו וישמור משמרתני מצותי חקותי
ותורתני ר' יונתן משם ר' יוחנן אמר אפילו הלכות עירובי חצרות היה אברהם יודע
תורותי שתי תורות שקיים אפילו מצוה קלה שבעל פה ר' סימון אמר אפילו שם
חדש שעתיד הקדוש ברוך הוא לקרוא לירושלים היה אברהם יודע דכתיב
(בראשית כב) ויקרא המקום ה' יראה וכתיב (יחזקאל מח) ושם העיר מיום ה'
שם שמה וכתיב (ירמיה ג) ביום ההוא יקראו לירושלים כסא ה'.

(Bereishit Rabbah 64:4)

כתיב באברהם (שם כו) וישמור משמרתני ומהיכן למד אברהם את התורה רבן

ללדו סיגאזליסו סיגוזב אלמאדכ טוטבכס אדש סיגאזליס 'טוטבכס סיגוזב טכז יי'טול

טוטבכס טפזגז לנזכ לזש לל זוטוטאכ לזכזל טוטבכס ללדו לזכ יכ 'טוטבכס'
לזכז אד טולז אכז זוטבכ טוטבש טולז סוז. סיגזכז טוטבכס טוטבש טולז
לזכז זאזליס אלזכז לזוזו. לזש סוזיכז לזכזי אדכ סיגז זוטוטבכס טולז
לזכז 'טוטבכס לזכז זוטוטבכס אדכ יכ לזכז טוטבש לזכז לזכז 'לזכז (לזכז לזכז)
וטול זאכז לזכז לזכז "זוטבכס לזכז לזכז זוטבכס זוטבכס זוטבכס זוטבכס זוטבכס
וטול זכזי" טוטבכס לזכז אדכ 'וטול זוטבכס זוטבכס זוטבכס זוטבכס זוטבכס
זוטבכס יכ 'זוטבכס טולז לזכז זוטבכס לזכז זוטבכס לזכז זוטבכס זוטבכס
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סיגוזב זאזליס טוטבכס זוטבכס:

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While the notion that Keturah was Hagar, to whom tradition ascribes piety,
authenticates Keturah as a legitimate wife for Abraham, Ginzberg (1947, Vol
5: 264, n309) points out that there is a trend in rabbinic literature that claims
Keturah was Abraham's third wife (Ramban on Genesis 25:6; Ibn Ezra on
Genesis 25:1; Rashbam on Genesis 25:1, 6). Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (1981:113)
cites a source (Yovioth 19:13) which states that Hagar was already dead
when Abraham took Keturah as his wife. Indeed Ramban criticises Abraham
for taking a wife from the daughters of Canaan, while insisting that a wife be
found from his homeland, from his father's house, for his son Isaac.

(Tanhuma Lekh-Lekha 11)

זוטבכס לזכז לזכז:

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בסנהדרין (כא).. ואין הדבר כן, כי לא תקרא פילגש אלא כשהיא בלא קדושין, כי הכתובה מדברי סופרים, והגירסא בסנהדרין פילגש בלא כתובה וקדושין. אבל אפשר שגם בני נח כאשר ישאו להם נשים כמשפטן בבעילה היו נוהגים לכתוב להן מהר ומתן, ואשר רצונה שתהיה להם פילגש וישלח אותה כאשר ירצה ולא יהיו בניה בנוחלים את שלו, לא היה כותב לה כלום. ועל דעת רבותינו ב"ר (סא ד) שהיא הגר, הנה היא פילגש ודאי:

(Ramban on Genesis 25:6)

קטורה. איננה הגר כי כתוב ולבני הפלגשים נתן אברהם. ופירוש פילגש שפחה וזה השם איננו נופל על זכר ונוכל לפרש על פלגשים נשים:

(Ibn Ezra on Genesis 25:1)

קטורה. לפי הפשט אין זו הגר:

(Rashbam on Genesis 25:1)

הפילגשים. הגר וקטורה:

(Rashbam on Genesis 25:6)

Ginzberg (1947, Vol 5: 265, n309) quotes Yalkut Reuveni (Genesis 26.2, 36c) that states that Abraham married descendants of Noah's three sons: Sarah, a daughter of Shem, Hagar a daughter of Ham and Keturah a daughter of Japheth. This *midrash* of course reflects the idea that Abraham is the father of many nations: "As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations." (Genesis 17:4-5). Thus there is a tradition that rejects the notion that Hagar adopted the name Keturah.

The trend in rabbinic literature that identifies Keturah with Hagar not only gives rabbinic sanction to Abraham's second marriage, but it also exonerates the Patriarch from banishing Sarah's maidservant into the wilderness in the first place. After his wife's passing he took Hagar back into his household and elevated her from the status of a concubine, to that of a wife.

Summation

There are two trends in the *midrash* regarding Abraham's wife Keturah. One school of thought proposes that Keturah is Hagar, Sarah's concubine whom she gave to Abraham to father a child. According to the *midrash* Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh, her father having given her to Sarah after witnessing the wonders that God had wrought on her household.

The idea that Hagar had relapsed into worshipping the gods of her father after her banishment from Abraham's camp implies that she had converted to Abraham's ways when she entered his household as Sarah's handmaiden. Her repentance and return to worshipping the God of Abraham occasioned her name change to Keturah (following the custom mentioned in Genesis 17 concerning the name change of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah) and allowed Abraham to take her back and marry her.

According to Rabbi Nehemiah, Hagar was known as Keturah because her deeds were as beautiful as incense (*ketoret*), while Targum Yonathan understands the name to indicate that she was bound to Abraham with a chain when he married her. Tanḥuma *Ḥayyei Sarah* posits that Hagar was known as the woman bound to the water skin (referring to her banishment from Abraham's household when he gave her a water skin and some bread), hence her name Keturah. The last two interpretations are based on the second meaning of the root q-t-r, "tie, bind". Related to this interpretation is the idea that Hagar made a wreath or crown (*meqoteret*) of good deeds. (Jastrow 1996:1352)

Rashi explains the name Keturah as reflecting the fact that Hagar restrained herself from other men after Abraham banished her from his home at the orders of Sarah, literally: "Hagar ties up her opening from wedding [another] man".

A third explanation of the name change, expressed in the Zohar and the Keli Yakar, is that the name Keturah was chosen by Abraham because he wished

to publicise the fact that Hagar, who had returned to idolatry during her banishment, had repented and renounced the gods of her father. These sources compare a repentant transgressor to incense.

The tradition that Hagar and Keturah are the same person is opposed by a second school of thought that states that Hagar and Keturah are two distinct and separate individuals. According to this view Abraham had three wives, Sarah, Hagar and Keturah. Ramban points out that Hagar was merely Abraham's concubine and her son, Ishmael, was therefore not permitted to inherit with Isaac, the son of Sarah, Abraham's wife. The Torah text explicitly states that Abraham took Keturah as his wife. Therefore Hagar and Keturah are not the same person. Indeed Abraham is criticised for marrying a Canaanite, after insisting that a wife be found in Mesopotamia for his son Isaac.

Since midrashic literature is replete with examples of the superimposition of rabbinic conditions on biblical times, for example the statement that Jacob studied in the *yeshivot* of Shem and Japheth (Rashi, Ba'al HaTurim on Genesis 25:27), it can be assumed that the rabbis who suggested that Hagar converted to Judaism envisioned the process taking the form of ritual immersion in a *mikvah*, followed by instruction in the minor and major *mitzvot*, as stipulated by the Talmud (Yevamot 47b). This assumption is supported by the rabbinic assertion that Abraham knew and observed the entire Torah, both Written and Oral.

There is, however, a school of thought that believes Abraham lapsed by taking a Canaanite as a wife after making sure that his inheritance would live on with his son and heir Isaac. In order to make certain that his legacy is not threatened by his offspring from his concubine and second wife Abraham sent their children away from Isaac: "Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; but to Abraham's sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East." (Genesis 25:5-6).

Thus rabbinic literature deals with Abraham's marriage to Keturah in three different ways. There are commentators (Ramban) that courageously criticise (albeit gently) Abraham, the father of the Jewish People, for marrying a foreign woman. Some merely point out that Abraham married a Canaanite, but do not make any comment, while many attempt to justify the Patriarch's actions by identifying Keturah with Hagar and stating that Hagar, who had been Abraham's concubine, converted to Judaism, thus qualifying her to be taken by Abraham as a wife.

It is clear from the analysis of the rabbinic attempt to justify Abraham's marriage to Keturah that the standing of the husband influenced the rabbinic commentary to the biblical narrative, a contention which will be born out in the following chapter which deals with Esau and his marriage to Canaanite women.

Chapter Three — Esau and Judith bat Be’eri, Basemath bat Elon and Mahalath bat Ishmael

“When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith daughter of Be’eri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca.” (Genesis 26:34-35).

“So Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, sister of Nebaioth.” (Genesis 28:9)

“This is the line of Esau—that is, Edom. Esau took his wives from among the Canaanite women, Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite, and Oholibamah daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, and also Basemath daughter of Ishmael and sister of Nebaioth.” (Genesis 36:1-3)

The Torah informs us that Esau, the firstborn son of Isaac and Rebecca, married non-Israelite women and that these wives were disagreeable to his parents. The details of these marriages seem to be derived from two sources: according to chapter twenty-six of Genesis, Esau married two Hittite women, Judith bat Be’eri and Basemath bat Elon, while chapter thirty-six informs the reader that Esau married three foreign women, Adah bat Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah bat Anah the Hivite, and Basemath bat Ishmael. Yet another tradition (Genesis 28) names Mahalath bat Ishmael as Esau’s Ishmaelite wife.

While the Torah states that Esau’s wives were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca, there is no evidence that it was because they were foreign women. The rabbis, influenced by circumstances of their times, viewed Genesis 26:35 as a condemnation of intermarriage.

According to Genesis 26:34-35, Esau’s two wives were Hittites, one of the seven Canaanite nations which the Book of Deuteronomy explicitly charges

the Israelites to destroy and warns against intermarrying with them¹. According to Genesis 36:2-3, however, Esau also married a Hivite, another of the seven Canaanite nations forbidden to the descendants of Abraham by the Deuteronomist:

“When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations before you—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations much larger than you—and the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter. You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Lord’s anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out.”
(Deuteronomy 7:1-4)

Since Esau is portrayed in a negative light both in the Bible and in rabbinic literature (although there are *midrashim* that depict him as possessing commendable traits), it is of interest how the sages dealt with his marriages to these women. While it would promote rabbinic interests to exonerate Abraham for marrying Keturah, one would think that the rabbis would make use of Esau’s contravention of the Deuteronomic injunction to criticise Jacob’s older brother, whose descendants, the Edomites, are portrayed in the Bible as being hostile towards Israel:

“From Kadesh, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom: . . .
Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory. Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king’s highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the

¹ The rabbis viewed the Bible synchronically and not diachronically and therefore believed that Esau would have known of the Deuteronomic prohibition of marriage to a Canaanite.

left until we have crossed your territory.’ But Edom answered him, ‘You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with the sword.’ . . . And Edom went out against them in heavy force, strongly armed. So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them.” (Numbers 20:14-21)

Esau is clearly identified with Edom:

“And Esau said to Jacob, ‘Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished’—which is why he was named Edom.” (Genesis 25:30)

“This is the line of Esau—that is, Edom.” (Genesis 36:1)

The prophet Ezekiel expresses the fact that the Edomites were enemies of Israel:

“The word of the Lord came to me: O mortal, set your face against Mount Seir² and prophesy against it. Say to it: Thus said the Lord God: I am going to deal with you, Mount Seir: I will stretch out My hand against you and make you an utter waste. I will turn your towns into ruins, and you shall be a desolation; then you shall know that I am the Lord. Because you harbored an ancient hatred and handed the people of Israel over to the sword in their time of calamity, the time set for their punishment— assuredly, as I live, declares the Lord God, I will doom you with blood; blood shall pursue you; I swear that, for your bloodthirsty hatred, blood shall pursue you”. (Ezekiel 35:1-6)

In rabbinic literature the Edomites are viewed as the ancestors of Rome, the oppressors and persecutors of the Jewish People:

² Mount Seir, home of Esau and a mountain range of Edom is synonymous with Edom (Genesis 36:8). *Vide* Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon 1995.

תני רבי חייא מאי דכתיב אלהים הבין דרכה והוא ידע את מקומה יודע הקדוש ברוך הוא את ישראל שאינן יכולין לקבל גזירות אכזריות אדום³ לפיכך הגלה אותם לבבל. (Pesachim 87b)

ת"ר אין מעברין את השנה לפני ראש השנה ואם עיברוה אינה מעוברת אבל מפני הדחק מעברין אותה אחר ראש השנה מיד ואעפ"כ אין מעברין אלא אדר איני והא שלחו ליה לרבא זוג בא מרקת ותפשו נשר ובידם דברים הנעשה בלזו ומאי ניהו תכלת בזכות הרחמים ובזכותם יצאו בשלום ועמוסי יריכי נחשון בקשו לקבוע נציב אחד ולא הניחו אדומי⁴ הלז.

(Sanhedrin 12a)

Another point of interest for this study is investigating how rabbinic tradition reconciles the inconsistencies in the Torah text regarding the names and nationality of Esau's wives, since the rabbis considered the Torah to be the word of God and therefore immutable.

The second issue is dealt with first as it has bearing on the case that is built up by the rabbis against Esau. Thus the rabbis claim that Basemath and Adah were alternative names of the daughter of Elon the Hittite. This is expressed by Abraham ibn Ezra (on Genesis 26:34):

ובשמת. היא עדה ויש לה ב' שמות ובמקרא נמצאין למאות כן:

(ibn Ezra on Genesis 26:34)

Ginzberg (1942, Vol 1: 340) quotes *Sefer HaYashar* which explains the dual name of Esau's second wife as a reflection of Esau's resentment at having

³ i.e., Rome, for which Edom was the general disguise (The Soncino Talmud 1952 : 464).

This is an example of the anachronistic approach of the rabbis to the Bible.

⁴ Primarily name given to Esau, אדום is used by the Talmudists for the Roman Empire, as they applied every passage of the Bible referring to Edom or Esau to Rome. In the middle ages it came to be used symbolically of Christianity, and that accounts for the substitution of ארמני 'Aramean' in censored editions (The Soncino Talmud 1938: 52). *Vide* Jastrow (1996:16).

been cheated out of his birthright. According to this *midrash*, the name of Esau's second wife was Basemath, but Esau named her Adah, "saying that the blessing had in that time passed from him" (the root 'd-h having the meaning of "pass by"⁵).

Rashi (on Genesis 36:2) offers a different interpretation in reconciling the two traditions concerning the name of the daughter of Elon the Hittite. He posits that Esau's first wife was named Adah, but she was also known as Basemath because she burned spices (*besamim*) as part of the pagan ritual which she practiced:

עדה בת אילון. היא בשמת בת אילון ונקראת בשמת על שם שהיתה מקטרת בשמים לעבודת אלילים:

(Rashi on Genesis 36:2)

Nahmonides shares this view:

עדה בת אילון. היא בשמת בת אילון ונקראת בשמת (לעיל כו לד) על שם שהיתה מקטרת בשמים לעבודה זרה.

(Ramban on Genesis 36:2-3)

While *Sefer HaYashar* and Rashi differ as to the origin of the alternative names for Esau's first wife, both agree that Esau's choice of wife was not meritorious. Her name either reflects Esau's resentment of his younger brother (reflecting the negative attitude of the Edomites / Romans towards the Jews), or her name is indicative of her loyalty to the gods of her father, gods that are an anathema to the Jewish People and to the God of Israel.

While Genesis 26:34-35 mentions Judith daughter of Be'eri the Hittite, Genesis 28:9 fails to mention a daughter of Be'eri, but mentions Oholibamah daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite whom Rashi identifies with Judith:

⁵ Jastrow 1996:1043

אהליבמה היא יהודית והוא כינה שמה יהודית לומר שהיא כופרת בעבודת אלילים כדי להטעות את אביו:

(Rashi on Genesis 36:2)

According to Rashi, Esau called his second wife Judith to deceive his father into thinking that Oholibamah had renounced idolatry⁶. Once again Esau's wife is depicted as unsuitable for a son of Isaac, and Esau is shown in a negative light: as a deceiver of his father.

Ramban also identifies Oholibamah with Judith, giving the same explanation as Rashi

ואהליבמה היא יהודית, אותו רשע כינה שמה יהודית לומר שהיא כופרת בעבודה זרה כדי להטעות את אביו.

(Ramban on Genesis 36:2-3)

Rashi (on Genesis 36:2) goes on to denigrate Oholibamah / Judith by taking note of the fact that she is referred to as Oholibamah daughter of Anah daughter of Zibeon the Hivite. Rashi points out that Genesis 36:24 mentions Anah as the son of Zibeon and concludes that Zibeon had sexual intercourse with his son's wife who gave birth to Oholibamah, who is therefore a *mamzeret*, a child born of an illegitimate (in this case incestuous) relationship (*vide* Leviticus 18:15).

“The sons of Zibeon were these: Aiah and Anah—that was the Anah who discovered the hot springs in the wilderness while pasturing the asses of his father Zibeon.” (Genesis 36:24)

⁶ This interpretation is based on an anachronistic understanding of the rabbis. Originally the word *yehudi* meant a person from the land of Judah and not necessarily someone who believed in the God of Israel. According to Shaye Cohen (1999: 80) the first time the term Judean (*yehudi*) was used to designate a person who worshipped the God of Israel was around about the first century Before the Common Era.

“Do not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law: she is your son’s wife; you shall not uncover her nakedness.” (Leviticus 18:15)

בת ענה בת צבעון. אם בת ענה לא בת צבעון ענה בנו של צבעון שנא' ואלה בני צבעון ואיה וענה מלמד שבא צבעון על כלתו אשת ענה ויצאת אהליבמה מבין שניהם והודיעך הכתוב שכולן בני ממזרות היו:

(Rashi on Genesis 36:2)

Since Anah is not the daughter of Zibeon, but his son, it follows, according to Rashi, that Oholibamah was the daughter of both Anah and his father Zibeon (the mother being Anah’s wife).

Elsewhere (Genesis 36:20) Anah is mentioned as the brother of Zibeon:

“These were the sons of Seir the Horite, who were settled in the land: Lotan, Shobal, Zibeon, Anah,”

Ḥizquni takes cognizance of both verses and postulates that Anah was both Zibeon’s brother and son because Zibeon had sexual intercourse with his mother who gave birth to Anah. Thus Oholibamah, Esau’s wife, was the daughter of a *mamzer*, the product of an incestuous relationship between a mother and son (Leviticus 18:7). He goes on to explain that referring to Oholibamah, granddaughter of Zibeon, as his “daughter” conforms to biblical style, citing Genesis 36:39 (paraphrased in 1 Chronicles 1:50) as an example:

“And when Baal-hanan son of Achbor died, Hadar succeeded him as king; the name of his city was Pau, and his wife’s name was Mehetabel daughter of Matred daughter of Me-zahab”.

(Genesis 36:39)

“When Baal-hanan died, Hadad succeeded him as king; and the name of his city was Pai, and his wife’s name Mehetabel daughter of Matred daughter of Me-zahab.” (1 Chronicles 1:50)

בת ענה בת צבעון בפרשה זו תמצא ענה אחיו של צבעון כדכתיב ושובל וצבעון וענה, וכתיב ואלה בני צבעון ואיה וענה הוא שפרש"י שצבעון בא על אמו והוליד ממנה ענה א"כ הוא היה בנו ואחיו ולכך מונהו עם בני שעיר ועם בני צבעון והיינו דכתיב הוא ענה פ' הוא ענה דמעיקרא. ויתכן לומר בת ענה בן צבעון ומה שכתוב בת צבעון אינו מוסב אענה שהרי זכר היה אלא מוסב לאהליבמה כלומר אהליבמה שהיתה בת ענה ובת צבעון שבני בנים הרי הם כבנים דוגמא בת מטרד בת מי זהב.
(Ḥizquni on Genesis 36:2)

Both Rashi and Ḥizquni portray Oholibamah as having doubtful status. She is either a *mamzeret* or a daughter of a *mamzer*, although Ḥizquni does concede that there are those who read the text literally and claim that Anah was the daughter of Zibeon and not his son. According to this interpretation Anah is mentioned as one of chieftains of the Horites (Genesis 36:29) because her brother, Aiah died, leaving only Anah to inherit from their father, Zibeon:

יש מפרשים בפרק יש נוחלין ענה נקבה היתה מדכתיב בת ענה בת צבעון, והא דכתיב לקמן הוא ענה אשר מצא את הימים דמשמע זכר היה היינו על ידי שירשה במקום איה שהרי איה אחיו של ענה היה ולא מצינו שנמנה באלופים אלא שמע מינה איה מת וענה נשארה יחידה לאביה ולהכי מנו לה בבני שעיר החורי יושבי הארץ וירשה במקום זכר ונמנית באלופיהם:

(Ḥizquni on Genesis 36:2)

Rashi, determined to malign Oholibamah and, by extension Esau, states that not only was Oholibamah a product of an incestuous union, but she herself was guilty of the crime:

ואהליבמה ילדה וגו'. קרח זה ממזר היה ובן אליפז היה שבא על אשת אביו אל אהליבמה אשת עשו שהרי הוא מנוי עם אלופי אליפז בסוף הענין (ב"ר):

Since the Torah (Genesis 36: 14-16) states that Korah was the son of Oholibamah, Esau's wife, and Eliphaz, Esau's firstborn son from his wife

While Ibn Ezra concedes that it is possible to infer from Genesis 36:2 that Oholibamah was the product of an incestuous relationship, (either Zibeon had sexual intercourse with his daughter-in-law) (*vide* Rashi), or Zibeon had sexual

(Ibn Ezra on Genesis 36:2)

ל:

תאמר איך נאמר כי לבדל הקדמונים שכתבו כי קולאם שבכא הוה רבו עמא ומא ומאע
מאלי ק' כי ק' קולאם שבכא כי ויאולו ויאולו איש קולאם שרישו. ופירש' זוטא כי הוה
מאע' וזע' וזע' קולאם על שבתו רבו. וכן ה' י' ויאולו ויאולו ויאולו ויאולו ויאולו
בזמנו וזע' כי ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע'
כי הוה ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע'
כי הוה ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע'
כי הוה ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע'
כי הוה ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע'
כי הוה ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע' חק' ת' ת' ע'

mamzerim or children of *mamzerim*:

Abraham Ibn Ezra disagrees with Rashi and Hizquni, rejecting their attitude towards Esau, and disputing their claim that Oholibamah and Korah were

nakedness of your father." (Leviticus 18:8)

"Do not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the

(Genesis 36: 14-16)

Eliphaz in the land of Edom. Those are the descendants of Adah"
Zepho, Kenaz, Korah, Gatam, and Amalek; these are the clans of
descendants of Esau's firstborn Eliphaz: the clans Teman, Omar,
Korah. These are the clans of the children of Esau. The
Anah daughter of Zibeon: she bore to Esau Jeshu, Jalam, and
"And these were the sons of Esau's wife Oholibamah, daughter of

contravening Lev 18:8:

Adah, Rashi claims that Eliphaz had sexual intercourse with his father's wife,

intercourse with his brother's wife), he refutes the idea and claims that Esau's wife is the daughter of Anah, the son of Zibeon, not Anah the brother of Zibeon. He claims that the Torah states her genealogy as "the daughter of Anah, daughter of Zibeon" to differentiate between the two men named Anah. The Torah merely informs us, writes Ibn Ezra, that Zibeon is Oholibamah's grandfather, not uncle.

Turning his attention to the issue of Korah's status, Ibn Ezra states that there are commentators who claim that there were two men by the name of Korah, one the son of Oholibamah, and the second the son of Eliphaz, the son of Adah. One was Esau's grandson, and the other Esau's son. Ibn Ezra, however, believes that Korah was the son of Oholibamah, who died while he was still a young child (he was the youngest of her sons). Ibn Ezra claims that Korah is counted as one of the chieftains of Eliphaz because he was brought up by Adah, the mother of Eliphaz, together with her own children.

Ibn Ezra's exegesis exonerates Oholibamah and Korah from the status of *mamzerut*, which in turn vindicates Esau from the charge of marrying a *mamzeret*, which would be a contravention of Deuteronomy 23:3:

"No one *mamzer* shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of his descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord"

Shabbetai ben Yoseph in his super-commentary on Rashi (Siftei Ḥakhamim) states that if, as Rashi claims, Oholibamah and Judith were the same woman then Be'eri and Anah must have been the same man. Furthermore he reconciles the fact that according to the Torah Judith was a Hittite and Oholibamah a Hivite by stating that the father of Judith / Oholibamah was a Hittite and her mother was a Hivite.

ואף על פי שיהודית היא בת בארי החתי ואהליבמה היא בת ענה החוי, יש לומר הוא ענה הוא בארי דשני שמות היה לו, והא דמייחס אותו פעם למשפחת החוי ופעם

Genesis 28:9 mentions that Esau took Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, sister of Nebaioth as a wife, while Genesis 36:3 claims that the Since Judith died childless her name is not mentioned.

those wives who bore Esau children are mentioned in the second list of wives. According to Hitzquni, Judith is not mentioned in Genesis 36 because only (Hitzquni on Genesis 36:2)

ים: ותא חנה ויערי ראובן ל' לא אלא ו: ובעב בת בני עמי גב
ישע ועכ וערי ראובן וראובן יערי ראובן יערי ראובן יערי ראובן יערי ראובן
ותא חנה ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן
לד:

ואת חנה ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן
ותא חנה ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן
ועי לקת את חנה ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן
Be'er were the same person.

This conjecture is supported by Hitzquni who also concurs that Anah and
(Siftei Hakhaim on Genesis 36.3)

אשר אחת היתה.
ותא חנה ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן ויערי ראובן
Oholibamah were two different women:

without having children and Esau then married Oholibamah. Thus Judith and
Oholibamah and not Judith. According to this alternative opinion Judith died
Siftei Hakhaim posits another supposition, based on the fact that Genesis
26 mentions Judith, but not Oholibamah, while Genesis 36 mentions

(Siftei Hakhaim on Genesis 36)
לכן מייחסו פסוק למשפחת החתן ולא לפסוק החתן.
למשפחת החתן, ואשר דארי חתן ממשפחת החתן ואת חנה ויערי ראובן

daughter of Ishmael and the sister of Nebaioth was named Basemath. Naturally the rabbis needed to reconcile the discrepancy and simply stated that Esau's third wife had two names. This is already reflected in the Aramaic translation of the Torah, Targum Yonathan ben Uzziel:

ואלו עליו לתו ישמעאל ונסיב ית מחלת ביה בשמת בת ישמעאל בר אברהם אחותו דנביתו מן אמיה על נסוי ליה לאנתו:

(Targum Yonathan ben Uzziel Genesis 28:9)

According to Rashi (on Genesis 36:3), Rabbeinu Bahya (on Genesis 36:3), Bereishit Rabbah (67:13), Midrash Shemuel (17a), Yalkut Shimon! Bereishit (27:116), and Yalkut Shimon! Shemuel (13:117), Esau noticed that his Canaanite wives caused his parents bitterness and he sought to make amends by marrying a daughter of Ishmael, the son of his grandfather, Abraham. Thus Esau gained atonement for his sin of marrying Canaanite women by taking a wife from the daughters of Ishmael, Abraham's kin. He therefore called Basemath, his third wife, Mahalath, from the Hebrew root m-ḥ-l meaning 'pardon', 'forgive', since she was a source of pardon for Esau.

לאו אסמאל
 ביה בשמת בת
 אברהם אחותו
 על נסוי ליה
 לאנתו:

(Rashi on Genesis 36:3)

לאו אסמאל
 ביה בשמת בת
 אברהם אחותו
 על נסוי ליה
 לאנתו:

(Rabbeinu Bahya on Genesis 36:3)

וירא עשו כי רעות בנות כנען וילך עשו אל ישמעאל רבי יהושע בן לוי אמר נתן דעתו להתגייר מחלת שמחל לו הקדוש ברוך הוא על כל עונותיו ...
(Bereishit Rabbah 67:13),

רבי זעירא [הוון] בעין ממנייא יתיה ולא [בעין] קבלי עלוי כיון דשמע הדא מתניתא חכם וחתן ונשיא הגדולה מכפרת קבל עליו חכם מפני שיבה תקום והדרת פני זקן (ויקרא י"ט ל"ה) וכתוב בתריה וכי יגור אתך גר (שם שם ל"ג) מה גר נמחל לו על כל עונותיו אף זה [חכם שנתמנה] נמחל לו על כל עונותיו חתן וילך עשו אל ישמעאל ויקח את מחלת [בראשית כ"ח ט'] וכי מחלת הוא שמה והלא בשמת היה שמה אלא מלמד שמחלה לו על כל עונותיו.

(Midrash Shemuel 17a)

... וילך עשו אל ישמעאל ויקח את מחלת ר' יהושע בן לוי אמר נתן דעתו להתגייר מחלת שנמחלו לו עונותיו ...

(Yalkut Shimoni Bereishit 27:116)

חתן דכתיב וילך עשו אל ישמעאל וגו' וכי מחלת שמה והלא בשמת שמה, אלא מלמד שנמחלו לו עונותיו.

(Yalkut Shimoni I Shemuel 13:117)

According to these sources there are three means to atonement: conversion to Judaism, attaining a high office and marriage. The fact that Basemath bat Ishmael is also called Mahalath bat Ishmael is used as a justification for the assertion that marriage is a source of atonement.

According to Bereishit Rabbah (67:13), Esau took a wife from the Ishmaelites after he realised that his Canaanite wives were a cause of bitterness to Isaac and Rebecca. The *midrash* quotes Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi who taught that by marrying a daughter of his father's kinsman Esau displayed his intention to adopt his father's values (conversion): רבי יהושע בן לוי אמר נתן דעתו להתגייר. This idea was adopted by Ramban, Rabbeinu Bahya and Yalkut Shimoni who

give credit to Esau for fulfilling two of the three means of attaining atonement, namely he “converted” and he took a wife.

Various explanations are given for Mahalath’s alternative name, Basemath. According to Ramban, Basemath was a description of Esau’s third wife, who burned spices (*besamim*) [for worship]: והוא, ובשמת בת ישמעאל יהיה שם העצם, ושם תואר לקטור הבשמים. It is not clear whether Ramban believed Basemath burned spices for the worship of the God of Israel or the gods of the Ishmaelites. This particular interpretation of the name Basemath is the same as that used to explain the alternative name of Esau’s first wife, Basemath bat Elon, the Hittite. Ramban notices the link and claims that Esau deliberately named his third wife after his first wife, who had died childless, since her given name, Mahalath, was unbecoming (*maḥala* means “sickness”)⁷. Esau, therefore chose to call her Basemath, from the word *bosem*, ‘perfume’ or ‘spices’. Esau deliberately named her after his first wife because, coming from kindred stock, she was accepted by Isaac, thereby making her Esau’s most beloved wife. This interpretation turns that of the previous sources on its head. While the former states that the given name of Ishmael’s daughter was Basemath, and Esau gave her the alternate name Mahalath, for a positive reason (she was the means by which he received atonement for his misdeeds), Ramban claims that Ishmael had named his daughter Mahalath (a *shem ka’ur* ‘an ugly name’) and Esau named her Basemath after his first wife, because she was accepted and loved by his parents:

בשמת בת ישמעאל. ולהלן הוא קורא לה מחלת (לעיל כח ט), מצאתי בהגדת מדרש ספר שמואל (פרק יז) שלשה מוחלין להם על כל עונותיהם, גר שנתגייר והעולה לגדולה והנושא אשה, ולמד הטעם מכאן, לכך נקראת מחלת שנמחלו לו עונותיו. כל זה לשון רש"י: והנה לא נתן טעם באבי אהליבמה שנקרא שם בארי, וכאן ענה, ובשמת בת ישמעאל יהיה שם העצם, והוא שם תואר לקטור הבשמים. ובבראשית רבה (סז יג) אמרו נתן עשו דעתו להתגייר, מחלת, שמחל לו הקב"ה על עונותיו, בשמת, שנתבשמה דעתו עליו. והנה שניהם תאר, אין שם העצם נודע בם. ולכך אמר רבי אברהם כי היו לה

⁷ While the first opinion regarding the meaning of the name *Maḥalath* is based on the Hebrew root *m - ḥ - l*, Ramban bases his interpretation on the root *ḥ - l - h*.

שני שמות וגם לאביה: ויתכן לומר כי השתים נשים ההם מתו בלא בנים, אולי נענשו בעבור שהיו מורת רוח ליצחק ולרבקה, ונשא אחות אשתו בת אלון, ואחרת, אהליבמה בת ענה, אבל בת ישמעאל אחות נביות, בעבור שהיה לה שם כעור בלשון הקדש, מחלת, קרא את שמה בשם הנכבד אשר היה לאשתו הראשונה, מלשון בשמים, כי היתה חביבה עליו בעבור שהיתה ממשפחתו, ואיננה רעה בעיני יצחק אביו:
Ramban (on Genesis 36:2-3).

According to Ramban, Bereishit Rabbah and Yalkut Shimoni, an alternative explanation of the name Basemath is that Esau named his third and most acceptable wife, Basemath because his character grew better due to her influence (*vide* Jastrow 1996:179).

בשמת, שנתבשמה דעתו עליו.

(Ramban on Genesis 36:2-3)

וירא עשו כי רעות בנות כנען וילך עשו אל ישמעאל רבי יהושע בן לוי
אמר נתן דעתו להתגייר מחלת שמחל לו הקדוש ברוך הוא על כל
עונותיו (בראשית לו) בשמת שנתבסמה דעתו עליו.

(Bereishit Rabbah 67:13)

... וילך עשו אל ישמעאל ויקח את מחלת ר' יהושע בן לוי אמר נתן דעתו להתגייר
מחלת שנמחלו לו עונותיו בשמת שנתבשמה דעתו עליו.

(Yalkut Shimoni Genesis 27:116)

Investigating the rabbinic response to the anomalies in the text regarding the names of Esau's wives we see that according to rabbinic tradition Esau married three women: Basemath / Adah bat Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah bat Anah bat Zibeon the Hivite / Judith bat Be'eri the Hittite, and Basemath / Mahalath bat Ishmael. The rabbis suggested that the name of each wife reflected something about Esau himself. Thus his first wife was named Basemath because she burned spices on the altars of her father's gods, a practice which caused great bitterness to her parents-in-law, Isaac and Rebecca. Esau named her Adah as an expression of his resentment at

having been cheated of his birthright, based on the understanding of the name Adah being derived from the root 'd-h meaning "pass by". Esau claimed that "the blessing had in that time passed from him".

While Esau's first wife is indicative of his disregard for his parents' abhorrence of idolatry and his resentment towards his younger brother, his second wife is symptomatic of Esau's deceptiveness and duplicity, and his disregard for the laws of sexual morality. According to the sages the name Judith would ordinarily signify that the owner of the name was a worshipper of the God of Israel, but the rabbis, determined to malign Esau, taught that her real name was Oholibamah and that Esau had named her Judith in order to deceive his father into believing that she had renounced idolatry. This interpretation reinforces the rabbinic polemic against the Edomites and, by extension, the Romans.

Sforno (on Genesis 36:2) blames Oholibamah for Esau's relocation to Seir, an alternative name for Edom. Thus, according to Sforno, Esau's rise to power in Seir to eventually become an enemy of Israel was due to Oholibamah's influence:

את אהליבמה בת ענה, היא היתה מבני שעיר החורי ועל ידה הלך עשו לארץ שעיר
 כאמרו וישב עשו בהר שעיר ובניו אחריו השמידו את החורי כאמרו כאשר עשה לבני
 עשו היושבים בשעיר אשר השמיד את החורי מפניהם ולזה חזר ואמר ואלה תולדות
 עשו אבי אדום בהר שעיר, ומנה האלופים כי בניו אחריו היו שכבשו ונעשית תמנע
 פילגש ונעשו תולדות עשו אלופים:

(Sforno on Genesis 36:2)

Not content to merely portray Esau as a deceiver of his father, commentators like Rashi and Hizquni accuse Oholibamah of being the product of an incestuous relationship and therefore of having the status of a *mamzeret*. This charge discredits Esau for marrying a *mamzeret*, thereby contravening the Deuteronomic command not to marry a *mamzer* until the

tenth generation. Not only is Oholibamah a *mamzeret*, but, Rashi claims that she was herself guilty of incest by having sexual intercourse with Eliphaz, Esau's son by his first wife Adah. The result of this illicit union was Korah.

The medieval commentator, Abraham ibn Ezra is rather uncomfortable with this conjecture and strives to find an alternative explanation for the anomalies in the text which are used by Rashi and Ḥizquni to demonstrate Oholibamah's status. Ibn Ezra exonerates Esau for committing the transgression of marrying a *mamzeret*.

Unlike his first two wives, Esau's third wife reflects her husband's positive quality of honouring his parents by attempting to make amends for marrying foreign women. Aware of the heartache he caused his parents by marrying Hittite and Hivite women, Esau married a daughter of Ishmael, his father's brother and named her Mahalath, since she was the source of atonement for his transgressions.

Besides the tradition that Esau repented of his ways and married a daughter of Ishmael, who was a source of atonement, the rabbis do not attempt to justify Esau's choice of wives. Indeed even Isaac is criticised for not being strict about who his eldest son married:

ויהי עשו בן ארבעים שנה. ולא חשש יצחק להשיא לו ולאחיו נשים הגונות. ויקח אשה את יהודית בת בארי החתי. ולא הקפיד יצחק על נשואי החתיות כמו שעשה אביו.
(Sforno on Genesis 26:34)

Esau is portrayed as an unscrupulous and unprincipled man who hunted down other men's wives and raped them. Esau decided to emulate his father, who had married at the age of forty, by taking a wife when he turned forty. But unlike Isaac, he married foreign women forbidden to Israelite men. Rabbeinu Bahya accuses Esau of putting on appearances of being pious, while in reality he was ungodly. Rabbeinu Bahya, quoting Vayiqra Rabbah

13.5, compares Esau to a wild boar who displays his cleft hooves when lying down as if to say “I am fit to eat”, while concealing the fact that it does not chew its cud. Similarly Esau’s descendents were robbers and committed acts of violence, while outwardly pretending to worship God.

יכרסנמה חזיר מיער משה אמר (ויקרא יא) ואת החזיר כי מפריס פרסה למה נמשלה לחזיר לומר לך מה חזיר בשעה שהוא רובץ מוציא טלפיו ואומר ראו שאני טהור כך מלכות אדום מתגאה וחומסת וגוזלת ונראת כאלו מצעת בימה מעשה בשלטון אחד שהיה הורג הגנבים והמנאפים והמכשפים.

(Vayiqra Rabbah 13.5)

ויהי עשו בן ארבעים שנה ויקח אשה את יהודית בת בארי החתי ואת בשמת. דרשו רז"ל כל ארבעים שנה היה עשו צד נשי אנשים ומענה אותן וכיון שהגיע לארבעים שנה דמה עצמו לאביו אמר מה אבא נשא אשה בן ארבעים אף אני בן ארבעים, ועל אומתו הזכיר אסף (תהלים פ) יכרסמנה חזיר מיער, ודרשו רז"ל מה חזיר מראה טלפיו ואומר ראו שאני טהור, כך בני עשו גוזלין וחומסין ומראין עצמן כאלו הם עובדי הש"י.

(Rabbeinu Bahya on Genesis 26:34)

Rabbeinu Bahya continues to paint Esau in a bad light by stating that when he married his Hittite and Hivite wives he was merely marrying women of his own character. Quoting “But those who in their crookedness act corruptly, let the Lord make them go the way of evildoers. May it be well with Israel!” (Psalms 125:5) and a Talmudic proverb לא לחנם הלך זרזיר אצל עורב אלא מפני שהוא מינו (Bava Qamma 92b), Rabbeinu Bahya (on Genesis 26:34) claims that Esau, who was wicked sought a wife from the descendents of the wicked and therefore it is understandable that he should choose a wife from those nations that Deuteronomy charges the Israelites to destroy (Deuteronomy 20:17):

והגיד הכתוב כי עשו הרשע לקח נשיו מזרע הרשעים וזהו שכתוב (תהלים קכה) והמטים עקלקלותם יוליכם ה' את פועלי האון, כלומר מתחברים הם לפועלי האון ואז שלום על ישראל שלא יתערב זרע פסול בזרעם, והנה עשו הלך אחר מינו, ואמרו רז"ל לא לחנם

הלך זרזיר אצל עורב אלא מפני שהוא מינו, ייתי הדין מחיק שמא ויסב להדין מחיקת
שמא:

(Rabbeinu Bahya on Genesis 26:34)

The *midrash* Tanḥuma denounces Esau further by stating that his marriages to his first two wives caused Isaac to lose his eyesight. According to this collection of *midrashim*, Esau deliberately married Canaanite women out of anger that the Divine Presence dwelt in Isaac's house. Esau's wives practiced their idolatrous worship, causing God's Presence to leave his father's house. Upon witnessing the departure of God's Presence, Isaac became depressed so God dimmed his eyes so that he would not become more dejected:

מה כתיב למעלה ותהיין מרת רוח ליצחק ואח"כ ותכהין עיניו, מפני הכעס שהיה
מכעיסולפי שהשכינה היתה שרויה בביתו של יצחק עמד עשו ונטל מבנות כנען והיו
נשיו מעשנות ומקטרות לעבודה זרה שלהם ונסתלקה הימנו שכינה מיצחק והיה רואה
יצחק ומיצר, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא הריני מכה את עיניו שלא יראה ויוסיף צער לפיכך
ותכהין עיניו.

(Tanḥuma *Toledot* 8)

The author of this *midrash* learns the cause of Isaac's blindness from the juxtaposition of the following three verses:

"When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith daughter of Beerī the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah. When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, 'My son.' He answered, 'Here I am.'" (Genesis 26:34-27:1).

Summation

The rabbis make no attempt to justify or lessen Esau's transgression of marrying Canaanite women, on the contrary they use every opportunity to

vilify and condemn Esau for his action. Not only did he cause his parents bitterness and sorrow, but his defiance of the norms of his father and grandfather caused his father's blindness.

The rabbis state that Esau was as wicked as his Canaanite wives and that his choice of them was a natural result of his search for a suitable partner for his disposition. The rabbis stressed that the names of Esau's first two wives, (both those given to them by their parents, and those given to them by Esau himself) were indicative of and reflected his nature. The rabbis seem determined to connect Esau with Rome, the persecutor of the Jews during the first centuries of the Common Era.

This negative portrayal of Jacob's older brother and the condemnation of his marriages are in keeping with the anti-Edomite sentiment of the Bible and the anti-Roman sentiment of the rabbis whose criticism of Esau gave vent to their anger against their oppressors.

In the case of Esau, the rabbis saw no need to validate or excuse his disobedience of the prohibition of marrying foreign women expressed in the Torah and rabbinic law. On the contrary, given the tradition that Esau was the ancestor of the Edomites and hence the Romans, it suited the purpose of the sages to take a harsh stand against Jacob's rival for the birthright. Since the Torah does not explicitly state the reason for Isaac and Rebecca's bitterness towards Esau's first two wives, it is clear that the rabbis assumed that Esau's parents disapproved of their son's relationships because the women were Canaanites. This assumption on the part of the sages clearly reflected their ideology and the socio-political circumstances of their time. Indeed the rabbis went to great pains to express their disapproval of Esau because he married foreign women.

Chapter Four — Joseph and Asenath

“Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-phaera, priest of On. Thus Joseph emerged in charge of the land of Egypt” (Genesis 41:45)

“Before the years of famine came, Joseph became the father of two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Poti-phaera, priest of On, bore to him.” (Genesis 41:50)

“To Joseph were born in the land of Egypt Manasseh and Ephraim, whom Asenath daughter of Poti-phaera priest of On bore to him.” (Genesis 46:20)

According to the Book of Genesis, the hero of the Joseph saga was given an Egyptian wife (Asenath) by Pharaoh on his rise to power and prominence as second-in-command after he interpreted the monarch’s dreams. Not only was Joseph’s wife an Egyptian, she was also the daughter of a priest of the Egyptian city On¹ and she bore Joseph two sons Manasseh and Ephraim. These children were blessed by Jacob from his death bed, the words of the blessing being used as the standard blessing in Jewish tradition for fathers to bless their sons at the Friday night *Shabbat* table.

Since both the Torah and Jewish tradition positively accept the marriage of Joseph the son of Jacob and Asenath bat Poti-phaera, priest of On, the rabbis had to justify the relationship, especially because of Joseph’s epithet of “*Hazadik*”, the “Righteous”². Thus the midrashic tradition that Asenath was

¹ On, known by the Greeks as Heliopolis, was the centre of the worship of the Egyptian sun god.

² Joseph is known in rabbinic literature as *Yosef Hazadik* because he resisted Potiphar’s wife’s attempts at seduction.

According to Yalkut Shimoni Genesis 34:134, Jacob's sons wanted to kill Asenath, who was the product of a rape, so that no one could charge the house of Jacob with harlotry. In order to save her life, therefore, Jacob cast Asenath out of his house, but before doing so he tied a piece of gold (in other versions an amulet or an inscription) around her neck. According to some versions of the *midrash*, the inscription (or amulet) contained Asenath's story and her lineage, while according to Yalkut Shimoni it merely contained God's holy name:

מה עשה שכס בן חמור הביא נערות משחקות חוצה לה מתופפות בתופים ויצאה חוצה לראות בבנות הארץ ושללה ושכב עמה והרתה וילדה את אסנת. ואמרו בני יעקב להרגה אמרו יאמרו בכל הארץ שיש בת זנות באהלי יעקב מה עשה יעקב כתב על ציץ של זהב שם הקודש ותלה על צוארה ושלחה.

(Yalkut Shimoni Genesis 34:134. Similarly Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 37).

... ותלה לה [אסנת] יעקב אבינו קמיע בצוארה והשליכה ...

(Da'at Zekeinim on Genesis 41:45. Similarly Rabbeinu Baḥya on Genesis 41:45 and Yalkut Shimoni Genesis 34:134)

According to Rabbeinu Baḥya (on Genesis 41:45, *supra*), Jacob placed his granddaughter under a bush (*sneh*), after sending her from his house, hence the name Asenath. Asenath was sent to Egypt where she was adopted by Poti-phera, and brought up as his own daughter. Some *midrashim* express the idea that God, through the agency of the archangel, Michael, saw to it that Asenath was taken to Egypt and that she grew up in Poti-phera's house so that Joseph would marry her. According to this legend Joseph was destined to marry Asenath thus justifying their union.

והכל צפוי לפני הקב"ה וירד מיכאל המלאך ונטלה והורידה למצרים לביתו של פוטיפרע שהיתה אסנת ראוייה ליוסף והיתה אשתו של פוטיפרע עקרה וגדלה אותה כבת ולקחה יוסף לאשה:

(Yalkut Shimoni on Genesis 34:134)

והכל צפוי לפני הב"ה וירד מיכאל המלאך והורידה למצרים לבית פוטיפרע שהיתה
אסנת ראויה ליוסף לאשה

(Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer Chapter 37)

בנותיהם בתולות ואחר כך משיאין אותן (על שם דכתיב (שם כד) ואיש לא ידעה ואין
איש אלא אביה). בת שש שנים היתה דינה כשהולידה את אסנת משכם מנין שש שנים
של שכר הצאן שעבד יעקב אבינו ללבן והוסיף עשרים שנה שמת מכאן ואילך יוסף
המבין דעת וירד מיכאל והוליכה לבית פוטיפר:

(Tractate Soferim 21:10)

The *midrash* relates that when Joseph was made viceroy of Egypt he travelled throughout the country and all the women came out to greet him to see his beauty. While they threw gifts at him to attract his eye, Asenath had nothing to throw but her amulet. Upon seeing and reading the amulet, Joseph understood that Asenath was kin and he married her. Thus he is portrayed by the sages as having acted righteously by bringing a stray Jewess back into the fold:

וכשעבר יוסף בכל ארץ מצרים יצאו כל הנשים לראות יפיו של יוסף כדכתיב בנות צעדה
עלי שור וכל אחת זורקת לו חפץ או תכשיט וזו [אסנת] לא היה לה מה לזרוק וזרקה לו
הקמיע שהיה בצוארה ועיין בו וראה שהיא מזרעו של יעקב ונשאה:

(Da'at Zekenim on Genesis 41:45)

The rabbis identify Poti-phera, priest of On and father of Asenath, with Potiphar, Joseph's former master:

"The Midianites, meanwhile, sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward." (Genesis 37:36)

"When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there." (Genesis 39:1)

בת פוטי פרע כהן און. דרשו רז"ל פוטיפרע הוא פוטיפר ונקרא פוטיפר על שם שפיטם פרים ועגלים לע"ז, וזהו לשון פוטיפר מפטם פר, והוא נקרא פוטיפר, ונקרא פוטיפרע על שם שנסתרס מאליו לפי שלקח את יוסף למשכב זכור: ודעתי לומר כי פוטיפרע היה שר משרי פרעה וכאשר נסתרס ושנו את שמו פוטיפרע נתבייש בדבר ונעשה כומר בבית ע"ז, וזהו שכתוב בו כהן און האלוה שלו הוא און, וכן מצינו ביתרו שכתוב כהן מדין, ופירושו כומר לפי שהיה מפטם עגלים לע"ז.

(Rabbeinu Bahya on Genesis 41:45)

דייק מדכתיב ויקרא פרעה שם יוסף וגו' ויתן לו את אסנת וגו', רצה לומר פרעה נתן ליוסף את אסנת ומאי נפקא מינה בזה, ואם כן על כרחך צריך לומר דפוטיפרע הוא פוטיפר, ויש נפקותא גדולה בזה שפרעה היה רוצה ליתן גדולה ליוסף ללובשו בגדי מלוכה, ופרעה ירא כיון דעבד הוא לא יניחו לו גדולה זו, ועוד בנימוסי מצרים כתיב אין עבד מולך ולא לובש בגדי שרים, לכך רצה ליתן ליוסף בת אדוניו של יוסף, דאם האדון נתן לעבדו אשה הוא משוחרר וכל שכן אם נותן לו בתו שהוא משוחרר, אם כן שמע מינה דפוטיפרע הוא פוטיפר וק"ל:

(Sifteī Ḥakhamim on Genesis 41)

According to Sifteī Ḥakhamim Pharaoh gave Joseph his former master's daughter in order to demonstrate that he was no longer a slave, but a free man, and therefore qualified to wear the garments of a royal personage and assume a ruling position in Pharaoh's court.

The notion that Poti-phera, the priest of On, and Potiphar, Joseph's former master, were one and the same person, led to the idea, expressed in Yalkut Shimoni (Genesis 39:146), that Asenath testified to her father that Joseph was innocent of trying to seduce Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39). Her testimony saved Joseph's life and Asenath merited being the mother of the two tribes of Joseph (Menasseh and Ephraim):

ונכנסו כל השרים לחצירו של פוטיפר וספרו לו רצה להרגו אמרה ליה אל תהרגנו ותאבד מעותיך אלא תחבשנו. אפילו כן רצה להרגו עד שבאת אסנת בסתר אל פוטיפרע ונשבעה לו וספרה האמת. אמר לה [הקב"ה] חייך הואיל ואת לומדת עליו זכות שבטים שאני מעמיד ממנו על ידך הם באים.

(Yalkut Shimoni Genesis 39:146)

Yalkut Shimoni on Joshua 2:9 mentions Asenath as one of nine righteous women who converted to Judaism:

יש נשים חסידות גיורות הגר אסנת צפרה שפרה פועה בת פרעה רחב רות ויעל אשת חבר הקיני.

(Yalkut Shimoni on Joshua 2:9)

It is interesting to note that Yalkut Shimoni contradicts itself as to the origins of Asenath. According to Yalkut Shimoni on Genesis 39:146, Asenath was Jacob's granddaughter while Yalkut Shimoni on Joshua 2:9 claims that she converted to Judaism.

Ginzberg (1942, Vol 2: 172-174) quotes a *midrash* (the Prayer of Asenath³) which describes an encounter between Joseph and Asenath. Shortly after being promoted from a prisoner to vizier of Egypt, Joseph visited Potiphar's house and met Asenath. After formally greeting each other, Asenath, taken with Joseph's beauty, attempted to kiss him. Joseph pulled back and told her that, as one who follows God's laws, he could not be intimate with a woman who worships idols. The appearance and speech of Joseph made such an impression on Asenath that she secluded herself in her bedroom, removed her clothes of nobility and donned sackcloth and covered her head with ashes. Thus she remained for seven days and seven nights. On the eighth day Asenath was visited by an angel who bade her remove her sackcloth and dress in clothes of state, for "this day she had been born anew". The angel blessed her and her seven attendants, giving her the name "City of Refuge", and then left her. He had scarcely departed when it was announced that

³ Cf. The pseudepigraphic work "Joseph And Asenath".

Joseph had come for a visit. Joseph was taken with Asenath's transformation and they were betrothed.

This *midrash* expresses the notion that Asenath had experienced a life-changing vision and had renounced the gods of Egypt for the God of Israel, making her a suitable wife for Joseph *Hazadik*.

Summation

Due to Joseph's epithet of *Hazadik*, it was essential for the rabbis to justify his marriage to Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest. In their eagerness to defend Joseph's acceptance of Asenath as a wife, the rabbis even resorted to fantastic narratives involving God or the archangel Michael to justify the union. Hence the *midrashim* that God took note of Asenath when Jacob cast her out of his home and sent the archangel Michael, the prince of angels and guardian of Israel to transport her to Egypt, placing her in Poti-phares's house, where she was adopted.

Similarly the *midrash* that portrays Asenath saving Joseph's life by testifying that he did not try to seduce Potiphar's wife, expresses the idea that Joseph was destined to marry Asenath. God appeared to Asenath and told her that she would be rewarded for her righteousness by being the mother of Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Even the idea that Asenath was actually the daughter of Dinah and Shechem, and therefore not a foreign woman, but of the seed of Jacob, is rather fanciful, as no textual justification is given by the sages for this claim. Yalkut Shimoni on Joshua even makes the bold statement that Asenath was one of the nine righteous women who converted to Judaism, thereby vindicating the saintly Joseph from any potential charges of transgression, which in turn holds up their expressed suspicion of foreign women.

Chapter Five — Judah and the daughter of Shua the Canaanite.

“About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. “(Genesis 38:1-2)

In the chapter that follows the sale of Joseph to the Midianites / Ishmaelites, Judah left his brothers and settled near an Adullamite, named Hirah, where he met and married the daughter of Shua, a Canaanite. Not only is such a union contrary to later biblical ordinances, but it was especially troubling to the rabbis because Judah inherited the status of the firstborn of Jacob (Israel), and it was from the House of Judah that King David traced his lineage. David, in turn is considered the ancestor of the Messiah. The rise of Judah, Jacob’s fourth son, to the position of firstborn and ancestor of the Davidic line is expressed in Jacob’s deathbed blessing of his sons:

“You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise; Your hand shall be on the nape of your foes; Your father’s sons shall bow low to you. Judah is a lion’s whelp; On prey, my son, have you grown. He crouches, lies down like a lion, Like the king of beasts—who dare rouse him? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, Nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet; So that tribute shall come to him And the homage of peoples be his.” (Genesis 49:8-10)

Given Judah’s importance, the rabbis needed to justify his marriage to the daughter of Shua the Canaanite¹. An analysis of the *midrashim* concerning the daughter of Shua the Canaanite brings to light two alternative ways of dealing with, what in the rabbinic mind, is a serious problem.

¹ The name of Judah’s wife is not given and the only identity provided by the text is that she was the daughter of Shua.

The first approach understands Judah's wife to be a Canaanite and he is severely criticised for disregarding the commandment not to marry a Canaanite (Deuteronomy 7:1-4). The second approach is to deny that Judah married a Canaanite by claiming that his father-in-law was not a Canaanite, but a merchant.

The first approach, represented by Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra, understands the biblical verse describing Shua as a Canaanite literally. Ibn Ezra, quoted by Ramban, even states that the reason why Judah's three sons born to him by Shua's daughter were so wicked that God punished them by killing two of them, was precisely because their mother was a Canaanite:

כנעני, לא תגרא (ב"ר) :

(Rashi on Genesis 38:2)

בת איש כנעני, פירוש סוחר, והגאון ה"ר אברהם כתב ויתכן שהוא כמשמעו.

(Or HaḤayyim on Genesis 38:2)

ורבי אברהם אמר (להלן מו י) כי בעבור היות האשה הזאת כנענית ועבר על דעת אבותיו היו בניה רעים ומתו, ולכן הזכירו הכתוב, ושאל לבדו הזכיר שהיה בן הכנענית, כי לא הוצרך להזכיר כן בשלה, ואם כן יהיה טעם וירא שם יהודה, כלומר שראה אותה וחשק בה, כענין וירא אשה בתמנתה דשמשון (שופטים יד א):

(Ramban on Genesis 38:2)

בן הכנענית. לעד כי נשי השבטים היו ארמיות ומצריות ואדומיות ומדיניות והזכיר זו לבדה בעבור שעשה שמעון שלא כהוגן לקחת כנענית. ועל זה הדבר הזכיר מות ער ואונן בעבור היותם בני כנענית:

(ibn Ezra on Genesis 46:10)

Ibn Ezra clearly criticizes Judah for marrying a Canaanite woman attributing the death of his sons Er and Onan to their inherent wickedness due to their Canaanite lineage. Judah suffered the premature death of his two older sons, a tragedy which might have been viewed by the rabbis as divine punishment

for marrying a Canaanite woman. Commenting on Genesis 46:10², ibn Ezra points out that Simeon's marriage to a Canaanite woman was contrary to the norm, as illustrated by the death of Judah's sons, Er and Onan. Aggadat Bereishit (Chapter 64.1) goes further than ibn Ezra, stating that God deliberately killed the daughter of Shua and her two sons, Er and Onan, so that Judah would father a child with Tamar. The *midrash* states that this rather cruel scheme was necessary because God had decided that Judah would be the ancestor of the Messiah and a Canaanite woman would not be a fit progenitor for such an important figure in Jewish tradition. This source claims that Tamar was the daughter of Noah's son, Shem³, who was, according to Ramban (on Genesis 38:2), a priest of *El Elyon*:

ד"א וירד יהודה וגו' וירא שם יהודה [בת איש כנעני ויקחה]. כיון שנטלה אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא המשיח עתיד לעמוד מיהודה והלך ונטל אשת כנענית אלא מה אני עושה מביא עלילות ומשיא לבנו את תמר ותמר היתה בתו של שם הגדול אמר הקב"ה תמות כנעני שנאמר וירבו הימים וגומר ותמת בת שוע אשת יהודה (בראשית לח יב) וימותו בניה שנאמר וימת ער ואונן (שם מו) כדי שידבק יהודה בתמר שהיא כהנת בתו של שם בן נח שנאמר ומלכי צדק מלך וגו' (שם יד יח). ויהי בעת לדתה וגומר ויהי בלדתה ויתן יד (שם לח כז וכח) בקש זרח לצאת תחילה אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא משיח עומד מפרץ ויוצא זרח ראשון יחזור למעי אמו ויצא פרץ ראשון שהמשיח יוצא ממנו שנאמר ויהי כמשיב ידו וגו' (שם שם כט). פרץ זה משיח שנאמר עלה הפורץ לפניהם וגו' (מיכה ב יג). (Aggadat Bereishit Chapter 64.1⁴)

וכן תמר היתה בת אחת מן הגרים בארץ, לא בת איש כנעני ביחוסו, כי חלילה שיהיה אדוננו דוד ומשיח צדקנו שיגלה לנו במהרה מזרע כנען העבד המקולל, ורבותינו אמרו (ב"ר פה י) בתמר שהיתה בתו של שם, והוא כהן לאל עליון:

(Ramban on Genesis 38:2)

² "Simeon's sons: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar, and Saul the son of a Canaanite woman."

³ As opposed to the daughter of Shua, who, as a Canaanite, was a descendant of Noah's middle son Ham (Genesis 10:6). Ham, who reported his father's nakedness, was cursed to be the slave of Shem and Japhet. (Genesis 9:25-27)

⁴ This *midrash* seems to overlook the fact that according to the precept of the Levirate marriage Judah's third son, Shelah is obligated to marry Tamar.

The rabbis' silence about the fact that Judah transgressed the biblical prohibition of having sexual intercourse with one's daughter-in-law⁵ is noteworthy. Given Judah's importance to the history of the Jewish People, they chose to overlook this transgression⁶.

The second approach to the marriage of Judah to the daughter of Shua is to deny that the wife of Judah was a Canaanite at all. Using a verse from the prophet Hosea, the rabbis who followed this solution to the problem proposed that in this context the word *kena'ani* does not mean a 'Canaanite', but rather a 'merchant'. The use of the word in Hosea 12:8 clearly means a 'merchant':

כנען בידו מאזני מרמה לעשק אהב:

"A trader who uses false balances, who loves to oppress,"
(Hosea 12:8)

Isaiah (23: 8, 11) employs the word *kena'an* in the same way:

מי יעץ זאת על צר המעטירה אשר סחריה שרים כנעניה נכבדי ארץ:

"Who was it that planned this For crown-wearing Tyre, Whose merchants were nobles, Whose traders the world honored?"
(Isaiah 23:8)

ידו נטה על הים הרגיו ממלכות ה' צוה אל כנען לשמד מעזניה:

"He stretched out his hand over the sea, he shook the kingdoms: the Lord hath given a commandment against the merchant city, to destroy the strong holds thereof." (Isaiah 23:11)

Targum Onkelos, Targum Yonathan ben Uzziel, the Talmud (Pesachim 50a), Rashbam, Rabeinu Bahya, Bereishit Rabbah, Yalkut Shimoni, Da'at Zekeinim

⁵ "Do not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law: she is your son's wife; you shall not uncover her nakedness." (Leviticus 18:15)

⁶ Vide Chapter Ten — A Comparative Study of Intermarriage in the Bible.

and Ḥizquni employ this second definition when interpreting Genesis 38:2:

וחזא תמן יהודה בת גבר תגרא ושמיה שוע ונסבה ועל לותה:
(Targum Onkelos on Genesis 38:2)

וחמא תמן יהודה ברת גבר תגר ושמיה שוע וגיירה ועל לותה:
(Targum Yonathan ben Uzziel on Genesis 38:2)

כנעני. כתרגומו תגרא. כמו כנעניה נכבדי ארץ. כנען בידו מאזני מרמה. כי מבנות כנען היו
:זוהרים:
(Rashbam on Genesis 38:2)

בת איש כנעני. כתרגומו תגרא, לא כנעני ממש, כי יהודה הלך בדרך אבותיו וחלילה לו
שישא מבנות הכנעני.
(Rabbeinu Bahya on Genesis 38:2)

וירא שם יהודה בת איש כנעני ושמו שוע בר גברא תגרא בוצינא דאתרא.
(Bereishit Rabbah 85:4)

Thus, according to this tradition, Genesis 38:2 reads:

“There Judah saw the daughter of a certain merchant whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her.”

Pesachim 50a, Yalkut Shimoni, Da’at Zekeinim and Ḥizquni all point out that Judah would not have married a Canaanite because Abraham and Isaac warned against marrying Canaanite women. Therefore, they reason, the word “Canaanite” must be interpreted to mean ‘merchant’:

היינו דכתיב [זכריה יד] ולא יהיה כנעני עוד בבית ה' צבאות אלא למאן דאמר הנך תרתי
מאי ולא יהיה כנעני אמר רב ירמיה אין כאן עני וכנעני מנלן דאיקרין תגר דכתיב
[בראשית לח] וירא שם יהודה בת איש כנעני מאי כנעני אילימא כנעני ממש אפשר בא
אברהם והזהיר את יצחק בא יצחק והזהיר את יעקב ויהודה אזיל ונסיב אלא אמר רבי
שמעון בן לקיש בת גברא תגרא דכתיב [הושע יב] כנען בידו מאזני מרמה ואיבעית
אימא מהכא [ישעיהו כג] אשר סחריה שרים כנעניה נכבדי ארץ:
(Pesachim 50a)

וירא שם יהודה בת איש כנעני מאי כנעני אילימא כנעני ממש אפשר בא אברהם והזהיר ליצחק בא יצחק והזהיר ליעקב ויהודה אזיל ונסיב אלא בר גבר תגרא כדכתיב כנען בידו וגו'. ואיתמא מהכה כנעניה נכבדי ארץ בת גבר תגרא בוצינא דאתרא:
(Yalkut Shimoni on Genesis 38: 145)

וקשיא דבת איש כנעני מתרגמין בת גבר תגרא דאיך אפשר אברהם צוה לאליעזר לא תקח אשה לבני מבנות הכנעני ויצחק צוה ליעקב לא תקח אשה לבני מבנות הכנעני וילך יהודה וישא כנענית אלא מהו בת איש כנעני גבר תגרא.
(Da'at Zekeinim on Genesis 37: 35)

חז"ק הא אמרינן בפסחים מה בת איש כנעני דגבי יהודה אילימא כנעני ממש אפשר בא אברהם והזהיר את אליעזר לא תקח אשה לבני מבנות הכנעני ובא יצחק והזהיר את יעקב ובא יהודה ולקח אלא מאי כנעני תגרא.
(Hizquni on Genesis 50: 13)

Summation

The union of Judah and the daughter of Shua the Canaanite was problematic for the rabbis who were conscious of the prohibition of marrying Canaanites, expressed in the Torah. Some rabbis indirectly criticise Judah for marrying the daughter of Shua, either by stating that his two oldest sons died because of the wickedness inherited from their Canaanite mother, or claiming that God saw to it that Judah's wife died so that he would have a child with Tamar, a child who would be the ancestor of the Messiah.

Rabbis who followed an alternative approach to the problem of Judah's marriage to the daughter of Shua, could not accept that Jacob's fourth son and future heir of the spiritual birthright and progenitor of the Messiah, would marry a Canaanite woman, since, according to the sages, both Abraham⁷ and

⁷ According to Genesis 24:2-3 Abraham demanded that his servant promise not to take a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanite women.

Isaac⁸ had admonished their sons not to take Canaanite women for wives. To reconcile their ideals with the biblical text, these rabbis chose to understand the term *kena'ani* to mean 'a trader', referring to Hosea 12:8 and Isaiah 23:8 and 11 to justify their interpretation.

Both sets of sages attempt to exonerate Judah from guilt. While the former indirectly criticise him for marrying the daughter of Shua, he is redeemed in their eyes by taking in Tamar after impregnating her. Their oldest son, Perez, is the ancestor of King David, and thus of the Messiah.

The other sages deny that Judah married a Canaanite, insisting that he merely married the daughter of Shua, a merchant who was living in Canaan because of trade. Indeed, according to these rabbis, Judah heeded his father and grandfather's advice and followed in their footsteps by refraining from marrying a Canaanite. Judah is thus cleared of any transgression and is portrayed as conforming to rabbinic ideology. This is imperative since the rabbis could not accept the idea that Judah, the ancestor of the Messiah, had disobeyed his father, grandfather and the Torah⁹ by marrying a Canaanite.

⁸ "So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying, 'You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women.'" (Genesis 28:1).

⁹ "When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations before you—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations much larger than you . . . You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons." (Deuteronomy 7:1-3)

Chapter Six — Moses and Zipporah.

“When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters . . . Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah as wife. She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, ‘I have been a stranger in a foreign land.’” (Exodus 2:15-16, 21-22)

“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: for he had married a Cushite woman” (Numbers 12:1)

These two biblical passages inform us that Moses, viewed by Jewish tradition as the quintessential prophet and law giver of the Jewish People, married a foreign woman¹. Given the importance of Moses as the disseminator of the Divine law, it is rather surprising that many of the *midrashim* about his marriage do not concern themselves with the fact that Moses married Zipporah. Indeed most of the commentators and *midrashim* attempt to answer questions concerning Numbers 12:1. Some of these *midrashim* deal with the question of whether Moses married two wives, or whether the Cushite woman was Zipporah, and if so why she was referred to as a Cushite woman. Other commentators discuss the subject of Miriam and Aaron's challenge to Moses.

Of the few *midrashim* that reconcile Moses' marriage to the Midianite Zipporah with the rabbinic prohibition of marrying foreign women, Yalkut Shimoni (Exodus 2:169) and Ramban (on Exodus 2:16-21) state that Jethro,

¹ Some traditions claim that Moses had two wives, Zipporah and the Cushite woman, while other traditions identify the Cushite woman with Zipporah, daughter of Jethro. See David Goldenberg (2003:28-29, 52-59)

Zipporah's father, converted to Judaism². Ramban explains Jethro's alternative name of Hobab by stating that the latter was adopted by Moses' father-in-law as his Jewish name:

ואחרי שנתגייר נקרא חובב, דכתיב מבני חובב חותן משה (שופטים ד יא), כי דרך כל המתייהדים לקרא להם שם אחר בישראל.

(Ramban on Exodus 2:16-21).

Of course this does not necessarily mean that his daughter, Zipporah, converted unless Ramban had a patriarchal system in mind which dictated the conversion of a man's entire household when he converted himself. Yalkut Shimoni (Exodus 2:169) has the need to specifically mention that Jethro's children followed their father's example:

חובב על שם שחבב את התורה שלא מצינו בכל הגרים שחבבו את התורה כיתרו. וכשם שחבב הוא את התורה כך חבבו בניו את התורה שנאמר הלוך אל בית הרכבים וגו'. (ירמיהו לה . ב).

(Yalkut Shimoni Exodus 2:169).

The *midrash* continues by stating that the reason why Jethro was called a 'priest of Midian' was that his descendants would in the future become great priests:

ולמה קורא אותו כהן מדין שעתידין בני בנותיו להיות כהנים גדולים

(Yalkut Shimoni Exodus 2:169).

It is not clear whether these progeny of Jethro served the God of Israel or the gods of Midian, but perhaps Ramban infers that Jethro's title of priest was merely a hint at the important role his descendants, through Moses, would play in the religious life of the People of Israel and that he was not actually a priest serving the Midianite gods. This of course would further validate

² This is another example of rabbinic anachronism. The rabbis apply their understanding of Judaism and the conversion process to the Torah narratives.

Moses' selection of a wife in the eyes of the rabbis³. There is, however, a contradiction in Yalkut Shimoni Exodus 2:169 regarding Jethro's embracing of Torah. According to the *midrash* Jethro agreed to give Moses his daughter Zipporah as a wife, provided that the first son born to them would be dedicated to idolatry and any future sons would serve the God of Israel. Moses agreed and he was attacked by God on the way to Egypt because he neglected to circumcise Gershom (Exodus 4:24-26). Zipporah saved Moses' life by taking a flint stone and circumcising Gershom⁴. While this *midrash* questions Jethro's intentions, it certainly paints Zipporah in a good light:

ויואל משה לשבת את האיש בשעה שאמר משה ליתרו תנה לי את צפורה בתך לאשה אמר לו קבל עליך דבר אחד שאני אומר לך ואני נותנה לך לאשה. אמר לו משה מה הוא. אמר לו הבן שיהיה לך תחלה יהיה לע"ז מכאן ואילך לשם שמים וקבל עליו. אמר לו השבע לי (כה) וישבע לו שנאמר ויואל משה לשבת אין אלה אלא לשון שבועה שנאמר ויואל שאול את העם (וכן הוא אומר הוואל קח ככרים). (כז) לפיכך הקדים המלאך להרוג את משה מיד ותקח צפורה צר.

(Yalkut Shimoni Exodus 2:169)

Rabbeinu Bahya (on Exodus 2:21) and Sifteï Ḥakhamim (on Genesis 49, section 20) claim that Zipporah converted, Rabbeinu Bahya even stating that she converted with the intention of marrying Moses:

ויתן את צפורה בתו למשה. נקראת צפורה מלשון צפור שהוא עוף טהור על שם שעתידה להתגייר ולהטהר מטמאת ע"ג ולהזדווג למשה:

(Rabbeinu Bahya on Exodus 2:21)

³ While this would not follow because the *kohanim* were of the family of Aaron, not of Moses, there are biblical references to Moses as a priest (Psalm 99:6). Judges 18:30 seems to refer to a levitical descendant of Moses founding the priestly line of the Danite sanctuary (see Talmud Bava Batra 109b).

⁴ This biblical passage is very ambiguous and scholars are not sure whether God wanted to kill Moses or his son and whether Zipporah circumcised her husband or her son. The fact that Zipporah recognised the need to circumcise her son redeemed her in the eyes of the rabbis, making her a suitable wife for Moses.

ובאמת צפורה גיורת היתה, עוד יש לומר דמשה נשאה קודם מתן תורה:
(Sifteī Ḥakhamim on Genesis 49, section 20)

It is noteworthy that Sifteī Ḥakhamim mentions an alternative opinion that states Moses married Zipporah before the giving of Torah, implying that he was not yet aware of the prohibition against marrying non-Israelite women, thus excusing his marriage to Zipporah. This seems to contradict the rabbinic statement that Abraham knew of, and observed, the entire corpus of Jewish law, both Written and Oral⁵. If Abraham observed rabbinic law, how much more so would Moses. It seems, therefore, that the sages were not adverse to applying diachronic methodology to the text, when doing so would promote their ideology. Or Ha-Ḥayyim (on Exodus 2:21) goes as far as to state that Moses had no choice but to marry Zipporah, as she was destined to be his spouse (she was his *bat zug*):

יכוין הכתוב להודיע כי היא בת זוגו, ותיבת למשה הוא דברי הכתוב שאומר כי צפורה
למשה היא למנה בת זוגו:

Other *midrashim* that deal with Zipporah attempt to explain the meaning and origin of her name and, in doing so, justify Moses' choice of her as his wife. Thus Yalkut Shimoni (Exodus 2:169) and Ḥizquni (Exodus 2:21) both explain the etymology of the name Zipporah as derived from the word *zippor*, meaning "bird". Zipporah, they claim went out to bring Moses into her father's house with the nimbleness of a bird⁶. Yalkut Shimoni (Exodus 2:169) and

⁵ See chapter on Abraham and Keturah of this work. Yet some sources (Bava Mezi'a 86b; Genesis Rabbah 48.12-14; Avot deRabbi Nathan 13; Tanḥuma Vayera 4) admit that Abraham served milk and meat to his guests (Genesis 18:8) despite the later prohibition of mixing meat and dairy products. Later sources (Da'at Zekeinim on Genesis 18:8) state that he served milk, followed by meat, thus conforming to the commandments of Torah. See Ginzberg (1947, Vol 5 :235 n140)

⁶ Ginzberg (1942, Vol 2: 328) cites a *midrash* (Lekah Tov Exodus 4:25) which explains Zipporah's bird-like nimbleness in circumcising her eldest son Gershon in order to save Moses' life, as the source of her name.

Exodus Rabbah, Chapter 1, offer a second explanation of Moses' wife's name: Just as the blood of a bird purified a sufferer of *zar'at*, so Zipporah purified her father's house of idolatry:

ד"א שטהרה כל בית אביה (כב) כדם הצפור.

(Yalkut Shimoni Exodus 2:169)

ולמה נקרא שמה צפורה שטהרה הבית כצפור:

(Exodus Rabbah, Chapter 1)

Rabbeinu Bahya (on Exodus 2:21) states that just as a *zippor* is a pure bird, so Zipporah would in the future be purified from the impurities of idolatry, convert and marry Moses.

These *midrashim* are attempts at dismissing Moses' transgression of marrying a Midianite woman. Some claim that Jethro and his children converted to Judaism thus justifying the marriage of Zipporah and Moses. Others claim that Zipporah converted in her own right, and still others that she was predestined to marry Moses. Zipporah's very name was indicative of her righteousness and suitability to marry the great leader of the Jewish People. One *midrash* even abandons the usual synchronic approach of the rabbis to Torah in order to justify Moses' marriage to the daughter of a Midianite priest by stressing that Moses married Zipporah before the Torah, which prohibits such a union, was given at Mount Sinai.

The majority of *midrashim* concerning Zipporah discuss the passage in Numbers 12 which describes the challenge posed by Miriam and Aaron against Moses regarding his Cushite wife. The debate in rabbinic literature is whether Moses married two different women (Zipporah and a woman from the land of Cush), or whether Zipporah and the Cushite are one and the same woman. Rashbam (on Numbers 12:1) and Hizquni (on Numbers 12:1) declare quite emphatically that Zipporah could not be the Cushite woman,

since she was a Midianite, and therefore of the seed of Abraham⁷, while the Cushites were descendants of Ham⁸, whom God had warned the Israelites not to marry.

הרי צפורה לא היתה כושית, כי כוש מבני חם ומדין מבני קטורה אשר ילדה לאברהם:
(Ḥizquni on Numbers 12:1)

ועוד תשובה כי לא היתה כושית כי כוש מבני חם הוא ומדין מבני קטורה אשר ילדה
לאברהם:
(Rashbam on Numbers 12:1)

Since Zipporah was a descendant of Abraham she was considered suitable to be Moses' wife, but it was inconceivable to the rabbis that a descendant of Ham could be the wife of such an esteemed leader of Israel.

Da'at Zekeinim (on Numbers 12:1), ibn Ezra (on Numbers 12:1), Ḥizquni (on Numbers 12:1) and Rashbam (on Numbers 12:1) all quote a *midrash* from *Divrei haYamim deMoshe Rabbeinu*. This *midrash* states that after Moses fled from Egypt he joined the camp of Kikanos, king of Ethiopia (Cush), whose throne had been usurped. After Kikanos died from a fatal illness Moses was crowned king. After leading his army to victory against the usurpers, Moses reigned over Ethiopia for forty years. Upon defeating the enemy the Ethiopians gave Adonia, King Kikanos' widow, to Moses as a wife. Moses, fearing the God of his fathers and remembering the warnings of Abraham and Isaac not to marry the descendants of Ham, did not have sexual intercourse with her nor did he even look at her. In the fortieth year of Moses' reign over Ethiopia his queen, whose son, Monarchos, had reached manhood, challenged Moses' right to the throne, criticising him for not consummating their marriage and not being an Ethiopian. Under the urging of the people of

⁷ Genesis 25:1-2

⁸ Genesis 10:6

Ethiopia Moses was relieved of his kingship and he left Ethiopia, with many gifts⁹.

כדכתיב בדברי הימים דמשה רבינו מלך היה בארץ כוש ארבעים שנה ולקח מלכה אחת
ולא שכב עמה כמ"ש שם.

(Rashbam Numbers 12:1)

Thus according to Da'at Zekeinim, ibn Ezra, Hizquni and Rashbam, the Cushite woman referred to by Miriam and Aaron is the Ethiopian queen Adonia.

Those *midrashim* that identify the Cushite woman with Zipporah do so in order to lessen Moses' transgression — marrying one foreign woman is less of a transgression than marrying two. His marriage to Zipporah is justified by the rabbis, but marrying a second foreign wife would complicate matters. It was easier to explain Moses' second wife by simply stating that she was none other than Zipporah, daughter of Jethro. This approach, however, needed further explanation. Since the Torah is accepted by the sages as the word of God¹⁰ there could not be any contradictions in the text. Thus the sages had to justify their claim that Zipporah, whose ethnicity is given as Midianite in Exodus 2, and the Cushite wife of Moses mentioned in Numbers 12, were one and the same woman. The rabbis had to provide a reason why Zipporah was referred to as a Cushite.

The apparent contradiction was explained away by understanding the word Cushite metaphorically. Thus Zipporah's extraordinary beauty is given as the reason why she is referred to as a Cushite (Rashi on Numbers 12:1, Rabbeinu Bahya on Numbers 12:1, Targum Yerushalmi on Numbers 12:1, Sifrei Parashat Beha'alotekha Piska 99, Yalkut Shimoni Numbers 12. 737,

⁹ This *midrash* is recorded by Josephus (Antiquities 2.242) and is mentioned in Ginzberg (1942, Vol 2: 286)

¹⁰ The rabbis understood this implicitly and this unshakable belief coloured their understanding and interpretation of the Torah.

Yalkut Shimoni Samuel 2:22, Midrash Tehillim Mizmor 7 and Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 39 and 52). Just as a Cushite differs from other people due to his or her black skin, so Zipporah differed from other women in that she was beautiful and pleasant both in her physical appearance, and in her deeds¹¹. Rashi and Rabbeinu Bahya both point out that the phrase *yafat mar'eh*, “beautiful in appearance” and *kushit* have equal numerical values:

בגימ' יפת מראה . . . על שם נוייה נקראת כושית.

(Rashi on Numbers 12:1)

Another explanation for calling Zipporah a Cushite, is to ward off the “evil eye”:

האשה הכשית. על שם נוייה נקראת כושית כאדם הקורא את בנו נאה כושי כדי שלא תשלוט בו עין רעה:

(Rashi on Numbers 12:1, quoting Tanḥuma)

This explanation infers that a Cushite is the opposite of “beautiful”, as opposed to the numerological explanation which equates blackness with beauty.

While the rabbis were generally suspicious of foreign women and viewed otherness in a negative light, Zipporah’s otherness is portrayed in midrashic literature and the classic commentaries as a positive trait: just as a Cushite is unusual in appearance, so Zipporah was unusually righteous and beautiful:

¹¹ This is not the only occurrence of the metaphorical use of the term *kushi*. King Saul, who stood out from other men because of his height, is referred to as a Cushite in Psalm 7 (the rabbis (Mo'ed Qatan 16b) interpret *Kush ben yemini*, “Cush a Benjaminite” as referring to King Saul, who was of the tribe of Benjamin). Amos (9:7) compares the Israelites to Cushites. The rabbis (Mo'ed Qatan 16b) explain that Just as the Cushites differ in their skin colour, so Israel differs from the other nations in the performance of *mitzvot*. The rabbis (Sifrei Parashat Beha'alotekha Piska 99) understand Eved-melekh the Cushite (Jeremiah 38:7) to refer to Baruch ben Neriah, Jeremiah’s scribe, or to King Zedekiah (Mo'ed Qatan 16b).

האשה הכושית וכי כושית היתה אלא מדיינית היתה שנאמר ולכהן מדין שבע בנות (שמות ב') ומה ת"ל כושית מה כושי משונה בעורו כך צפורה משונה בנויה יותר מכל הנשים כיוצא בו.

(Sifrei Parashat Beha'alotekha Piska 99)

Ibn Ezra (on Numbers 12:1) and Rabbeinu Bahya (on Numbers 12:1) take a more literal approach stating that the Midianites were Ishmaelites who lived in tents and because of the heat of the sun they were not white skinned, but black. Thus Zipporah was black like a Cushite:

והישר בעיני שזו הכושית היא צפורה כי היא מדיינית ומדיינים הם ישמעאלים והם דרים באהלים וכן כתוב ירגזון יריעות ארץ מדין ובעבור חום השמש אין להם לבן כלל וצפורה היתה שחורה ודומה לכושית:

(Ibn Ezra on Numbers 12:1)

The rabbis also attempt to clarify the subject of the public challenge to Moses' authority by his siblings. It is not clear from the Torah text whether Miriam and Aaron objected to the fact that Moses had married a foreign woman, or whether they were opposed to her because she was a Cushite. It is noteworthy that all the *midrashim* examined claim that the issue which led Miriam and Aaron to challenge Moses was the fact that they discovered that Moses had decided to abstain from sexual intercourse with his wife:

ותדבר מרים ואהרן. (ספרי) היא פתחה בדבור תחלה לפיכך הקדימה הכתוב תחלה ומנין היתה יודעת מרים שפירש משה מן האשה רבי נתן אומר מרים היתה בצד צפורה בשעה שנאמר למשה אלדד ומידד מתנבאים במחנה כיון ששמעה צפורה אמרה אוי לנשותיהן של אלו אם הם נזקקים לנבואה שיהיו פורשין מנשותיהן כדרך שפירש בעלי ממני ומשם ידעה מרים והגידה לאהרן ומה מרים שלא נתכוונה לגנותו כך נענשה ק"ו למספר בגנותו של חברו:

(Rashi on Numbers 12:1)

The issue of Zipporah's foreignness or her race does not seem to be a concern. As David Goldenberg (2003:27) points out it is modern biblical scholars who have read their modern day assumptions and prejudices into the

text. The rabbis claim that Miriam and Aaron disapproved of the fact that Moses neglected his husbandly duties, a direct contravention of a positive commandment¹², legislated by Moses himself. It seems that all the *midrashim* and rabbinic commentators agree that Miriam and Aaron's criticism of their brother was not his marriage to a foreign woman, but his neglect of her.

David Goldenberg (2003:55) points out that such an interpretation makes sense. While the complaint against Moses concerned his wife, his siblings point out that God spoke to them as well. The nature of the complaint is connected to the following verse, which describes Moses as "very humble more than anyone else on earth" (Numbers 12:3). Thus the complaint had something to do with Moses' marriage, his relationship with God and his humility. The rabbinic interpretation explains all three points. The grievance against Moses was that he had a "holier than thou" attitude, as illustrated by his decision to live a life of celibacy. Indeed Midrash Tanḥuma *Ṣav* 13¹³ relates that Moses decided to remain celibate after the Revelation at Mount Sinai:

ומאיזה זמן פירש משה מדרך ארץ, אלא בשעה שאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה בסיני קודם מתן תורה שיקדש את העם ואמר להם, לשלשת ימים אל תגשו אל אשה (שמות יט טו), פירשו הם מנשותיהם ופירש משה מאשתו. ואחר מתן תורה אמר ליה הקדוש ברוך הוא, לך אמור להם, שובו לכם לאהליכם, ואתה פה עמוד עמדי (דב' ה ל-לא), ואל תשוב לדרך ארץ.

(Midrash Tanḥuma *Ṣav* 13)

According to Miriam and Aaron, Moses is no better or holier than them and, just as they have not remained celibate, so there is no reason for Moses to

¹² "If he [a man] marries another [wife], he must not withhold from this one [his first wife] her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights" (Exodus 21:10). This command concerning a man who marries two women was interpreted by the rabbis as a positive commandment that a husband is obligated to fulfil the sexual needs of his wife (wives).

¹³ Tanḥuma understands the command that the Israelites return to their tents to mean that they can resume sexual relations with their wives, while Moses is commanded to remain with God so that God can give him further instruction (Deuteronomy 5:27-28), i.e. Moses does not resume sexual relations with his wife.

abstain from sexual intercourse with his wife. Rashi (on Numbers 12:1) states that it was Miriam who opened the conversation with Moses, indicative of her concern, as a fellow woman, for the welfare of her sister-in-law:

ותדבר מרים ואהרן. (ספרי) היא פתחה בדבור תחלה לפיכך הקדימה הכתוב תחלה.
(Rashi on Numbers 12:1)

Rashi (Numbers 12:1), Midrash Tanḥuma *Ṣav* 13, Sifrei Beha'alotekha 99, and Yalkut Shimoni (on Numbers 12:737) quote Rabbi Nathan who taught that Miriam knew about Moses' neglect of his wife because she overheard Zipporah bewailing the fate of the wives of Eldad and Medad¹⁴, whose husbands, consumed with prophecy, would probably emulate Moses and separate themselves from their wives:

ומנין היתה יודעת מרים שפירש משה מן האשה. רבי נתן אומר, מרים היתה בצד צפורה כשאמרו למשה אלדד ומידד מתנבאים במחנה (שם יא כז). וכיון ששמעה צפורה, אמרה, אוי להם לנשותיהם של אלו.

(Tanḥuma *Ṣav* 13)

Sifrei Beha'alotekha 99, Hizquni (Numbers 12:1) and Yalkut Shimoni (on Numbers 12. 737) quote a second tradition, according to which Miriam realised that Moses was not attending to his wife's conjugal rights when she noticed that Zipporah was not adorned in jewellery, one of the obligations of a husband towards his wife¹⁵:

מנין היתה מרים יודעת שפירש משה מפריה ורביה אלא שראתה צפורה שאינה מתקשטת בתכשיטי נשים אמרה לה מה לך שאין את מתקשטת בתכשיטי נשים אמרה לה אין אחיך מקפיד בדבר לכך ידעה מרים ואמרה לאחיה ושניהם דברו בו
(Sifrei Beha'alotekha 99)

¹⁴ Numbers 11:26-30

¹⁵ Exodus 21:10

Summation

Judging from the small number of *midrashim* that try to explain away Moses' marriage to the daughter of a Midianite priest, it can be extrapolated that the rabbis do not seem to be too concerned with the fact that the wife of *Moshe Rabbeinu*, "Moses our Teacher", was a daughter of a Midianite priest. While *Rabbeinu Bahya* and *Sifteï Hakhamim* explicitly state that Zipporah converted, and *Yalkut Shimoni* and *Ramban* claim that her father, Jethro, embraced Torah¹⁶, most of the *midrashim* speculate about the issue that caused contention between Moses and his siblings Miriam and Aaron.

Zipporah's character is the subject of a few *midrashim* that use her name, derived from the Hebrew word for "bird", to explain her righteousness. Zipporah is depicted as having purified her father's house from the pollution of idolatry and as being destined to marry the great law-giver and teacher of the People of Israel.

While the rabbis disapproved of the otherness of the wives of Esau and went out of their way to justify the marriage of other biblical heroes to non-Israelite wives, they accepted Zipporah's physical difference in a positive light. Zipporah's otherness was lauded as indicative of her physical beauty and her righteous conduct, as opposed to the other foreign women, who were viewed with suspicion and fear.

The rabbis pay very little attention to Zipporah's foreignness and when discussing her otherness they draw attention to her appearance and her righteousness.

Perhaps Moses' status in Jewish tradition contributed to the rabbis' attitude towards Zipporah. The rabbis could not conceive that Moses would marry a foreign wife who did not convert.

¹⁶ The contention that Jethro, followed by his daughters, converted to Judaism indicates a tendency towards patrilineal descent for determining an individual's Jewish status, as opposed to matrilineal descent, which is the accepted halakhic practice.

This attitude of the rabbis concerning Moses and Zipporah is interesting because the incident in Numbers 12:1-3 could have opened the door to rabbinic criticism of Zipporah's foreignness, yet it was not used in this way, but rather understood to be a criticism of Moses' neglect to fulfil his sexual obligations to his wife, obligations which are mandated by Torah, the very book attributed to Moses himself. Not only do Moses' actions (or lack thereof) contradict Torah, but his over zealous abstinence from his wife could be viewed as arrogance, hence the Torah's emphasis that Moses was the most humble of all men.

While the rabbis agree with the Torah's assessment of Moses' humility, the sages use the incident of Miriam and Aaron's challenge to their brother as a polemic against celibacy and as a promotion of the concept of marriage. Thus Zipporah, far from being an object of derision, is used as a model of the righteous wife being hard done by her husband who, consumed with prophecy, elects not to be intimate with his wife. Although the rabbis viewed women, especially foreign women, with suspicion, they opposed abstinence and viewed Moses as setting a bad example to the men of Israel. Miriam's punishment (*zara'at*) for challenging Moses was the classic punishment for slander. She was not punished because she was wrong, but because she rebuked Moses in public.

Moses, like Abraham, Judah and Joseph, is exonerated of the transgression of marrying a non-Israelite woman, as opposed to Esau, who is severely criticised and condemned. Thus there appears to be no consistency in the rabbinic attitude towards intermarriage.

Chapter Seven — Boaz and Ruth

“In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land; and a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab. The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife’s name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. They came to the country of Moab and remained there. Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years.” (Ruth 1:1-4)

After the death of her two sons, Naomi decided to return to her family and homeland and urged her widowed daughters-in-law to remain with their kin in Moab.

“But Ruth replied, ‘Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; 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 I will be buried. Thus and more may the LORD do to me if anything but death parts me from you.’” (Ruth 1:16-17)

The Book of Ruth is the story of a Moabite woman who not only commits herself to joining her lot with the People of Israel, but also is described as the ancestress of King David, who in turn is believed by the rabbis to be the ancestor of the Messiah. Ruth’s conversion and her importance as the mother of the Davidic dynasty has led some scholars to claim that the Book of Ruth could be used to highlight the righteousness of all converts and God’s positive attitude towards them. Some scholars take this point further by maintaining that the Book of Ruth as a whole was written as a polemic against the negative stance towards conversion that is expressed in the Books of Ezra¹ and Nehemiah². Moshe

¹ Ezra 9-10

² Nehemiah 13:23-29

Weinfeld (1997) disagrees with this hypothesis, claiming that if the Book of Ruth were a protest against the Ezra-Nehemiah attitude towards foreign women it would be explicitly expressed in the story. One could argue, however, that such an explicit expression of opposition to Ezra-Nehemiah would lessen the polemical efficacy of the narrative. This debate is, however, beyond the scope of this work, which researches the midrashic understanding of the Bible rather than its historical validity.

Since the biblical text (Ruth 1:16-17) clearly states that Ruth formally joined the People of Israel and accepted the God of Israel as her God, her marriage to Boaz, a prominent member of Bethlehem society, does not pose any problems for the rabbis. Jewish tradition understands Ruth's declaration of loyalty to Naomi as a formal conversion to Judaism and it is portrayed in rabbinic sources as a model for conversion to Judaism:

אמר רבי אלעזר מאי קראה דכתיב (רות א') ותרא כי מתאמצת היא ללכת אתה ותחדל לדבר אליה אמרה לה אסיר לך תחום שבת (רות א') באשר תלכי אלך אסיר לך יחוד (רות א') באשר תליני אלין מפקדינן שש מאות וי"ג מצות (רות א') עמך עמי אסיר לך עבודת כוכבים (רות א') ואלהיך אלהי ארבע מיתות נמסרו לב"ד (רות א') באשר תמותי אמות ב' קברים נמסרו לב"ד (רות א') ושם אקבר מיד ותרא כי מתאמצת היא וגו':

(Yevamot 47b. Similarly Targum Yonathan on Ruth 1:16-17 and Midrash Zuta to Ruth 1:16-17).

כב [טז] ותאמר רות אל תפגעי בי לעזבך לשוב מאחריך מהו אל תפגעי בי אמרה לה לא תחטא עלי לא תסבין פגעיק מני לעזבך לשוב מאחריך מכל מקום דעתי להתגייר אלא מוטב על ידך ולא על ידי אחרת כיון ששמעה נעמי כך התחילה סודרת לה הלכות גרים אמרה לה בתי אין דרכן של בנות ישראל לילך לבתי תיאטראות ולבתי קרקסאות שלהם אמרה לה אל אשר תלכי אלך אמרה לה בתי אין דרכן של ישראל לדור בבית שאין שם מזוזה אמרה לה באשר תליני אלין עמך עמי אלו עונשין ואזהרות ואלהיך אלהי שאר מצות: כג דבר אחר אל אשר תלכי אלך באהל מועד בגלגל בשילה בנוב בגבעון בבית עולמים באשר תליני אלין לנה אני על קרבנותי עמך עמי לבטל עבודת כוכבים שלי ואלהיך אלהי לשלם שכר פעולתי: כד [יז] באשר תמותי אמות אלו ד' מיתות ב"ד סקילה שריפה הרג וחנק ושם אקבר אלו שני קברים המתוקנים לב"ד אחד

לנסקלין ולנשרפין ואחד לנהרגין ולנחנקין כה יעשה ה' לי וכה יוסיף אמרה לה בתי כל מה שאת יכולה לסגל מצות וצדקות סגלי בעולם הזה אבל לעתיד לבא כי המות יפריד ביני ובינך.

(Ruth Rabbah 2:22-24)

The rabbis understood that Naomi instructed Ruth in some of the minor and some of the major *mitzvot*, as ordained in the Talmud (Yevamot 47b)

The rabbis were faced with the challenge of reconciling the Torah injunction that no Moabite or Ammonite may enter the congregation of Israel with the fact that Ruth was a Moabitess.

“No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the LORD; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you.” (Deuteronomy 23:4-5)

“Thus Naomi returned from the country of Moab; she returned with her daughter-in-law Ruth the Moabite. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.” (Ruth 1:22).

The midrashic material concerning Ruth's eligibility to be the ancestress of the Davidic dynasty has brought two approaches to light. The first approach is to tackle the proscription of the Torah which prohibits Ammonites and Moabites from entering the congregation of the God of Israel. The second approach is to portray Ruth as the ideal woman for the role of the matriarch of the House of David.

The rabbis interpreted Deuteronomy 23:4-5 as a prohibition of the conversion of Moabites and Ammonites to Judaism and therefore needed to justify the fact that Ruth was accepted as a convert to Judaism despite her ethnicity:

בו ביום בא יהודה גר עמוני, ועמד לפניו בבית המדרש, אמר להם: מה אני לבא בקהל? אמר לו רבן גמליאל: אסור אתה. אמר לו רבי יהושע: מתר אתה. אמר לו רבן גמליאל: הכתוב אומר דברים (כג, ד) "לא-יבא עמוני ומואבי בקהל ה' גם דור עשירי" וגומר. אמר לו רבי יהושע: וכי עמונים ומואבים במקומן הן? כבר עלה סנחריב מלך אשור ובלבל את כל האמות, שנאמר (ישעיה י, יג) "ואסיר גבולת עמים ועתודתיהם שושתי ואוריד כאביר יושבים". אמר לו רבן גמליאל: הכתוב אומר (ירמיה מט, ו) "ואחרי-כן אשיב את-שבות בני-עמון", וכבר חזרו. אמר לו רבי יהושע: הכתוב אומר (עמוס ט, יד) "ושבתי את-שבות עמי ישראל", ועדין לא שבו. התירוהו לבא בקהל.³

(Yadayim 4:4)

The dispute between Rabbi Joshua and Rabban Gamaliel as to the acceptance of Judah the Ammonite proselyte, clearly illustrates the rabbinic interpretation of the phrase *ba beqahal Adonai*, "enter the congregation of the Lord" (in Deuteronomy 23:4) as "to convert to Judaism"⁴. The story of Ruth was used by the rabbis as justification for the *halakhah* that the prohibition of conversion of Moabites and Ammonites was only applicable to the men of the two nations.

מתני' עמוני ומואבי אסורים ואיסורן איסור עולם אבל נקבותיהם מותרות מיד . . . גמ' מנא ה"מ א"ר יוחנן דאמר קרא וכראות שאול את דוד יוצא לקראת הפלשתי אמר אל אבנר שר הצבא בן מי זה הנער אבנר ויאמר אבנר חי נפשך המלך אם ידעתי ולא ידע ליה והכתיב ויאהבהו מאד ויהי לו נושא כלים אלא אאבוה קא משאיל ואביו לא ידע ליה והכתיב והאיש בימי שאול זקן בא באנשים ואמר רב ואיתימא רבי אבא זה ישי אבי דוד שנכנס באוכלוסא ויצא באוכלוסא ה"ק שאול אי מפרץ אתי אי מזרח אתי אי מפרץ אתי מלכא הוי שהמלך פורץ לעשות דרך ואין ממחין בידו אי מזרח אתי חשיבא בעלמא הוי מ"ט אמר ליה שאל עליה דכתיב וילבש שאול את דוד מדיו כמדתו וכתיב ביה בשאול משכמו ומעלה גבוה מכל העם א"ל דואג האדומי עד שאתה משאיל עליו אם הגון הוא למלכות אם לאו שאל עליו אם ראוי לבא בקהל אם לאו מ"ט דקאתי מרות המואביה א"ל אבנר תנינא עמוני ולא עמונית מואבי ולא מואבית אלא מעתה ממזר ולא

³ The story of Rabbi Joshua, Rabbi Gamaliel and Judah the Ammonite proselyte is repeated in the Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 28a)

⁴ Shaye J.D. Cohen (1999: 248-249) maintains that *ba beqahal Adonai*, "enter the congregation of the Lord" means "to marry an Israelite". He therefore views Deuteronomy 23:4-5 as a prohibition against intermarriage with an Ammonite or a Moabite. Cohen cites 1 Kings 11:1-2, Ezra 9:1 and Nehemiah 13:23-28 to justify his opinion. There is a difference of opinion among scholars as to whether "enter the congregation of the Lord" means conversion or intermarriage.

ממזרת ממזר כתיב מום זר מצרי ולא מצרית שאני הכא דמפרש טעמא דקרא על אשר לא קדמו אתכם בלחם ובמים דרכו של איש לקדם ולא דרכה של אשה לקדם היה להם לקדם אנשים לקראת אנשים ונשים לקראת נשים אישתיק מיד ויאמר המלך שאל אתה בן מי זה העלם התם קרי ליה נער הכא קרי ליה עלם הכי קא אמר ליה הלכה נתעלמה ממך צא ושאל בבית המדרש שאל אמרו ליה עמוני ולא עמונית מואבי ולא מואבית אקשי להו דואג כל הני קושייתא, אישתיקו. בעי לאכרוזי עליה, מיד: (שמואל ב' י"ז) ועמשה בן איש ושמו יתרא הישראלי אשר בא אל אביגיל בת נחש, וכתוב: (דברי הימים א' ב') יתר הישמעאלי אמר רבא: מלמד, שחגר חרבו כישמעאל ואמר: כל מי שאינו שומע הלכה זו ידקר בחרב, כך מקובלני מבית דינו של שמואל הרמתי: עמוני - ולא עמונית, מואבי - ולא מואבית. ומי מהימן? והאמר רבי אבא אמר רב: כל תלמיד חכם שמורה הלכה ובא, אם קודם מעשה אמרה - שומעין לו, ואם לאו - אין שומעין לו שאני הכא, דהא שמואל ובית דינו קיים.

(Yevamot 76b-77a)⁵

According to the *aggadic* narrative in Yevamot 76b, King Saul's advisor, Doeg, believed that David's eligibility to be king of Israel was invalidated by the fact that he was descended from Ruth. Since Ruth was a Moabitess, she and her descendants should be excluded from God's congregation (Deuteronomy 23:4). Saul, urged on by Doeg, asked the sages of the house of study for a *pesaq halakhah* in the matter. The scholars ruled that since the Torah text refers to Ammonite and Moabite, and not Ammonitess and Moabite, women who belong to these nations were not included in the prohibition. This narrative was recorded by the Amoraim to demonstrate that the rabbinic interpretation of Deuteronomy 23:4 has biblical origins.

Although there is a dispute between Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Simeon (recorded in Yevamot 77a) as to whether the prohibition of Deuteronomy 23:4 applies to all Moabites and Ammonites, or only to the menfolk, the majority of rabbis accept Rabbi Judah's ruling that the prohibition applies only to men and that Moabite and Ammonite women can be accepted into the congregation of

⁵ The dispute between scholars concerning David's admission into the "congregation of the Lord" is also referred to in Midrash Shemuel 22:1, TJ Yevamot 48b 8:3, Midrash Tehillim 9, Ruth Rabba 4:1, 9, Targum Yonathan on 1 Chronicles 2:17

YHWH. This ruling allows Ruth and Naamah⁶ to be accepted as legitimate wives of Boaz and Solomon, which in turn bestows legitimacy on the Davidic dynasty.

Other midrashic sources trace the *halakhah* that the prohibition of Deuteronomy 23:4 excludes female Moabites and Ammonites back to the time of the story of Ruth. According to Ruth Rabbah (7:7 and 10) the kinsman who was first in line to marry Ruth according to the law of levirate marriage was ignorant of Torah and believed that marrying a Moabite woman was prohibited. Unaware of the rabbinic interpretation that Deuteronomy 23:4 only applies to Ammonite and Moabite men, he refused to marry Ruth, leaving the way open for Boaz to become the progenitor of the Davidic dynasty:

ובועז עלה השער וישב שם והנה הגואל עובר אשר דבר בעז מה לאחורי תרעא הוה קאים א"ר שמואל בר נחמן אפ"ה היה בסוף העולם הטיסו הקב"ה והביאו לשם כדי שלא יהא אותו צדיק יושב ומצטער מתוך ישובו אמר רבי ברכיה כך דרשו שני גדולי עולם רבי אליעזר ור' יהושע ר' אליעזר אומר בעז עשה את שלו ורות עשתה את שלה ונעמי עשתה את שלה אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא אף אני אעשה את שלי ויאמר סורה שבה פה פלוני אלמוני ר' יהושע אומר פלוני אלמוני שמו ר' שמואל בר נחמן אמר אלם היה מדברי תורה אמר הראשונים לא מתו אלא על ידי שנטלו אותן ואני הולך ליטלה חס לי ליטלה לית אנא מערבב זרעייתי איני מערב פסולת בבני ולא היה יודע שכבר נתחדשה הלכה עמוני ולא עמונית מואבי ולא מואבית:

(Ruth Rabbah 7:7)

Targum Ruth 2:11-13 (*infra*) has Boaz inform Ruth that the prohibition of Deuteronomy 23:4 does not include Ammonite and Moabite women. Ginzberg (1942, Vol 4: 33) cites a *midrash* stating that Boaz had to be reminded by a heavenly voice that only Ammonite and Moabite men were affected by the Deuteronomic exclusion.

Ketubot 7b goes even further and claims that Boaz promulgated the law that female Ammonites and Moabites were not included in the prohibition of Deuteronomy 23:4. According to this Talmudic passage Boaz needed ten

⁶ Naamah was the Ammonite wife of King Solomon and mother of King Rehoboam. According to Jewish tradition the Messiah will descend from these two kings.

elders to witness his kinsman's refusal to marry Ruth because new laws or interpretations can only be legislated and made public in the presence of ten or more men:

אמר רב נחמן אמר לי הונא בר נתן תנא מנין לברכת חתנים בעשרה שנאמר ויקח עשרה אנשים מזקני העיר ויאמר שבו פה... ורבי אבהו בהאי קרא דרב נחמן מאי דריש ביה ההוא מיבעי ליה למידרש עמוני ולא עמונית מואבי ולא מואבית דאי סלקא דעתך לברכה לא סגיא דלאו זקנים ואידך אי סלקא דעתך למידרש לא סגיא דלאו עשרה אין לפרסומי מילתא וכדאמר ליה שמואל לרב חנא בגדתאה פוק ואייתי לי בי עשרה ואימא לך באנפייהו המזכה לעובר קנה והלכתא המזכה לעובר לא קנה:

(Kethuboth 7b)

Thus rabbinic sources give unequivocal sanction to the conversion of Ruth and her marriage to Boaz. Indeed according to Tanna deBei Eliyahu Zuta Chapter 3, Boaz was rewarded by being the ancestor of kings for taking a wife *leshem shamayim*, 'for the sake of heaven'. This statement by the author of the *midrash* indicates that according to the sages the union between Boaz and Ruth had Divine blessing:

צא למד מבוועז בן שלמון בן נחשון בן עמינדב שנשא אשה לשם שמים סוף יצא ממנו דוד ושלמה בנו שהרבו תורה ומצות בישראל עליהן ועל כיוצא בהן ועל הדומין להן ועל העושה כמעשיהן עליהן הכתוב אומר כי כאשר השמים החדשים והארץ החדשה אשר אני עשה עומדים לפני נאם ה' כן יעמוד זרעכם ושמכם (ישעיה ס"ו כ"ב).

(Tanna deBei Eliyahu Zuta Chapter 3)

In order to further bolster the rabbis', and indeed the Bible's, acceptance of Ruth, many *midrashim* laud Ruth's beauty, humility and righteousness. These *midrashim* imply that Ruth was destined to be the matriarch of the House of David. Ginzberg (1947 Vol 6: 143, n845) cites *midrash Yelammedenu* which claims that the reason why Deuteronomy 23:4 refers only to male Ammonites and Moabites is because Ruth was destined to become the ancestress of King David. Ruth Rabbah (7:2) understands the six measures of barley given by Boaz to Ruth after she visited him at the threshing floor⁷ to be six grains of

⁷ Ruth 3

barley as an indication to her that she was destined to be the ancestress of six devout men who would be endowed with six spiritual gifts:

וימד שש שעורים וישת עליה א"ר סימון דרש בר קפרא בצפורי וכי יש דרכו של מלך
לישא לו אשה בשש שעורים או דרכה של אשה להנשא בשש סאין א"ר יהודה בר ר'
סימון בזכות וימד שש שעורים וישת עליה זכה ועמדו ממנה ששה צדיקים וכל אחד
ואחד בהן שש מדות דוד חזקיהו יאשיהו חנניה מישאל ועזריה דניאל ומלך המשיח.
(Ruth Rabbah 7:2)

The list of righteous descendants of Ruth in Sanhedrin 93a-b differs slightly from that in Ruth Rabbah 7:2:

אמר רבי תנחום דרש בר קפרא בציפורי מאי דכתיב [רות ג'] שש השעורים האלה
נתן לי מאי שש השעורים אילימא שש שעורים ממש וכי דרכו של בועז ליתן
מתנה שש שעורים אלא שש סאין וכי דרכה של אשה ליטול שש סאין אלא רמו
[רמוז] לה שעתידין ששה בנים לצאת ממנה שמתברכין בשש [שש] ברכות ואלו הן
דוד ומשיח דניאל חנניה מישאל ועזריה.
(Sanhedrin 93a-b. Similarly Ruth Zuta 3:15 and Bemidbar Rabbah 13:11 and
Targum Yonathan of Ruth 3:15)

Thus, according to the sages, Boaz recognised the greatness inherent in Ruth and foretold that great men would trace their ancestry to her. Such a woman was worthy of marrying into the People of Israel. According to Shabbat 113b, Ruth Rabbah 5:6 and Ruth Zuta 2:13, Boaz had a vision that kings would descend from Ruth as a reward for her kindness to her mother-in-law:

ותאמר אמצא חן בעיניך אדוני כי נחמתני⁸. מה נחמה ניחמה אמר לה עתידה את לעלות
לגדולה ועתידין בניך להיות מנהיגין של ישראל ועתידה את ללבוש כתר מלכות אע"פ
שאת רואה עצמך שאת ענייה עתיד לצאת ממך בן שהוא מקדיש מאה [אלף] ככרי זהב
ביום אחד שנאמר [והנה בעניי הכינותי לבית ה' זהב ככרים מאה אלף וגו' (דה"א כ"ב י"ג)]
וכי עני מקדיש כל הככרים] הללו של כסף ושל זהב אלא ביום שהרג דוד את גלית
הפלשתי השליכו עליו בנות ישראל את כל הכסף והזהב והקדישו לבית המקדש וכיון
שבא רעב שלש שנים בקשו ממנו ישראל ליתן ולא רצה ליתן להם כלום אמר לו הקב"ה
לא קבלת עליך להחיות בו עניים חייד אין אתה בונה אותו אלא על ידי שלמה בנך
דכתיב ויהי דבר ה' אל נתן לאמר וגו' אשר יצא ממעיד הוא יבנה הבית לשמי (שם ז' י"ב):

⁸ Ruth 2:13

צָרוּר אֶת הַמְדִינִים וְהַכִּיתֶם אוֹתָם מוֹאֲבִים עֲצֻמָּן לֹא כָל שָׁכֵן אָמַר לוֹ הַקֶּב"ה לֹא כִשְׁעַלְתָּה עַל דַּעְתְּךָ עַל־תָּה עַל דַּעְתִּי שְׁתֵּי פְרִידוֹת טוֹבוֹת יֵשׁ לִי לְהוֹצִיא מֵהָרֹת הַמּוֹאֲבִיָּה וְנַעֲמָה הָעַמּוֹנִית וְהֵלֵא דְבָרִים ק"ו וְמָה בְּשִׁבִיל שְׁתֵּי פְרִידוֹת טוֹבוֹת חֵס הַקֶּב"ה עַל ב' אוֹמוֹת גְּדוּלוֹת וְלֹא הִחְרִיבֵן בְּתוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי אִם כִּשְׂרָה הִיא וְרֵאוּיָה הִיא לְצִאת מִמֶּנָּה דָּבָר טוֹב עַל אַחַת כְּמָה וְכְמָה דִּהוּהָ חַיָּה.

(Bava Kamma 38a-b)

Thus the nation of Moab was saved by divine intervention because of the merit of Ruth. Indeed, according to Bereishit Rabbah (51:8), Lot was delivered from the destruction of Sodom because the future Messiah would descend from him — through Ruth the Moabitess (great grandmother of David) and Naamah the Ammonitess (wife of Solomon and mother of Rehoboam)¹¹. The example of Ruth is used to make the point that one is rewarded for doing *mitzvot* even when they are performed without good intention. Thus Balak, king of Moab was rewarded for the forty-two sacrifices he offered to God¹² in that Ruth, the granddaughter of Balak's son or grandson, Eglon, became the mother of the Davidic dynasty:

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב לְעוֹלָם יַעֲסוֹק אָדָם בְּתוֹרָה וּבִמְצוֹת אִפְּלִי שְׁלֵא לְשִׁמְךָ שְׁמִתוֹךְ שְׁלֵא לְשִׁמְךָ בֵּא לְשִׁמְךָ שְׁבַשְׁכָּר מ"ב קִרְבָּנוֹת שֶׁהַקְּרִיב בְּלֶק הַרְשַׁע זָכָה וַיֵּצֵא מִמֶּנּוּ רוֹת וְאִ"ר יוֹסִי בֵּר' חֲנִינָא רוֹת בֵּת בְּנוֹ שֶׁל עִגְלוֹן מֶלֶךְ מוֹאֲב הִיתָה

(Nazir 23b, Similarly Sanhedrin 105b, Sotah 47a, Horayot 10b).

Although Eglon, king of Moab, oppressed the Israelites for eighteen years, until he was defeated by the judge, Ehud, he was rewarded by being the grandfather of Ruth because he rose from his chair when Ehud informed him that he had a message for him from God:

“and when Ehud approached him, he was sitting alone in his cool upper chamber. Ehud said, “I have a message for you from God”; whereupon he rose from his seat.” (Judges 3:20)

¹¹ Genesis 19:30-38. Ginzberg (1947, Vol 5: 243 n188) cites the rabbinic tradition that the Messiah is not only the descendant of David, the offspring of Ruth the Moabitess, but also the descendant of Solomon and his wife Naamah, the Ammonitess.

¹² Numbers 23

The rabbis understood that Eglon rose from his chair to show honour to God and was therefore rewarded with being the ancestor of Ruth, and through her the ancestor of King David and the future Messiah:

ר' ביבי בשם ר' ראובן אמר רות וערפה בנותיו של עגלון היו שנאמר (שופטים ג') דבר סתר לי אליך המלך ויאמר הם וגו' וכתוב (שם) ואהוד בא אליו וגו' ויאמר אהוד דבר אלהים לי אליך ויקם מעל הכסא אמר לו הקב"ה אתה עמדת מכסאך לכבודי חייך הריני מעמיד ממך בן יושב על כסא ה'

(Ruth Rabbah 2:9. Similarly Tanḥuma *Wa-Yeḥi* 14)

This *midrash* expresses the idea that Ruth was destined to be the ancestress of King David and therefore it was God's will that she marry Boaz, a chieftain¹³ and judge¹⁴ of Judah. Boaz was so impressed with Ruth's humility he asserted that she was one of the matriarchs of Israel:

ותאמר אמצא חן בעיניך אדוני וגו' ואנכי לא אהיה כאחת שפחותיך¹⁵ אמר לה חס ושלוס אין את מן האמהות אלא מן האימהות

(Ruth Rabbah 5:5)

Ruth's humility and beauty is further indicated by the rabbinic analysis of Ruth 3:1-6. Naomi instructed Ruth to bathe, anoint and dress herself and then go to the threshing floor to convince Boaz to marry her. Ruth, however first went to the threshing floor and then did as her mother-in-law instructed her:

"Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, "Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy. Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls you were close to. He will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor tonight. So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down to the threshing floor . . ." She replied, "I will do everything you tell me." She went down to the

¹³ Ruth Rabbah 5:15

¹⁴ There is a tradition that identifies Ibzan of Bethlehem (Judges 12:8-9) with Boaz (Bava Batra 91a and Targum Yonathan on Ruth 4:21)

¹⁵ Ruth 2:13

threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her.” (Ruth 3:1-3, 5, 6)

The rabbis, ever aware of the subtleties of the biblical text, note the wording of verse 6 and ask why Ruth disobeyed Naomi’s instructions by first going to the threshing floor and then bathing, anointing and dressing herself. *Tanḥuma Behar 3* explains that Ruth did not want to go down to the threshing floor in her finery because the men of the area were sexually perverse and might think her to be a harlot. Thus she first went to the threshing floor and then followed Naomi’s instructions:

אמרה לה חמותה, הנה הוא זרה את גורן השעורים הלילה (שם ג ב). והוא היה נשיא
והיה זורה את השעורים בגורן. אלא שהיה דורו פרוץ בגזל, והיה יוצא לשם לשמור
גורנו. אמרה לה, ורחצת וסכת ושמת שמלותיך (שם שם ג). ואחרי כן, וירדת הגורן (שם).
וירדתי כתיב. מהו וירדתי הגורן. שאמרה לה, זכותי תרד עמך. לכך כתיב, וירדתי הגורן.
והיא לא עשתה כן כמו שאמרה לה חמותה. היא אמרה לה, ורחצת וסכת ושמת
שמלותיך, ואחרי כן, וירדת הגורן. ומה עשתה רות. לאחר שירדה לגורן, עשתה כל מה
שאמרה לה, שנאמר, ותרד הגורן ותעש ככל אשר צותה חמותה (שם שם ו). למה לא
עשתה כך. אמרה רות כלתה, הדור פרוץ בעריות, שמא יראו אותי מקושטת ויאמרו
שמא זונה היא. לפיכך, ותרד הגורן, ואחרי כן, ותעש ככל אשר צותה חמותה.
(*Tanḥuma Behar 3*. Also Rashi on Ruth 3:6)

Ruth’s modesty and concern for her image was, for the rabbis, an indication that she possessed the right moral character to be the wife of Boaz and the matriarch of the Davidic dynasty, and ultimately the ancestress of the Messiah himself. The rabbis’ emphasis on Ruth’s beauty and modesty is reminiscent of the rabbinic treatment of Sarah and Zipporah. In *Ruth Rabbah 4:6* (on Ruth 2:5), Boaz enquires of his servant the identity of the young woman among the reapers. The rabbis claim that he was struck by her beauty and modesty and wanted to know who she was:

ויאמר בועז לנערו הנצב על הקוצרים . . . למי הנערה הזאת ולא הוה חכים לה אלא כיון
שראה אותה נעימה ומעשיה נאים התחיל שואל עליה כל הנשים שוחחות ומלקטות וזו

יושבת ומלקטת כל הנשים מסלקות כליהם וזו משלשלת כליה כל הנשים משחקות עם הקוצרים וזו מצנעת עצמה כל הנשים מלקטות בין העמרים וזו מלקטת מן ההפקר.
(Ruth Rabbah 4:6)

Not only is Ruth beautiful in appearance, but she is also considered to be virtuous. Midrash Eishet Ḥayil, Yalkut Shimoni Mishle 31.964 and Midrash Mishle 31.29 interpret Proverbs 31:29, “Many daughters have done virtuously, but you excel them all”, to refer to Ruth:

רבות בנות עשו חיל זו רות שנתקרבה תחת כנפי השכינה וזכתה ויצא ממנה דוד ושלמה שרו להקב"ה בשירות ובתושבחות:
(Yalkut Shimoni Mishle 31.964)

Not only was Ruth destined to marry Boaz, but she was destined to give birth to Obed, the grandfather of King David. Ruth Rabbah 7:14 claims that Ruth was physically incapable of giving birth to children because she had no womb. God intervened and fashioned a womb for her. This *midrash* explains the rather unusual phrase ויתן ה' לה הריון, “the Lord gave her conception”:

ויהי ביתך כבית פרץ אמרו כל בנים שהקב"ה עתיד ליתן לך יהיו מן הצדקת הזו ודכוותה (בראשית כ"ה) ויעתר יצחק לה' לנכח אשתו כי עקרה היא מהו לנכח אשתו אלא מלמד שהיה יצחק שטוח כאן ורבקה שטוחה כאן ואומר רבש"ע כל בנים שאתה עתיד ליתן לי יהיו מן הצדקת הזו ודכוותה (שמואל א' ב') וברך עלי את אלקנה ואת אשתו אמר בנים שעתיד הקב"ה ליתן לך יהיו מן הצדקת הזו ויקח בועז את רות ותהי לו לאשה אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש עיקר מוטרין לא היה לה וגלף לה הקדוש ברוך הוא עיקר מוטרין:

(Ruth Rabbah 7:14)

Summation

Since the story of Ruth is about a Moabite woman who elects to cast her lot with the people and God of her widowed mother-in-law, Ruth does not present the same problem as the other women analysed in the previous chapters of this

work. Ruth is not a “foreign wife” because there is no question that she converted¹⁶. She does, however, pose a problem for the rabbis because they were faced with the task of reconciling the conversion of a Moabite with the prohibition of Ammonites and Moabites from entering the congregation of YHWH (Deuteronomy 23:4). The rabbis approach the problem using two methods. Some sources analyse the language of Deuteronomy 23:4 and claim that only Ammonite and Moabite men are excluded from intermarrying and / or converting into the people of Israel because the words *Ammoni* and *Mo'abi* do not include women: עמוני ולא עמונית מואבי ולא מואבית (Yevamot 76b). Other traditions use the example of Ruth as an illustration that the prohibition of Deuteronomy only applies to Ammonite and Moabite men. According to a few *midrashim* this interpretation of the Deuteronomic prohibition was already known in biblical times. Yevamot 76b and similar *midrashim* maintain that the prophet Samuel legislated that only Ammonite and Moabite men were prohibited from entering the congregation of YHWH, while Ketuboth 7b claims that Boaz himself promulgated this law in order that he could marry Ruth, and thus act as Mahlon's redeemer.

Another approach used by the sages to justify Ruth's marriage to Boaz and her entry into the Jewish People is to demonstrate her righteousness and beauty, her willingness to join the People of Israel and all that conversion to Judaism entails.

Many *midrashim* also express the idea that Ruth was destined to be the ancestress of the Davidic dynasty and that God intervened to make the union between Ruth and Boaz a reality. Ruth Rabbah 7:14 even goes as far as stating that God fashioned a womb for Ruth so that she could conceive and bear Boaz a son, who would become the grandfather of King David.

Since the Book of Ruth clearly supports the idea of a Moabite woman entering the congregation of YHWH, and thus contradicts Deuteronomy 23:4, the rabbis

¹⁶ The rabbis interpreted Ruth's declaration (Ruth 1:16-17) to be a formal conversion as stipulated in Yevamot 47b (*supra*).

had to reconcile the two sources which are included in the biblical canon. Indeed Ruth the Moabitess has become the role model for all converts to Judaism throughout the centuries and the rabbis understood her famous declaration of loyalty (Ruth 1:16-17) to be her formal conversion to Judaism. According to the rabbis Naomi instructed Ruth in the laws of Torah, a requirement for conversion stipulated in the Talmud.

Given the favourable light in which Ruth the Moabitess is portrayed by the Bible, especially the fact that she is the ancestress of the Davidic dynasty and all that it symbolises in Jewish tradition, the rabbis were forced to accept her as a worthy proselyte and daughter of Israel. While the rabbis could use the biblical text to further their own ideology in the case of the other women investigated in this study, the narrative of Ruth leaves no room for interpretation regarding the heroine's status. Indeed Boaz is praised for marrying Ruth. This reflects the hypothesis that the rabbis were governed by national and ideological sentiment when interpreting biblical text.

Chapter Eight — Jezebel and Ahab

“Ahab son of Omri did what was displeasing to the Lord, more than all who preceded him. Not content to follow the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Phoenicians, and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. He erected an altar to Baal in the temple of Baal which he built in Samaria. Ahab also made a sacred post¹. Ahab did more to vex the Lord, the God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who preceded him.” (1 Kings 16:30-33)

Jezebel, wife of Ahab, the king of Israel, is the personification of the wicked and unscrupulous foreign woman, whom the rabbis feared would lead Jewish men astray to worship foreign gods and abandon the ethical principles of Torah. The biblical passage quoted above hints that Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, daughter of King Ethbaal of Phoenicia, made him the most sinful of all the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. Indeed the biblical text links the fact that Ahab married Jezebel with the notion that he was more sinful than Jeroboam ben Nebat. The rabbis understand 1 Kings 16:31 to mean that Jeroboam's worst transgressions were light indiscretions compared to Ahab's offences:

[מלכים א' ט"ז] ויהי הנקל לכתו בחטאת ירבעם בן נבט אמר רבי יוחנן קלות שעשה אחאב כחמורות שעשה ירבעם ומפני מה תלה הכתוב בירבעם מפני שהוא היה תחילה לקלקלה.

(Sanhedrin 102b. Similarly TJ Sanhedrin 51a 10:2 and Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 16, *Siman* 207)

Radak (on 1 Kings 16:31) expresses the idea that Ahab deliberately married Jezebel, the daughter of a foreign king who worshipped Baal, to surpass Jeroboam's sins:

¹ The Hebrew word *Asherah* has the meaning of “sacred post” or “grove”, but it is also the name of the Babylonian-Canaanite goddess of fortune, happiness and fertility, the consort of Baal. (*Vide* Enhanced Strong's Lexicon 1995)

הנקל לכתו. אם היה בעיניו נקל ללכת בחטאת ירבעם והם העגלים כן הראה במעשיו כי נקלים היו בעיניו אותם החטאות ולקח אשה מגויי הארצות לחטוא עוד ולעבוד הבעל שהיו הם עובדים שם וזהו שאמר וילך ויעבוד הלך שם לצידון ועבד הבעל שהיו עובדים שם והשתחוה לו כלומר שקבלו עליו באלוה ועשה כמוהו בשמרון ובנה לו בית וקראו בית הבעל והקים לו שם מזבח:

(Radak on 1 Kings 16:31)

Although Ahab chose to marry Jezebel, the Bible and rabbinic literature portray him as being influenced by his wife to perform acts of unparalleled immorality. While many other kings, including Solomon, had erected temples to foreign gods, Ahab went further by instituting formal worship of Baal and Asherah in Israel (1 Kings 16:31-33).

The rabbis viewed Ahab's silence during Jezebel's execution of the prophets of YHWH² as indicative of his consent to their persecution. He is also condemned by the rabbis for agreeing to the murder of Naboth in order to attain his vineyard³. These two examples of Ahab's failure to protest against his wife's immoral acts led Ralbag and Radak to explain Elisha's reference to King Jehoram son of Ahab, as "the son of a murderer":

בן המרצח הזה. קרא בן אחאב בן המרצח כי הוא הסכים בהריגת נבות ובהריגת נביאי ה' על יד איזבל:

(Ralbag on 2 Kings 6:32. Similarly Radak on 2 Kings 6:32)

According to Malbim (in his commentary on 1 Kings 16:31-33) Ahab was influenced by Jezebel to worship Baal, but erected groves to Asherah of his own accord, the latter not being as severe a transgression as the former:

ויקח אשה את איזבל וילך ויעבד את הבעל וכו' ויעש אחאב את האשרה אחרי העיון ראיתי כי עבודת הבעל היתה גרועה יותר מענין האשרה, כי בעבודת הבעל זבחו את בניהם והתעיבו מאד, אבל האשרות היו נוטעים גם אצל הבמות שהיו מקריבים לה',

² 1 Kings 18:3-4,13

³ 1 Kings 21

כמ"ש לא תטע לך אשרה אצל מזבח ה', ותראה כי אליהו הגם שקבץ נביאי הבעל והאשרה לא התוכח רק עם נביאי הבעל ורק אותם הרג לא את נביאי האשרה, וכן בית יהוא שבטל את הבעל השאירו האשרה כמ"ש (לקמן ב' י"ג ו), וז"ש שמה שעבד את הבעל היה מצד שלקח אשה את איזבל בת אתבעל, שאביה היה מעובדי הבעל והיא הסתה אותו לבעל, אבל האשרה עשה מעצמו, ועז"א ויעש אחאב את האשרה ר"ל מדעת עצמו, וכן מה שהוסיף להכעיס היה מדעת עצמו, ועז"א חזר שם אחאב ב"פ:

(Malbim on 1 Kings 16:31-33)

Taking their cue from 1 Kings 16:33, the rabbis portrayed King Ahab as being so devoted to idolatry that he placed idols in every field of his kingdom and he inscribed on the gates of Samaria the caption: "Ahab denies the God of Israel". This act was a final dissociation from the God of Israel:

[הושע י"ב] גם מזבחותם כגלים על תלמי שדי אמר רבי יוחנן אין לך כל תלם ותלם בארץ ישראל שלא העמיד עליו אחאב עבודת כוכבים והשתחוה לו... [מלכים א' ט"ז] ויעש אחאב את האשרה ויוסף אחאב לעשות להכעיס את ה' אלהי ישראל מכל מלכי ישראל אשר היו לפניו אמר רבי יוחנן שכתב על דלתות שמרון אחאב כפר באלהי ישראל לפיכך אין לו חלק באלהי ישראל.

(Sanhedrin 102b. Similarly Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 16, *Siman* 207, Yalkut Shimoni on Hosea 12 *Siman* 528)

The rabbis take pains to express the idea that Ahab's sins were instigated by Jezebel who advised and coerced him into murdering Naboth and worshipping Baal. This is expressed in the biblical text itself (1 Kings 21:25) and repeated reference is made to the verse in rabbinic writings (Sanhedrin 102b, Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 16 *Siman* 207, *Sifrei Re'eh* and Malbim on 1 Kings 16:31-33):

"Indeed, there never was anyone like Ahab, who committed himself to doing what was displeasing to the Lord, at the instigation of his wife Jezebel" (1 Kings 21:25)

The rabbis are troubled by the fact that Ahab, wicked as he was, merited reigning over Israel for twenty-two years (1 Kings 16:29) and by the fact that his repentance was accepted by God⁴. Therefore the Talmud (Sanhedrin 102b) expresses the idea that Ahab's transgressions were balanced by his merits and it was only the influence of Jezebel which tipped the scale towards Ahab's sins. The rabbis (Sanhedrin 102b) conclude that if it were not for the slaying of Naboth, which was purely at the instigation of Jezebel, Ahab's merits would have outweighed his sins. While Ahab was a man of great learning, showing favour to scholars and reverence for the Torah which he studied zealously, Jezebel weighed gold for her idols:

רבי יוחנן מפני מה זכה אחאב למלכות עשרים ושנים שנה מפני שכיבד את התורה שניתנה בעשרים ושנים אותיות שנאמר (מלכים א' כ') וישלח מלאכים אל אחאב מלך ישראל העירה ויאמר לו כה אמר בן הדד כספך וזהבך לי הוא ונשיך ובניך הטובים לי הם כי אם כעת מחר אשלח את עבדי אליך וחפשו את ביתך ואת בתי עבדיך והיה כל מחמד עיניך ישימו בידם ולקחו ויאמר למלאכי בן הדד אמרו לאדוני המלך כל אשר שלחת (לעבדך) [אל עבדך] בראשונה אעשה והדבר הזה לא אוכל לעשות מאי מחמד עיניך לאו ספר תורה דילמא עבודת כוכבים לא סלקא דעתך דכתיב (מלכים א' כ') ויאמרו אליו כל הזקנים וכל העם (לא תאבה ולא תשמע) אל תשמע ואל תאבה ודילמא סבי דבהתא הוו מי לא כתיב (שמואל ב' י"ז) ויישר הדבר בעיני אבשלום (והזקנים) [ובעיני כל זקני ישראל] ואמר רב יוסף סבי דבהתא התם לא כתיב וכל העם הכא כתיב וכל העם דאי אפשר דלא הוו בהון צדיקי וכתיב (מלכים א' י"ט) והשארתי בישראל שבעת אלפים כל הברכים אשר לא כרעו לבעל וכל הפה אשר לא נשק לו אמר רב נחמן אחאב שקול היה שנאמר (מלכים א' כ"ב) ויאמר ה' מי יפתה את אחאב ויעל ויפול ברמות גלעד ויאמר זה בכה וזה אומר בכה מתקיף לה רב יוסף מאן דכתב ביה (מלכים א' כ"א) רק לא היה כאחאב אשר התמכר לעשות הרע בעיני ה' אשר הסתה אותו איזבל אשתו ותנינא בכל יום היתה שוקלת שקלי זהב לעבודת כוכבים ואת אמרת שקול היה אלא אחאב וותרן בממונו היה ומתוך שההנה תלמידי חכמים מנכסיו כיפרו לו מחצה (Sanhedrin 102b. Similarly Tanḥuma *Shemot* 29, Yalkut Shimoni 1 Kings 20 *Siman* 219).

⁴ After Elijah rebuked him for worshipping idols and committing abominable acts, Ahab repented sincerely and as a reward God promised to postpone punishment to the next generation (1 Kings 21:27-29).

The length of Ahab's reign was significant to the rabbis because it corresponded to the number of letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Just as the Torah is written with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, so Ahab merited ruling Israel for twenty-two years because, according to the sages, he honoured the Torah. The rabbis claim that Ahab's reverence for the Torah is demonstrated by his refusal to hand the Torah scrolls in his possession to Ben Hadad II, king of Damascus, during the siege of Samaria (1 Kings 20:1-9). In the rabbinic mind "all that is desirable in your eyes" (1 Kings 20:6) refers to Torah scrolls, and Ahab's reply, "Tell my lord the king: All that you first demanded of your servant I shall do, but this thing I cannot do" (1 Kings 20:9), is a refusal to hand them over to the Aramean.

Despite Ahab's good qualities, his willingness to be led astray by his wife and her undue influence over him earned him the description of the King who did what was most displeasing in the eyes of God. Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 16 *Siman* 207 and TJ Sanhedrin 51a 10:2 relate a legend about Rabbi Levi who spent two months teaching the first half of the biblical verse which describes Ahab's behaviour as uniquely displeasing to God. King Ahab visited Rabbi Levi in a dream and castigated him for not teaching the second half of the verse which explains that he [Ahab] was provoked by Jezebel into committing his transgressions. After his encounter with Ahab, Rabbi Levi spent the next two months expounding the second half of 1 Kings 21:25, demonstrating that Jezebel was the cause of Ahab's sin:

ר' לוי עבד דריש הדין קריא שתא ירחין לגנאי רק לא היה כאחאב, אתא לגביה בליליא
 אמר ליה מה חטאתי לך ומה סרחית לך אית לך רישא דפסוקא ואין לך סיפיה אשר
 הסתה אותו איבל אשתו. דריש עוד שתא ירחין לשבח רק לא היה כאחאב אשר
 הסתה אותו איבל אשתו.

(Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 16 *Siman* 207 and TJ Sanhedrin 51a 10:2)

Tanna deBei Eliyahu Rabba Parashah 10 explicitly states that Ahab lost his place both in this world and in the afterlife because of Jezebel who influenced

him to commit transgressions so displeasing to God that he was punished by being one of three kings excluded from heavenly reward (Sanhedrin 10:2)⁵:

כיוצא בדבר אתה אומר איזבל בת אתבעל מלך צידונין אשת אחאב בן עמרי אמרה משנה ראשונה שנכנסה (למדן) [למדן] דרכי עבודה זרה ועל ידה מכר עצמו לעבודה זרה שנאמר רק לא היה כאחאב אשר התמכר לעשות הרע בעיני ה' (מ"א כ"א כ"ה) ובשביל מעשיה ומעשי בעלה אבדו מן העולם הזה ומן העולם הבא ואבדו בניהם עמהם משל למלך בשר ודם שהביא לו עבדו מנחה שבעים כדי שמן וכיון ששמע ממנו דברים יתירים טרף אותם לפניו. ומי גרם לאחאב שיאבד מן העוה"ז ומן העוה"ב ואבדו בניו עמו אמרו איזבל אשתו עליה ועל כיוצא בה ועל הדומות לה ועל העושות כמעשיה הוא אומר ואולת בידיה תהרסנו (משלי שם) עליהן הוא אומר ועוד מעט ואין רשע וגו' (תהלים ל"ז י') ראיתי רשע עריץ וגו' ויעבור והנה איננו וגו' (שם שם ל"ה ול"ו) צופה רשע וגו' (שם ל"ב) ואחריו מה הוא אומר אדני ישחק לו (שם י"ג):

(Tanna deBei Eliyahu Rabba Parashah 10)

שלשה מלכים וארבעה הדיוטות אין להם חלק לעולם הבא. שלשה מלכים, ירבעם, אחאב, ומנשה.

(Sanhedrin 10:2. Similarly Tanḥuma *Mezora* 1, Avoth deRabbi Nathan 35:15, Tanna deBei Eliyahu Rabba Parashah 3, Tosefta Sanhedrin 12:3, TJ Sanhedrin 50b 10:2, Yalkut Shimoni 2 Kings 21 *Siman* 245)

⁵ The Talmud (Bava Mezi'a 59a) uses the example of Jezebel's influence over her husband as a warning against a man taking advice from his wife. The Talmud counsels that a wife's guidance should be limited to household or secular matters, a rather disparaging comment in light of modern sensibilities. Note that the rabbis do not make a distinction between Jewish wives and foreign wives. The comment in Bava Mezi'a 59a is perhaps indicative of the rabbis' fear and suspicion of assertive women in general.

ואמר רב כל ההולך בעצת אשתו נופל בגיהנם שנאמר רק לא היה כאחאב וגו' [מלכים א כא: כה] א"ל רב פפא לאביי והא אמרי אינשי איתתך גוצא גחין ותלחוש לה לא קשיא הא במילי דעלמא והא במילי דביתא לישנא אחרינא הא במילי דשמיא והא במילי דעלמא.

(Bava Mezi'a 59a)

Not only was Ahab excluded from The World to Come, his wickedness was so great that the righteousness of Obadiah⁶, head of his household staff, did not bring blessing upon his house. Expounding 1 Kings 18:3, Rabbi Yizḥak taught that Ahab summoned Obadiah during the famine in Samaria to ask him why he had not brought blessing upon the royal house, as Jacob brought blessing to the house of Laban and Joseph brought blessing on the house of Potiphar. The King of Israel even expressed doubt as to Obadiah's righteousness, necessitating a *bat qol* to proclaim that Ahab's house was not worthy of a blessing:

כתיב [מלכים א' י"ח] ויקרא אחאב אל עובדיהו אשר על הבית ועובדיהו היה ירא ה' מאד מאי קאמר קרא אמר רבי יצחק אמר ליה ביעקב כתיב [בראשית ל'] נחשתי ויברכני ה' בגללך ביוסף כתיב [בראשית ל"ט] ויברך ה' את בית המצרי בגלל יוסף ביתא דההוא גברא לא הוה מיבריק שמא לא ירא אלהים אתה יצתה בת קול ואמרה ועובדיה היה ירא את ה' מאד אבל ביתו של אחאב אינו מזומן לברכה

(Sanhedrin 39b. Similarly Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 18 *Siman* 210)

Given that the rabbis identify Ahab's chamberlain with the prophet of the same name (Sifrei Parashat Balak 133 and Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 18 *Siman* 210) this *midrash* illustrates the extent of Ahab's iniquity because even a biblical prophet, a man who saved the lives of a hundred prophets of YHWH at the risk of his own life, could not bring blessing to the king's house:

ר' נתן אומר בא הכתוב ללמדך (שכל) [כל] צדיק וצדיק שגדל בחיק רשע ולא עשה כמעשיו להודיע כמה צדיק גדול שגדל בחיק רשע ולא עשה כמעשיו וכל רשע שגדל בחיק צדיק ולא עשה כמעשיו להודיע כמה רשע גדול שגדל בחיק צדיק ולא עשה כמעשיו עשו גדל בין שני צדיקים בין יצחק ובין רבקה ולא עשה כמעשיהם עובדיה גדל בין שני רשעים בין אחאב ואיזבל ולא עשה כמעשיהם [בא עובדיה שגדל בין שני רשעים ולא עשה כמעשיהם] ונתנבא על עשו שגדל בין ב' צדיקים בין יצחק לרבקה ולא עשה כמעשיהם שנאמר חזון עובדיה כה אמר ה' אלהים לאדום (עובדיה א')

(Sifrei Parashat Balak 133. Similarly Yalkut Shimoni on Numbers 27)

⁶ Obadiah hid a hundred prophets of YHWH in two caves, providing them with food and drink, in order to save them from Jezebel's persecution.

א"ר יצחק מפני מה זכה עובדיה בנביאות מפני שהחביא מאה נביאים שנאמר ויהי בהכרית איזבל את נביאי ה' ויקח עובדיהו מאה נביאים ויחביאם חשים וגו' (Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 18 *Siman* 210)

In expounding Job 35:11, "Who gives us more knowledge than the beasts of the earth, Makes us wiser than the birds of the sky?" the rabbis mention the ravens that brought food to Elijah during his sojourn in the wilderness to escape Jezebel's wrath (1 Kings 17:4-7) as examples of birds that are wise and from which we can learn. According to *Tanḥuma Mas'ei* 8, the ravens took bread from the table of Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, because they did not want to enter the house of Ahab which was full of idolatry:

ומעוף השמים יחכמונו (שם). אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא, למדו מן העורבים, שהיו מכלכלים את אליהו, שנאמר, והעורבים מביאים לו לחם ובשר בבקר וגו' (מ"א יז ו). ומהיכן היו מביאין. משלחנו של יהושפט, (ו) לפי שלא היו רוצין אותם העורבים ליכנס לביתו של אחאב להוציא משלחנו כלום לאותו צדיק, מפני שהיה ביתו של אחאב מלא מעבודה זרה. הוי, ומעוף השמים יחכמונו.

(*Tanḥuma Mas'ei* 8. Similarly Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 18 *Siman* 214)

Although Jezebel persecuted the prophets of YHWH and instigated King Ahab's immoral behaviour, the rabbis ascribe some meritorious qualities to the only reigning queen in Jewish history, other than Athaliah⁷.

"So they went to bury her [Jezebel]; but all they found of her were the skull, the feet, and the hands" (2 Kings 9:35)

Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 17, commenting on the above verse, states that Jezebel's skull, feet and hands were saved from being trampled by horses and being eaten by dogs because they were used to perform the primary *mitzvoth*

⁷ ארבע נשים נטלו ממשלה בעולם ואלו הן איזבל ועתליה מישראל וושתי מאומות העולם: (Esther Rabbah 3:2). Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, wife of Jehoram, King of Judah and mother of Ahaziah, was of the same ilk as Jezebel. Upon the death of her son Athaliah seized the throne and murdered all possible rivals from the royal house of Judah.

of escorting the dead to their graves and rejoicing with bride and groom. According to this *midrash* Jezebel would join any funeral procession that passed her palace, clapping her hands and singing dirges for the deceased. Similarly she would join any wedding party that passed her palace, clapping her hands and singing praises to the bridal couple. Consequently her body was saved from total annihilation after her execution by King Jehu⁸. The body parts that remained and were buried were indicative of the *mitzvot* Jezebel performed. Her skull was preserved because she sang, her hands because she clapped and her feet because she walked in the funeral and wedding processions that passed her palace. Although Jezebel was a foreign woman, the *mitzvot* ascribed to her by the rabbis conform to specifically Jewish values.

גמילות חסדים מניין אנו למדין לאבלים מאיזבל שהיתה ביתה סמוך לשוק וכל מת
שהיה עובר בשוק היתה יוצאת מתוך ביתה ומכה בכפי ידיה ומקוננת בפיה ומהלכת
עשרה צעדות וכל חתן שהיה עובר בשוק היתה יוצאה מתוך ביתה ומצלצלת בכפי ידיה
ומקלסת בפיה ומהלכת עשר צעדות ונתנבא עליה אליהו זכור לטוב הכלבים יאכלו את
איזבל בחלק ירעאל והאברים שהיו גומלי חסד לא שלטו הכלבים בהם שנ' וילכו
לקברה ולא מצאו בה וכו' גמילות חסד לאבלים.

(Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 17)

The rabbis had to reconcile their image of Ahab as a wicked king with the historical fact that he was a successful military tactician⁹. Thus according to a number of *midrashim* Ahab never suffered defeat in battle because his generation, despite practicing idolatry, did not commit the sin of slander, unlike the generation of King David, who consequently lost many battles:

⁸ 2 Kings 9:30-37

⁹ Ahab's military prowess is confirmed by the Mesha Stele erected by King Mesha of Moab who dedicated it to the god Chemosh out of gratitude for Moab's deliverance from Israelite rule. The stele (lines 4–9) relates, "As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab many years [lit. days] for Chemosh was angry with his land. And his son followed him and he also said 'I will humble Moab.' In my time he spoke [thus], but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel hath perished forever" (Bustanay Oded 1997). The erection of such a stone is indicative of the great triumph over Israel, which in turn is indicative of the might of both Omri and his son, Ahab.

שנו רבותינו דורו של אחאב כלם עובדי ע"א היו וע"י שלא היו בהם דילטורין היו יוצאים למלחמה ונוצחים שכן אליהו מכריז בהר הכרמל אני נותרתי נביא לה' לבדי וכל עמא ידעין ולא מפרסמים למלכא, אבל דורו של דוד א"ר יהושע דסכנין בש"ר לוי אפילו תינוקתו שהיו בימי דוד עד שלא טעמו טעם חטא היו יודעים לדרוש את התורה במ"ט פנים טהור ובמ"ט פנים טמא ואחר כל השבח הזה יוצאין למלחמה ונופלים לפי שהיה בהם דילטורים

(Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 18 *Siman* 213. Similarly Numbers Rabbah 19.2, Tanḥuma *Huqqat* 4, Pesikta deRav Kahana 4, Vayiqra Rabbah 26.2, Midrash Tehillim *Mizmor* 7 and TJ Pe'ah 4b 1:1)

The merits conferred on Ahab and Jezebel illustrates the rabbinic notion that all human beings are inherently good, a notion based on Genesis 1:31 that everything God created is very good. Although both characters are portrayed by the Bible as the epitome of wickedness and immorality, the rabbis managed to find some good qualities to bestow upon them. This complies with the teaching of Rabbi Yehuda ben Shila that judging one's neighbour in the scale of merit is one of the primary *mitzvot* for which a person is rewarded both in this world and in the world to come:

אמר רב יהודה בר שילא א"ר אסי א"ר יוחנן ששה דברים אדם אוכל פירותיהן בעולם
הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא ואלו הן הכנסת אורחין וביקור חולים ועיון תפלה
והשכמת בית המדרש והמגדל בניו לתלמוד תורה והדן את חברו לכף זכות

(Shabbat 127a).

Although it is difficult to judge the royal couple's actions favourably, the rabbis ascribed some meritorious actions to them.

Summation

It is clear from both biblical and rabbinic sources that Jezebel is considered the ultimate example of a wicked foreign woman that leads Israelite men astray influencing them to worship pagan gods and lead immoral lives. Although the rabbis claim that King Ahab deliberately married Jezebel as an expression of

rebellion against God¹⁰, he is portrayed in Jewish literature as a weak man who succumbed to his evil wife's influence, agreeing by his silence to Jezebel's callous slaughter of the prophets of YHWH and to the cold-blooded murder of Naboth. His willingness to be influenced by Jezebel made Ahab the most immoral king in the history of the Jewish monarchy.

Taking their cue from the biblical text the rabbis blame Jezebel for Ahab's sinful reign and, although she is merited with some righteousness, she is explicitly blamed for Ahab's sinfulness. Indeed the rabbinic sources state that if it were not for her influence over him, Ahab's sins would have been outweighed by his learning, reverence for Torah and support of scholars.

While Ahab clearly intended to marry Jezebel because of her foreignness, and even declared in an inscription on the gates of Samaria that he denied the God of Israel (Sanhedrin 102b and others), the rabbis emphasise the fact that it was Jezebel who led her husband astray. It seems that Ahab is not given any responsibility for his actions, but is merely criticised for allowing himself to be influenced by his wife. Jezebel is shouldered with the full responsibility for her husband's actions as well as her own and the rabbis use her as a warning to Jewish men to stay away from foreign women. Once again it is the woman's foreignness which is blamed for the sinfulness of her husband. The rabbis use the position of Jezebel as queen of Israel to portray her as the quintessential wicked foreign woman who leads her husband and Israelite society astray by her iniquitous counsel and her zealotry for Baal worship. Her position as sovereign enabled her to exercise power and influence over both her husband and her subjects. The rabbis clearly blame Ahab's choice of a foreign wife for Israel's iniquity.

¹⁰ 1 Kings 16:30-31. Historically Ahab married Jezebel in order to cement Israel's alliance with Phoenicia (Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre and Sidon). Together with Judah the three-party alliance successfully stayed the expansion of the Aramean kingdom to the east. Israel's alliance with Phoenicia also brought economic prosperity to Ahab's kingdom. These political considerations were of no importance to the *midrash* which was only concerned with the theological and moral issues resulting from Ahab and Jezebel's union.

Chapter Nine — Esther and Ahasuerus

Not only do the rabbis consider foreign women wicked and a bad influence on their husbands, but the rabbinic attitude towards Ahasuerus illustrates the sages' conviction that a foreign husband is equally detrimental to the well-being of Israel, despite the fact that there is a difference between a foreign wife and a foreign husband regarding the Jewish status of any children that may issue from an intermarriage¹.

Just as the rabbis portray Queen Jezebel as the quintessential wicked foreign wife who leads her Jewish husband astray, so some rabbinic sources depict King Ahasuerus as a wicked foreign husband who despised the Jews, even though the biblical text gives no indication of such a characteristic.

“The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favour more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.”
(Esther 2:17)

Esther is the only example of an important female biblical personality who married a non-Israelite (non-Jewish) man. It is therefore important to analyse the rabbis' sentiments concerning her marriage, especially since her relationship with King Ahasuerus saved the Jews of Persia from annihilation.

While the Book of Esther portrays King Ahasuerus as a benevolent ruler who was easily influenced by his wicked advisors, some midrashic accounts depict him as a wicked man in his own right who despised the Jews and, while swayed by Haman and his other advisors, was always disposed to persecute them:

אמר רבי אבא משל דאחשורוש והמן למה הדבר דומה לשני בני אדם לאחד היה לו תל
בתוך שדהו ולאחד היה לו חריץ בתוך שדהו בעל חריץ אמר מי יתן לי תל זה בדמים

¹ According to rabbinic law a child's Jewish status is determined by the Jewish status of the mother.

חילופייהו חדא דבלשצר וחמש דדריוש וכורש ותרתי דידיה הא שבעין כיון דחזי דמלו שבעין ולא איפרוק אמר השתא ודאי תו לא מיפרקי אפיק מאני דבי מקדשא ואשתמש בהו בא שטן וריקד ביניהן והרג את ושתי והא שפיר חשיב איהו נמי מיטעא טעי דאיבעי ליה למימני מחרבות ירושלים סוף סוף כמה בצירן (חדיסר) [חד סרי] איהו כמה מלך ארביסר בארביסר דידיה איבעי ליה למיבני בית המקדש אלמה כתיב [עזרא ד'] באדין בטילת עבדת בית אלהא די בירושלם אמר רבא שנים מקוטעות הוו.

(Megillah 11b)

Esther Rabbah 1:15, cites the opinion of Rabbi Nehemiah who taught that Ahasuerus held the feast at the end of the third year after he stopped the building of the Temple, by which time, according to his calculations, the seventy years mentioned by Jeremiah had passed:

ור' נחמיה אמר בשנת שלש לביטול מלאכת בית המקדש כיון שגמר לביטול מלאכת בית המקדש שלש שנים עשה משתה לכל שריו ועבדיו

(Esther Rabbah 1:15)

According to the rabbis not only does Ahasuerus take delight in the failure of Jeremiah's prophecy, but he further demeans the Jews by profaning the Temple vessels, using them at the banquet and wearing the garments of the High Priest:

מה ראה אחשורוש שנשתמש בכלים של בית המקדש על ככה משום דחשיב שבעים שנין ולא איפרוק

(Megillah 19a. Also Panim Aḥerim Nosaḥ B Parashah 1)

בהראותו את עושר כבוד מלכותו [אסתר א' ד] אמר רבי יוסי בר חנינא מלמד שלבש בגדי כהונה כתיב הכא [אסתר א' ד] יקר תפארת גדולתו וכתיב התם [שמות כ"ח] לכבוד ולתפארת ובמלאות הימים האלה וגו'

(Megillah 12a)

Some *midrashim* even state that Ahasuerus prevented the building of the Second Temple. According to Esther Rabbah 1:15 (*supra*), Ahasuerus

ordered the construction work on the Temple Mount to cease so that the seventy years of Babylonian rule referred to by Jeremiah could pass without the symbol of Jewish sovereignty being completed. This, he believed would ensure that the prophecy would never come to fruition. Esther Rabbah 5:2, however, cites Queen Vashti as the one who influenced Ahasuerus to stop the building of the Temple. Her maliciousness was punished by her execution by order of her husband².

אחר הדברים האלה כשך חמת המלך אחשורוש א"ר איבו בשם רבי יוסי בן זמרא כל מקום שנאמר אחר סמוך אחר מופלג ורבנן משום ר' יוסי בן זמרא כל מקום שנאמר אחר סמוך אחר מופלג כשך חמת המלך אחשורוש בשך אין כתיב כאן אלא כשך שכיכה שאינה שכיכה זכר את ושתי גזירה זאת שגזר עליה שתכנס לפניו ערומה ולא נכנס וקצף עליה והרגה מן דקטלה שרי תהי ביה (חוזר בו) למה שעשתה כהוגן ואת אשר נגזר עליה שלא כהוגן ולמה עלתה לה כך לפי שלא היתה מנחת לאחשורוש ליתן רשות לבנות בית המקדש ואומרת לו מה שהחריבו אבותי אתה מבקש לבנות ויאמר נערי המלך משרתיו וגו':

(Esther Rabbah 5:2)

Ahasuerus' refusal to allow the Temple to be rebuilt remained consistent even after he married Esther. According to Megillah 15b, Ahasuerus offered Esther only half his kingdom when she visited him to plead for the Jews of his empire because he did not want to give her anything that would divide his kingdom, namely his permission to rebuild the Temple:

ויאמר לה המלך לאסתר המלכה מה בקשתך עד חצי המלכות ותעש חצי המלכות ולא כל המלכות ולא דבר שחוצץ למלכות ומאי ניהו בנין בית המקדש.

(Megillah 15b)

Other sources do not emphasise Ahasuerus' aversion to Jews and claim that Ahasuerus held the banquet as a celebration of his victory over a rebellious

² Although the biblical text cites banishment as Vashti's punishment for disobeying her husband, the *midrashim* state that she was executed (According to Megilla 12b she was executed on Shabbat because she used to force the young Jewish women to strip naked and work on Shabbat). The rabbis were determined to vilify Vashti in order to justify Esther's rise to the throne.

province of his kingdom, to celebrate his birthday or to celebrate the completion of his throne:

בשנת דתלת למלכותיה דאחשורוש עבד משקיא ומטול מה עבד משקיא אית דאמרין דמרדין עלוהי אפרכיא ואזל וכבשנון ובתר דאכבשינון אתא ועבד משקיא ואית דאמר יומא דאידיא הוה ליה ושדר אגרתא לכולהן מדינתא למיתני למעבד קדמוי חדותא שלח וזמן כל רברבני מדינתא דיייתון ויחדון עמיה ואתו קדמוי מאה ועסרין ושבע מלכין מן מאה ועסרין ושבע מדינן וכולהון קטירי תגי ברישיהון והון סמיכין ליה על גנזי מילתא ואכלין וחדיינן קדם מלכא והון פרתונאי ורברבני מדינתא קדמוי ומן רברבני ישראל הוון תמן מטול דחזו תמן מאני בית מקדשא הון בכין ומספדן תמן:

(Targum Yonathan Esther 1:3)

[בשנת שלש למלכו]. ובשנת שלש ישב על אותו כסא ועשה משתה לכל שריו ועבדיו ולמה עשה משתה יש אומרים איפרכיות עמדו עליו וכבשם ויש אומרים יום גינוסיא שלו היה ושלח אגרות לכל שרי המדינות לבא לעשות לפניו שמחה באו לפניו מאה ועשרים ושבעה גדולים בני מלכים מן קכ"ז מדינות שהיה שליט בהם וכולם עטופים אצטלאות של לבן ובאו והיו מסובין על מטות של זהב ושל כסף:

(Midrash Abba Guryon. Similarly Panim Aḥerim Nosaḥ B Parashah 1)

בשנת שלוש למלכו עשה משתה ר' יהודה ור' נחמיה ר' יהודה אמר בשנת שלש למלאכת הכסא כיון שגמר מלאכת הכסא עשה משתה לכל שריו ועבדיו.

(Esther Rabbah 1:15)

Despite his negative qualities, the rabbis claim that Ahasuerus was careful to ensure that no one's religious sensibilities were offended during his banquet and he provided kosher food and wine that was untouched by non-Jews so that the Jews of Shushan could participate. Both Mordecai and Haman were in charge of the catering at the banquet so that neither Jew nor non-Jew had reason to avoid attending the feast on religious grounds:

ויין מלכות רב אמר רב מלמד שכל אחד ואחד השקהו יין שגדול הימנו בשנים והשתיה כדת (אין אונס) מאי כדת אמר רבי חנן משום רבי מאיר כדת של תורה מה דת של תורה אכילה מרובה משתיה אף סעודתו של אותו רשע אכילה מרובה משתיה אין אונס אמר רבי אלעזר מלמד שכל אחד ואחד השקהו מין מדינתו לעשות כרצון איש ואיש אמר

רבה לעשות כרצון מרדכי והמן מרדכי דכתיב איש יהודי המן איש צר ואויב.

(Megillah 12a)

כרצון מרדכי והמן. הם היו שרי המשקים במשתה:

(Rashi on Megillah 12a)

Rabbi Shmuel ben Imi taught that Ahasuerus had four good virtues: he waited three years before taking the crown and ascending the throne, waited four years before finding a suitable wife (Esther), he did nothing without asking for advice, and, as Rabbi Pinḥas pointed out, he kept a record of everyone who did him a good turn:

א"ר שמואל בר אימי ארבעה דברים טובים היו באותו האיש עשה שלש שנים בלא כתר
ובלא כסא והמתין ארבע שנים עד שמצא אשה ההוגנת לו ולא היה עושה דבר עד
שנמלך א"ר פנחס וכל מי שהיה עושה בו טובה היה כותבה הה"ד וימצא כתוב אשר
הגיד מרדכי וגו':

(Esther Rabbah 1.15)

There seem, therefore to be two midrashic traditions concerning Ahasuerus' character. One tradition portrays him as malevolent towards the Jews, so much so that he celebrated the fact that they would never be redeemed and the other tradition depicts him as a rather weak character that was easily influenced by his wicked counsellors.

Esther is depicted as a wholly righteous woman whose piety is unchallenged and reflected in her physical beauty. Thus Megillah 15a numbers Esther among the four women whose beauty is unsurpassed³ and the Talmud (Megillah 13a) and Yalkut Shimoni (Esther 2. 1053) explain her name as a reflection of her beauty and piety. Esther Rabbah (6:9) states that Esther was more beautiful than the Median and Persian women to whom she was compared:

³ The other three are Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail.

תנו רבנן ארבע נשים יפיפיות היו בעולם שרה (ואביגיל רחב) [רחב ואביגיל] ואסתר.
(Megillah 15a)

ויהי אומן את הדסה קרי לה הדסה וקרי לה אסתר תניא רבי מאיר אומר אסתר שמה ולמה נקרא שמה הדסה על שם הצדיקים שנקראו הדסים וכן הוא אומר [זכריה א. ח] והוא עומד בין ההדסים רבי יהודה אומר הדסה שמה ולמה נקראת שמה אסתר על שם שהיתה מסתרת דבריה שנאמר אין אסתר מגדת את עמה וגו' רבי נחמיה אומר הדסה שמה ולמה נקראת אסתר שהיו אומות העולם קורין אותה על שום אסתהר בן עזאי אומר אסתר לא ארוכה ולא קצרה היתה אלא בינונית כהדסה רבי יהושע בן קרחה אמר אסתר ירקרוקת היתה וחוט של חסד משוך עליה.

(Megillah 13a)

דבר אחר כשם שהדס ריחו טוב כך היו מעשיה טובים... דבר אחר כשם הדס אינו יבש לא בקיץ ולא בחורף כך הם הצדיקים אינם מתיבשים לא בעולם הזה ולא בעולם הבא.

(Yalkut Shimoni on Esther Chapter 2 . 1053)

ובהגיע תור אסתר וגו' ותהי אסתר נשאת חן בעיני כל רואיה ר' יודא אומר כאיקונין הזה שאלף בני אדם מביטים בה והיא עריבה על כולם ר' נחמיה אומר העמידו מדיות מכאן ופרסיות מכאן והיתה אסתר יפה מכולן ורבנן אמרין ותהי אסתר נושאת חן בעיני כל רואיה בעיני העליונים ובעיני התחתונים כד"א (משלי ג') ומצא חן ושכל טוב בעיני אלהים ואדם:

(Esther Rabbah 6:9)

ולמאן דאמר אסתר ירקרוקת היתה מפיק אסתר ומעייל ושת.

(Megillah 15a)

There is a disagreement between Rabbi Joshua ben Korḥa who taught that Esther had a greenish complexion⁴, and the majority of the rabbis who state that it was Vashti who had a sallow complexion. According to Rabbi Joshua ben Korḥa Ahasuerus was not attracted to Esther's physical beauty, but rather to her charm.

⁴ Like a myrtle. Hence her alternative name Hadassah, meaning 'myrtle'.

Esther's piousness is alluded to in the Talmud. She is enumerated as one of the seven prophetesses of the Bible (Megillah 14a), is referred to as "Esther the Righteous" in Megillah 10b and according to Megillah 14b she was dressed by the holy spirit. Esther's modesty is mentioned in Targum Yonathan on Esther 2:7, which states that Esther was modest in Mordecai's house for seventy-five years and did not look at another man other than Mordecai:

שבע נביאות מאן נינהו שרה מרים דבורה חנה אביגיל חולדה ואסתר.
(Megillah 14a)

יעלה הדס זו אסתר הצדקת שנקראת הדסה שנאמר ויהי אומן את הדסה.
(Megillah 10b)

אסתר דכתיב ויהי ביום השלישי ותלבש אסתר מלכות בגדי מלכות מיבעי ליה אלא
שלבשתה רוח הקדש כתיב הכא ותלבש וכתוב התם ורוח לבשה את עמשי וגו'.
(Megillah 14b)

והוה מרבי ית הדסה היא אסתר ברת אחבוי ואמאי הוה קרין לה הדסה על די הות
צדקתא וצדיקיא דמתילו לאסא אסתר הוה קרין לה על די הות צניעא בביתא דמרדכי
שבעין וחמיש שנין ולא חזת אפי גבר אלהן אפי מרדכי דאתעבידת לה לתורבינא ארום
לית לה אבא ואמא עולמתא שפירת ריוו ושפירת חיזו ובעידן דמית אבוהא אשתארת
במעין דאמה וכד ילידת יתה מיתת אמה ונסבה מרדכי ליה בביתיה והוה קרי לה ברת:
(Targum Yonathan on Esther 2:7)

Thus Esther is not condemned for marrying a non-Jew, who is variously depicted as a wicked man who despises the Jews more than Haman, a rather passive character who is easily influenced by those with evil intentions, to a man who concerns himself with the religious and cultural sensibilities of others. While no explicit objection to Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus is found in rabbinic texts, the rabbis do attempt to justify the union in an attempt to lessen what in their eyes was a transgression, i.e. marriage to a non-Jew.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 74b) raises the question whether Esther should not have given up her life rather than marry Ahasuerus since doing so would have meant transgressing in public. The answer given by Abaye is that Esther was *karka' olam*, "soil of the ground", which Rashi (on Sanhedrin 74b) explains to mean she submitted to the embraces of Ahasuerus and did not act on her part, but was acted upon, much like soil that is ploughed:

והא אסתר פרהסיא הואי אמר אביי אסתר קרקע עולם היתה.

(Sanhedrin 74b)

קרקע עולם היא. אינה עושה מעשה הוא עושה בה מעשה:

(Rashi on Sanhedrin 74b).

Thus Abaye portrays Esther as a blameless recipient of Ahasuerus' advances.

The Zohar turns to the supernatural to explain away the marriage of the virtuous Esther to the wicked and non-Jewish Ahasuerus. According to the mystics, Esther never lived with Ahasuerus as his wife because God sent a female demon that had the physical appearance of Esther to take her place. Since the marriage was never consummated it was a feigned union and therefore Esther was not guilty of a transgression⁵:

אסתר לי שנא דסתראה [תהלים לב] אתה סתר לי שכינתא אסתירת לה מאחשוורוש
ויהיב ליה שידה באתרה ואתהדרת איהי בדרועיה דמרדכי

(Zohar Ra'aya Meheimna Sefer Devarim Parashat *Ki Tezei* 276a)

According to Ginzberg (1947, Vol 6: 460, n80) this teaching in the Zohar was a polemic against older sources that maintain that Darius III was the son of Esther and Ahasuerus:

⁵ ולרבא דאמר, בר אהינא אסברה לי: (דברים כד. א) כי יקח איש אשה ובעלה קידושין
המסורין לביאה הוּו קידושין, קידושין שאין מסורין לביאה לא הוּו קידושין,

(Qiddushin 9b)

ותבאנה נערות אסתר וסריסיה ויגידו לה ותתחלחל המלכה מאד רבנן דתמן אמרין שפרסה נדה ורבנן דהכא אמרין הפילה עוברת ומשעה שהפילה שוב לא ילדה ר' יודן בר' סימון אמר במוך היתה משמשת א"ר יודן ברבי סימון דריוש האחרון בנה של אסתר היה טהור מאמו וטמא מאביו:

(Esther Rabbah 8:3)

Indeed according to Esther Rabbah (8:3) there was a difference of opinion among the rabbis as to whether Esther did have a child with her non-Jewish husband. Some taught that Esther had a miscarriage and did not conceive again, Rabbi Yudan ben Shimon said that at first Esther used a sponge as a contraceptive device, but that she nevertheless bore Ahasuerus a son, Darius III, who was both pure and impure, from his mother and father respectively.

It would seem that some of the rabbis were troubled by the idea that Esther's relationship with Ahasuerus was sexual. Thus the rabbis argued about Esther's age when she was presented to Ahasuerus for the first time. Rav states that she was forty years old, while Shemuel claims that she was seventy, and Rabbi Berekhia teaches in the name of Rabanan that Esther was seventy-five years old when she met Ahasuerus (Abba Guryon Parashah 2, Bereishit Rabbah 39:13). The latter two opinions might suggest that Ahasuerus' attraction to Esther was not sexual, but rather moral — he was drawn to her righteousness. This notion would preserve Esther's virtue in the eyes of those who followed this tradition. A contrary opinion is expressed in Megillah 13a and Esther Rabbah 8:3 (quoted above):

ותלקח אסתר אל המלך אחשורוש אל בית מלכותו בחדש העשירי הוא חדש טבת ירח שנהנה גוף מן הגוף ויאהב המלך את אסתר מכל הנשים ותשא חן וחסד לפניו מכל הבתולות אמר רב ביקש לטעום טעם בתולה טעם טעם בעולה טעם

(Megillah 13a)

Both Megillah 13a and Esther Rabbah 8:3 state emphatically that Esther had sexual intercourse with Ahasuerus.

Rabbi Meir (Megillah 13a) expresses the astonishing idea that Mordecai married Esther when she came of age⁶. This would explain the statement in Targum Yonathan on Esther 2:7 that Esther was modest in Mordecai's house and did not look at another man other than Mordecai for seventy-five years. According to the Talmud (Megillah 13b) after Esther had lain with Ahasuerus she would immerse in a *mikvah* and then return to Mordecai:

כי אין לה אב ואם ובמות אביה ואמה למה לי אמר רב אחא עיברתה מת אביה ילדתה מתה אמה ובמות אביה ואמה לקחה מרדכי לו לבת תנא משום ר"מ אל תקרי לבת אלא לבית⁷ וכן הוא אומר ולרש אין כל כי אם כבשה אחת קטנה אשר קנה ויחיה ותגדל עמו ועם בניו יחדו מפתו תאכל ומכוסו תשתה ובחיקו תשכב ותהי לו כבת משום דבחיקו תשכב הוות ליה (לבת) אלא (לבית) הכי נמי לבית.

(Megillah 13a)

אמר רבה בר לימא (משמיה דרב) שהיתה עומדת מחיקו של אחשורוש וטובלת ויושבת בחיקו של מרדכי.

(Megillah 13b)

The notion that Esther was married to both Mordecai and Ahasuerus is rather troublesome because not only was she guilty of marrying a non-Jew, but she also committed adultery. The Talmud, and *midrashim* do not seem to be perturbed by this state of affairs. Instead great pains are taken to state that Esther retained her loyalty to Judaism while married to Ahasuerus, taking care to observe *Shabbat* and keeping the laws of family purity (Megillah 13a, Targum Yonathan on Esther 2:9 and Esther Rabbah 6:8, Megillah 13b). Esther devised an ingenious way of remembering *Shabbat* by employing seven maidservants and using each on a different day of the week. These servants were pious and able to prepare kosher food for her (Targum

⁶ This understanding is already expressed in the Septuagint (Esther 2:7).

⁷ The word *bayit*, literally 'house' has the additional meaning of 'wife' in rabbinic literature (*vide* Jastrow 1996:168). cf. (Shabbat 118b):

אמר רבי יוסי מימי לא קריתי לאשתי ושתי ושורי שורי אלא לאשתי ביתי ושורי שדי

Yonathan on Esther 2:9). Esther was meticulous about not eating any forbidden foods, living on vegetables (pulses) as did Hannaniah, Mishael and Azariah in the court of Nebuchadnezzar (Panim Aḥerim Nosaḥ B Parashah 2, Megillah 13a, Rashi on Megillah 13a, Tosafot on Megillah 13a), and established a Sanhedrin and a house of study for Mordecai at the king's gate (Targum Yonathan on Esther 5:9), using his daily visits to the gate to ask his instruction concerning any questions of ritual that she might have (Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer chapter 49, Esther Rabbah 6:8). According to Midrash Zuta on Ecclesiastes Parashah 8, Esther was unaware of Haman's evil plans because she was busy with the *mitzvah* of burning the leaven in preparation for Passover:

ואת שבע הנערות וגו' אמר רבא שהיתה מונה בהן ימי שבת וישנה ואת נערותיה וגו'
אמר רב שהאכילה מאכל יהודי ושמואל אמר שהאכילה קדלי דחזירי ור' יוחנן אמר
זרעונים וכן הוא אומר ויהי המלצר נושא את פת בגס ונותן להם זרעונים [דניאל א. טז]
(Megillah 13a)

כתלי דחזירי. בקונ"ש שמינית ומתוך אונסה לא נענשה:
וכן הוא אומר. שהזרעונים טובים לצדיקים להבדילן ממאכל טמא:
(Rashi on Megillah 13a)

קדלי דחזירי. וח"ו היא לא היתה אוכלת:
(Tosafot on Megillah 13a)

וית שבע עולימתא לשמשותא שבע יומא דשבתא חולתא הות משמשא קדמאא בחד
בשבתא רוקעייתא בתרין בשבתא גונויתא בתלת בשבתא נהוריתא בארבע בשבתא
רוחשיתא בחמש בשבתא חורפיתא בשתא בשבתא רגועיתא ביומא דשבתא כולהן
צדיקתא וחזין למתן לה מיכלא ומשתיא על ידיהן מן ביתא דמלכותא ושני יתה וית
עולמתהא לאוטבא להון ולפנקותהון בבית נשיא:
(Targum Yonathan on Esther 2:9)

ובכל יום ויום מרדכי מתהלך לפני חצר בית הנשים לשאול על כתמה ועל נדותה לדעת
את שלום אסתר שלא יעשו לה כשפים אמר ר' יעקב בר אחא אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא
אתה דרשת שלום נפש אחת לדעת את שלום אסתר חייך סופך לדרוש שלום אומה
שלימה הה"ד דורש טוב לעמו ודובר שלום לכל זרעו:
(Esther Rabbah 6:8)

one of the seven prophetesses in the Bible, and the Talmud excuses her failure to accept martyrdom rather than publicly transgressing the prohibition of marrying a non-Jew by stating that she was a passive victim of Ahasuerus' advances. The characterisation of Ahasuerus in rabbinic literature is not consistent. Some sources portray him as a man who had no opinions of his own, but merely carried out the whims of his councillors, while others view him as nurturing an intense hatred of the Jewish People and describe how he flaunted the Temple treasures and wore the sacred garments of the High Priest at his banquet. Still others mention Ahasuerus' sensibility to the religious practices of others, including the Jews.

Rabbinic sources attempt to justify Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus by stating that at first Mordecai hid Esther for four years, but had to eventually reveal her to the king's messengers because of Ahasuerus' decree that any woman who hid herself from him would be put to death. Esther had to marry Ahasuerus in order to save her own life. A variation of this *midrash* relates that God spoke to Esther who had hid herself and told her that she was destined to be queen. The Zohar goes even further by denying that Esther actually married the king. Rather God substituted a female demon for her.

The rabbis lessened the gravity of the union by teaching that Esther retained her Jewish practices and rituals, observing the laws of *niddah*, *Shabbat*, *kashrut* and the laws of *Pesaḥ*. She even advanced Torah study by establishing a *beit midrash* and a *sanhedrin* at the king's gate.

There is a debate among the rabbis as to whether Esther bore Ahasuerus a child. According to some Esther had a miscarriage and did not bear any more children. Rabbi Yudan ben Shimon taught that she used a contraceptive device so that she would not conceive, but she eventually did give birth to a son, who was eventually crowned Darius III.

According to the biblical text of the Book of Esther, Esther's presence in the royal palace and her station as Ahasuerus' principle wife enabled her to put

an end to Haman and attain permission for the Jews of the kingdom to defend themselves against their attackers. The union between Esther and her non-Jewish husband saved the Jews of Persia, making it impossible for the rabbis to condemn the marriage.

Interestingly there is no mention or indication in rabbinic sources that Ahasuerus ever converted to Judaism, as is the case regarding most of the non-Israelite wives who married biblical heroes. Perhaps this is reflective of the rabbinic understanding that a child's Jewish status is derived from his or her mother, making Ahasuerus' conversion to Judaism unnecessary, as well as the strong historical improbability that the King of Persia would actually convert to Judaism. The rabbis maintain that Esther did practice her Judaism when married to Ahasuerus, even while keeping her Jewish identity secret. Thus her marriage to the non-Jewish king posed no threat to her Jewish identity and with Mordecai visiting her daily there was no danger that she would be led astray to worship other gods. The fact that Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus was a very public affair was a cause of concern for the rabbis for fear that others would emulate her. It was therefore important that the rabbis justify the union by pointing out the extenuating circumstances which enabled Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus to be looked upon favourably.

There is, however, a question as to whether Esther should not have martyred herself instead of marrying a non-Jewish man. While Abaye excuses her by stating that she was the passive victim of circumstances, the fact that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 74a) raises the question, indicates the rabbis' harsh opinion of intermarriage, implying that it may be preferable to give up one's life than to marry a non-Jew!

Vashti is condemned for being assertive and not obeying her husband, whereas Esther's resistance was more passive. She did not openly disobey her husband, but resisted his dominance by retaining her Jewish identity and observing the *mitzvot*. When she needed to take action to save her people from genocide she did so in a manner which did not shame or humiliate Ahasuerus.

Chapter Ten — A Comparative Study of Intermarriage in the Bible

The examination of the eight biblical heroes and their marriages in the previous chapters has brought to light certain trends in the rabbinic attitude to intermarriage which will be delineated in this chapter. The study of the midrashic explanations for these unions brings to light the fact that the opinion of the rabbis is not consistent but depends on the Jewish spouses and the children that result from such unions.

In order to clarify the rabbis' attitude the discussion below is divided into three sections:

1. A comparison of the literary portrayal of the various characters and how it influenced the rabbis with a focus on the gender of the Jewish and non-Jewish spouse, their personalities and behaviour as portrayed in the biblical text, and how they are reflected in the rabbinic texts which were examined above.
2. A comparison of the social status of the Jewish spouse and the importance of his / her marriage within the parameter of the history of the Jewish People and regarding the attributed offspring.
3. A comparison of the rabbis' opinion of the particular marriages and the resultant attitude towards the children of the union. An important aspect is the perceived threat of each marriage to the survival of Judaism and the midrashic excuses (*teiruzim*) used to justify the union. An overview of the methods used by the rabbis to reconcile their negative view of intermarriage with the biblical reports of important biblical personalities who married foreigners.

1. The Literary Portrayal of the Biblical Characters Examined.

Impact of Gender

All but one of the Israelite (Jewish) spouses of the intermarriages examined were men, the exception being Esther. This seems to have played an

important determining factor in how the rabbis dealt with each case of intermarriage. While the rabbis needed to find reasons to justify many of the marriages between Israelite men and foreign women, they simply stated that Esther was compelled to marry Ahasuerus because, as a woman, she was the passive victim of her husband's advances and had no choice but to marry him in order to save her life, or because God indicated to her that she was destined to marry him for a higher purpose (Sanhedrin 74b, Rashi on Sanhedrin 74b; Targum Sheni on Esther 2:8, Panim Aḥerim Nosaḥ B Parashah 2, Abba Gorion Parashah 2, Bereishit Rabbah 39:13¹). Esther's beauty, humility, virtue, loyalty to her Jewish identity and courage influenced the rabbis to portray her as a righteous woman who sacrificed her integrity to save the Jews of Persia. This opinion of the rabbis emphasises the social context of their times, a patriarchal era which dictated that women be subservient to the will of men.

Contrary to Esther, Abraham, Esau, Joseph, Judah, Moses and Ahab were responsible for their actions precisely because they were men and were therefore viewed by the rabbis as legal agents who could enter into a *kinyan*, an 'acquisition', in this case of a wife. According to rabbinic interpretation of Deuteronomy 22:13 and 24:1 men acquired wives and men divorce their wives. Women do not acquire, but are acquired²:

"A man marries a woman and cohabits with her. Then he takes an aversion to her" (Deuteronomy 22:13).

"A man takes a wife and possesses her. She fails to please him because he finds something obnoxious about her, and he writes her a bill of divorcement, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house" (Deuteronomy 24:1).

ואב"א: הא מני? ר"ש היא דתניא, ר"ש אומר: מפני מה אמרה תורה (דברים כב. יג) כי יקח איש אשה, ולא כתב כי תלקח אשה לאיש? מפני שדרכו של איש לחזור על אשה, ואין

¹ Vide Chapter Eight — Ahasuerus and Esther

² This clearly reflects the patriarchal system of the rabbis.

(Qiddushin 2b).

Importance of Piety and Righteousness

Abraham, Joseph and Moses

The righteousness of Abraham, the father of the Jewish People, Joseph, known in rabbinic tradition as *Yosef Hazadik*, and Moses, *Av Hanevi'im*, the supreme prophet³ and law giver compelled the rabbis to justify their respective marriages to Keturah, Asenath and Zipporah, all of whom were foreign. The trouble taken by the sages to explain the marriages of these illustrious figures is indicative of their opposition to intermarriage, something that was commonplace in biblical times. The rabbis felt the need to vindicate Abraham, Joseph and Moses lest their example be emulated by Jewish men of their time.

Judah

Judah, inheritor of the right of the firstborn and father of the tribe which produced King David, posed a problem for the rabbis because of his marriage to the daughter of Shua, a Canaanite. The rabbis could not accept the possibility that the ancestor of King David and the progenitor of the future Messiah would have married a Canaanite, such a union being prohibited by the Torah (Exodus 34:15-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-3) and contrary to the requests of Abraham (Genesis 24:2-3) and Isaac (Genesis 28:6).

Boaz

Boaz's righteousness was a result of his marriage to Ruth (Tanna deBei Eliyahu Zuta Chapter 3). Since Ruth is considered a righteous convert (Sanhedrin 93a-b, Ruth Zuta 3:15 and Bemidbar Rabbah 13:11 and Targum

³ Numbers 12:6-8, Yevamot 49b:

כדתניא כל הנביאים נסתכלו באספקלריא שאינה מאירה משה רבינו נסתכל באספקלריא המאירה.

Yonathan of Ruth 3:15) the rabbis do not have to justify her marriage to Boaz. Indeed the rabbis' reading of the text detects divine intervention that made sure Ruth married Boaz: Naomi urged Ruth to present herself to Boaz so that he would marry her (Ruth 3:1-5), Boaz agreed to wed Ruth (Ruth 3:10-13) and her redeemer refused to fulfil his obligation, making way for Boaz to take the responsibility (Ruth 4:6). Since Boaz is worthy of marrying Ruth and thereby becoming the ancestor of kings and the Messiah, it stands to reason, claim the rabbis, that Boaz is righteous and deserving of Ruth. In this instance it is the righteousness of the foreign partner that is transferred to the Jewish spouse.

Esau and Ahab

Esau and Ahab are both considered wicked. Esau, the ancestor of the Edomites (Genesis 25:30, Genesis 36:1) and, by rabbinic extension, the Romans (Pesachim 87b, Sanhedrin 12a, The Soncino Talmud 1952 : 464), is vilified by the rabbis for marrying two women of the seven Canaanite nations, marriages that according to the Bible caused his parents much bitterness (Genesis 26:34-35). Indeed rabbinic literature uses the fact that Esau married his first two wives as a pretext to criticise this enemy of Israel, a criticism that implicitly elevates his brother, Jacob (Israel). The example of Esau attests my hypothesis that the rabbis used the biblical text to promote their ideology. Thus, while the biblical characters who are portrayed as righteous by the text, such as Abraham, Joseph and Moses, were not criticised⁴ for marrying foreign women, Esau, because of what he symbolised, was condemned and maligned. The rabbis interpreted the names of his first two wives and his choice of them to be indicative of Esau's immoral character. Esau is, however, given some merit for marrying his third wife, a daughter of Ishmael and therefore a kinswoman of Abraham through Hagar. According to the rabbis Esau attained a measure of pardon from his parents.

Ahab

⁴ While Ramban does criticise Abraham for marrying Keturah, he is in the minority. *Vide* Chapter One.

Ahab, like Esau, was criticised for marrying Jezebel, whose wickedness was projected onto him. Ahab is known as the king who did more to anger God than all the kings who preceded him (1 Kings 16:30-31) and both the Bible and rabbinic literature blame Jezebel. Unlike the righteous heroes who transferred their virtue to their wives, Ahab's character was moulded by his wife, who is portrayed as the quintessential wicked foreign woman who led her husband astray. Thus the rabbis claim that because he remained silent during Jezebel's persecution of the prophets of YHWH and because he consented to have Naboth executed, Ahab's wickedness outweighed his good qualities (Sanhedrin 102b). The rabbis had to explain the fact that Ahab was successful in battle and ruled Israel for twenty-two years, since a man so wicked should not have merited so long a rule. The rabbis therefore claimed that he must have had some good qualities and portrayed him as a man who appreciated Torah scholarship and who had a healthy reverence for Torah. Despite his wickedness, Ahab's generation did not practice slander (Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Kings 18 *Siman* 213. Similarly Bemidbar Rabbah 19.2, Tanḥuma *Huqqat* 4, Pesikta deRav Kahana 4, Vayiqra Rabbah 26.2, Midrash Tehillim Mizmor 7 and TJ Pe'ah 4b 1:1). These virtues, ascribed to the king by the rabbis, would explain Ahab's sincere repentance that led God to defer punishment to the next generation (1 Kings 21:27-29). Ahab's virtues also served to highlight Jezebel's wickedness because, despite them Ahab was still counted among the three kings who lost their portion in the World to Come (Sanhedrin 10:2) and even his righteous servant, Obadiah could not bring blessing upon his house. The *midrash* Tanna deBei Eliyahu Rabba' (Parashah 10) explicitly blames Jezebel for Ahab's severe punishment, leading the rabbis to criticise him for following his evil wife's counsel. Some rabbis view Ahab's marriage to Jezebel as a deliberate rebellion against God (Radak on 1 Kings 16:31), just as Esau's marriage to his first two wives could be viewed as a rebellion against his parents (Genesis 26:34-35).

2. The Social Status of the Biblical Characters Examined and the Importance of their Marriages and their reputed Offspring for the History of the Jewish People.

Abraham

Abraham, as the first patriarch of the Jewish People set the moral standards for future generations. His marriage to Sarah, the first matriarch, eventually produced Isaac, the conduit of his father's teachings and ideology to the third generation, led by Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Keturah, Abraham's wife of his later years, following Sarah's death, lacked social status (at least the biblical text does not mention who she is), but she bore Abraham six sons (Genesis 25:2). One of Keturah's sons was Midian who became an enemy of Israel (Numbers 22:4-7, 25:1-18, 31:1-7), and the ancestor of Zipporah, the wife of Moses. Thus Keturah has both a negative and a positive impact on Israelite history, giving rise to the divergence of opinion concerning her marriage to Abraham. Some *midrashim* claim that she was Hagar, who, having converted to Judaism, adopted the name Keturah, while other *midrashim* state that she was Abraham's third wife, and, according to Ramban, a Canaanite⁵.

Esau

Esau's social importance lay in the fact that he was the firstborn of Isaac and Rebecca and was meant to inherit his father's legacy. The fact that he is portrayed as the ancestor of the Edomites gives him historical importance since they too were the enemies of Israel. The rabbis used the term Edom to refer to the Romans and thus Esau was seen by the sages as the ancestor of Israel's persecutor of rabbinic times. The biblical text also records Esau as the grandfather of Amalek, Israel's arch enemy⁶ through his first wife, Basemath / Adah bat Elon (Genesis 36:12, 15-16). Esau's connection to

⁵ *Vide* Chapter One — Abraham and Keturah

⁶ Deuteronomy 25:19

Israel's enemies opened the way for him to be depicted in a negative light and prompted the rabbis to condemn him for his immorality (Rabbeinu Baḥya on Genesis 26:34), and criticise him for marrying women of the Canaanite nations⁷.

Joseph

Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel, Jacob's favourite wife, enjoyed his father's devoted attention. The *ketonet passim* given to him by Jacob was indicative of his status as the favourite son, much to the annoyance of his brothers. But Joseph's elevated rank among his brothers was suggestive of his future importance as vizier of Egypt and saviour of the Middle East from the seven year famine. Joseph played an important role in the history of Israel, not only because he ensured the physical survival of his father and brothers, the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, but also because he brought them to Egypt, setting the scene for the deliverance of Israel from slavery, an event which led to the establishment of the unique relationship between God and Israel, sealed by the Covenant of Sinai. Joseph's righteousness and his importance to Jewish history compelled the rabbis to look favourably upon his marriage to Asenath and upon the two sons that she bore him. Indeed Ephraim and Manasseh were the eponymous ancestors of two important tribes of Israel, inspiring the rabbis to stipulate that fathers bless their sons at the *Shabbat* evening table with the blessing used by Jacob to bless Ephraim and Manasseh⁸.

The tribe of Manasseh produced the judge Gideon and King Jehu of Israel (Judges 6:15, Bereishit Rabba 97:5). Ephraim was both the ancestor of the virtuous Joshua bin Nun (Numbers 13:8, 16, Tanḥuma *Va-Yeḥi* 6) and the wicked kings Jeroboam and Ahab (Tanḥuma *Va-Yeḥi* 6). A rabbinic tradition

⁷ cf. Judah *infra*

⁸ Genesis 48:20

postulates that the future Messiah son of Joseph⁹ will descend from Ephraim (Sukkah 52a and Targum Yonathan ben Uzziel on Exodus 40:11). This tradition stems from the fact that Ephraim was a powerful and influential tribe that on many occasions presented themselves as a rival to the tribe of Judah. Hence it produced Jeroboam who led a successful revolt against Judah, resulting in the formation of the Kingdom of Israel. Thus Ephraim's contribution to the history of Israel is both negative and positive.

Judah

Judah's social status took on importance when he was designated to inherit the birthright of the firstborn, after Jacob's three older sons had been disqualified (Genesis 49:8-10). Not only did Judah attain the status as Jacob's firstborn, but his tribe produced the Davidic dynasty that the Bible depicts as divinely ordained to rule the People of Israel. In rabbinic thought the Messiah, future redeemer of the world, will come from the House of David. Given his importance to Jewish history, the rabbis had to explain the death of Judah's first two sons and his wife, who is not named in the biblical text, but simply designated as "the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua" (Genesis 38:2). While the Torah informs the reader that Er and Onan were slain because they acted in a manner that was displeasing to God, the rabbis who condemn Judah's choice of wife explain that being a Canaanite she was an unsuitable match for the ancestor of King David and the Messiah. The wickedness of their offspring was inherited from their mother. It was Perez, Judah's firstborn son borne to him by his daughter-in-law Tamar, who would be the ancestor of King David.

⁹ A rabbinic tradition states that the Messiah son of David will be preceded by a Messiah the son of Joseph who will prepare the way for the true Messiah and defeat Gog and Magog and the kingdom of Edom. According to some sources he will be killed in battle. (Encyclopaedia Judaica 1997 article on Ephraim).

Moses

Moses, the central character of four books of the Torah, shared with Joseph the distinction of being a Hebrew that attained an important social status in Egyptian society. While, according to the biblical text, Joseph was rewarded for his correct interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams by being appointed vizier over Egypt, Moses is described as being raised as an Egyptian prince. Like Joseph he retained his ethnic identity and went on to play an important role in the history of Israel as a liberator, legislator, prophet and judge. Moses was instrumental in the liberation of the People of Israel and in negotiating the covenant with God, symbolised by the Ten Commandments which he brought down from Mount Sinai. Moses' marriage to Zipporah produced two sons, Gershom and Eliezer both of whom were inconsequential to the history of Israel. Zipporah, however, saved Moses' life when he was attacked by God on the way to Egypt (Exodus 4:24-26) and her father instructed him on how to set up an effective judiciary system (Exodus 18:13-26). Thus Moses' marriage to Zipporah proved beneficial for the Jewish People. Due to Moses' importance, and Zipporah and Jethro's role in assisting him, the rabbis went to great pains to portray Zipporah in a positive light.

Boaz

Boaz was a chieftain (Ruth Rabbah 5:15) and judge of the tribe of Judah and as such enjoyed prominent status in Bethlehem society. His wealth enabled Ruth to glean from his fields to support herself and her mother-in-law, Naomi. His marriage to Ruth produced Obed, the grandfather of King David. Thus Boaz was also the ancestor of the House of David, influencing the rabbis to portray him as righteous and to view his marriage to Ruth positively.

Ahab

Ahab, as king of Israel, achieved the highest social status possible yet he is portrayed by the biblical text as the most wicked of monarchs. His military exploits were important for the security and economic well-being of his

kingdom, as was his alliance with Phoenicia, cemented by his marriage to Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidon and Tyre. Ahab also maintained his father, Omri's, alliance with Judah, sealing it by means of the marriage of Athaliah, who was either Ahab's sister or his daughter, to Jehoram son of King Jehoshaphat of Judah (2 Kings 8:18; 2 Chronicles 18:1). While historically Ahab's reign benefited the northern kingdom of Israel, the Bible and rabbinic literature portray his rule as disastrous for the religious life and moral welfare of Israel because, incited by his wife, Jezebel, Ahab promoted the worship of Baal and consented to the execution of Naboth and the persecution of the prophets of YHWH. Such action committed or condoned by the king would naturally be emulated by his subjects, leading to the moral deterioration of the kingdom of Israel.

Jezebel bore Ahab two sons, Ahazia and Jehoram. Ahazia continued his mother's policy of promoting Baal worship and he allowed himself to be influenced by the Tyrian leaders that had advised his father. During his reign Moab and Ammon, who had been vassals of Israel, gained their independence. His brother Jehoram allowed Elisha and the other prophets of YHWH to worship freely and removed the pillar of Baal erected by his father. He was, however, not successful as a king. His many defeats in battle and the severe famine which ravaged Israel during his reign gave rise to a rebellion led by Jehu, a commander of the garrison at Ramoth-Gilead. Jehoram was killed, bringing about the end of the Omri dynasty¹⁰.

Esther

Esther, a Jewess in exile in the city of Sushan, was of the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe of King Saul and her royal status was realised when she became queen of Persia after marrying Ahasuerus. Esther's importance to the history

¹⁰ While it would seem that Jehoram should have been rewarded for removing the pillar of Baal and allowing Elisha and the other prophets of YHWH to worship freely, Jehoram failed as a king due to God's promise to punish Ahab's sons for the transgressions of their father (1 Kings 21:27-29). While this conforms with Exodus 20:5, Numbers 14:18 and Deuteronomy 5:9, it contradicts Ezekiel 18:20

of Israel¹¹ is her role as ambassador to King Ahasuerus on the part of her people, the biblical precursor to the *shtadlanim* of the courts of Europe. Her pleading on behalf of the Jews saved them from annihilation at the hands of Haman and his fellow conspirators. Ahasuerus, variously portrayed as a weak man whose attitude towards the Jews was determined by the wicked Haman, a gracious host who catered for the religious sensibilities of others, and a king who hated the Jews more than Haman, was an important figure in the history of Israel because he represents the Jew hater who has a change of heart. Although he did not reverse his decree to annihilate the Jews of Persia, he did give permission for the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies. Since the Biblical text does not mention any offspring from the marriage of Esther and Ahasuerus, the rabbis debated whether Esther bore any children to Ahasuerus. One opinion states that Esther did have a son who became King Darius III the last Achaemenian king of Persia (Esther Rabbah 8:3, Jonas C. Greenfield 1997). Darius III was of no importance to the Jews, but his defeat by Alexander the Great is mentioned in 1 Maccabees 1:1. Thus Esther was an important figure in her own right and her significance to the history of the Jewish People did not stem from her children.

3. The Rabbinic Attitude to each of the Marriages Examined and the Methods used to Reconcile them with the Rabbinic Opposition to Intermarriage.

“You must not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for they will lust after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and invite you, and you will eat of their sacrifices. And when you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will lust after their gods and will cause your sons to lust after their gods.” (Exodus 34:15-16)

“When the LORD your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations

¹¹ The rabbis understood Esther to be an historical figure.

before you—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations much larger than you—and the LORD your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter. You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons” (Deuteronomy 7:1-3).

Exodus 34:15-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-3 are two source texts for the rabbinic prohibition of intermarriage. According to Ben-Zion Schereschewsky (1997), the definition of intermarriage is: “a marriage of a non-Jew to a Jew, i.e., one born of Jewish parents, or whose mother alone was Jewish, or who has become a proselyte in accordance with Jewish law”.

A reading of the biblical text concerning the biblical characters examined in this work conveys the understanding that all their marriages, with the exception of that between Boaz and Ruth, conform to the above definition of intermarriage and are prohibited by rabbinic law. While the Torah only forbids Israelites to marry members of the seven Canaanite nations mentioned in Deuteronomy 7:1, the rabbis extend the prohibition to include members of all the non-Israelite nations, all those who “will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods” (Deuteronomy 7:4):

משום ד"א בנותיהן דאורייתא היא דכתיב לא תתחתן במ דאורייתא ז' אומות אבל שאר עובדי כוכבים לא ואתו אינהו וגזור אפילו דשאר עובדי כוכבים ולר"ש בן יוחי דאמר כי יסיר את בנך מאחרי לרבות כל המסירות מאי איכא למימר אלא דאורייתא אישות דרך חתנות ואתו אינהו גזור אפילו דרך זנות נמי בבית דינו של שם גזור דכתיב ויאמר יהודה הוציאוה ותשרף אלא דאורייתא עובד כוכבים הבא על בת ישראל דמשכה בתריה אבל ישראל הבא על העובדת כוכבים לא ואתו אינהו גזור אפי' ישראל הבא על העובדת כוכבים.

(Avodah Zarah 36b)

ישראל שבעל עכו"ם משאר האומות דרך אישות או ישראלית שנבעלה לעכו"ם דרך אישות הרי אלו לוקין מן התורה שנאמר לא תתחתן במ בתך לא תתן לבנו ובתו לא

תקח לבנך אחד שבעה עממין ואחד כל אומות באיסור זה וכן מפורש על ידי עזרא ואשר לא נתן בנותינו לעמי הארץ ואת בנותיהם לא נקח לבנינו:

ולא אסרה תורה אלא דרך חתנות אבל הבא על הכותית דרך זנות מכין אותו מכת מרדות מד"ס גזירה שמא יבא להתחתן ואם ייחדה לו בזנות חייב עליה משום נדה ומשום שפחה ומשום כותית ומשום זונה ואם לא ייחדה לו אלא נקראת מקרה אינו חייב אלא משום כותית וכל חיובין אלו מדבריהן:

(Mishneh Torah Issurei Bi'ah 12:1-2)

איסור עובדת כוכבים ושפחה סעיף א ישראל שבעל עובדת כוכבים, דרך אישות, או ישראלית שנבעלה לעובד כוכבים (דרך אישות), הרי אלו לוקין מן התורה, שנאמר: לא תתחתן במ (דברים ז, ג) (ויש חולקין בזה). אבל הבא על העובדת כוכבים דרך זנות, במקרה, חייב עליה מדרבנן משום עובדת כוכבים ומשום זונה והיו ומכין אותו מכת מרדות. ואם ייחדה לו בזנות, חייב עליה מדרבנן משום נדה, שפחה, עובדת כוכבים, זונה. ואם היה כהן, אפילו בא עליה דרך מקרה לוקה מן התורה משום זונה (ויקרא כא, ז).

(Shulhan Arukh Even Ha'ezer 16:1)

Ruth

According to the biblical text, Ruth was the only foreign woman to have converted, committing herself to Naomi's people and their God. Thus the rabbis did not need to justify Ruth's marriage to Boaz, although Ruth's ethnicity did pose a problem for the rabbis which had to be resolved. According to Deuteronomy 23:4-5 Ammonites and Moabites were forbidden to convert or marry an Israelite and yet Ruth, a Moabite converted, was accepted into Judean society, married a prominent member of that society and become the great grandmother of King David. In rabbinic tradition Ruth is also the ancestress of the Messiah.

Since the Book of Ruth clearly approves of Ruth's marriage to Boaz, the rabbis have to reconcile the narrative of Ruth with the Deuteronomic prohibition. The solution of the rabbis is to understand the words of the

prohibition regarding Ammonite and Moabite converts literally: "Ammonite and not Ammonitess, Moabite and not Moabites" (Yevamot 77a), that is, the proscription only applies to male Ammonites and Moabites. Women Ammonites and Moabites are free to convert and marry Israelites. The importance of the marriage between Boaz and Ruth for the People of Israel is expressed by the last five verses of the Book of Esther:

"This is the line of Perez: Perez begot Hezron, Hezron begot Ram, Ram begot Amminadab, Amminadab begot Nahshon, Nahshon begot Salmon, Salmon begot Boaz, Boaz begot Obed, Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David." (Ruth 4:18-22)

These last verses of the narrative reveal the purpose of the account, namely the genealogical profile of King David. According to the biblical text, Ruth's marriage to Boaz was necessary for the eventual birth of David, the man who would unite the confederacy of the twelve tribes into a powerful kingdom and whose son would build the Temple in Jerusalem, symbol of the power of the God of Israel. Thus the rabbis express the idea that Ruth was destined to become the ancestress of King David¹² and Boaz was rewarded for taking the role of *go'el*, 'redeemer' and marrying her under the law of levirate marriage¹³. Indeed the fact that David's lineage back to Perez is expressed through Boaz indicated to the rabbis that the union between Boaz and Ruth was predetermined. The rabbis also point out Ruth's beauty, humility and righteousness, qualities that, according to them, make her suitable to marry an Israelite. Ruth is an example of a righteous convert who made a significant contribution to the moral well-being and future of Israel.

Judah

Judah, the father of Perez, is the link between the Patriarchs and the Davidic monarchy. It is the tribe of Judah, son of Jacob, who provides the continuous dynasty of Israel and who will, according to rabbinic tradition, provide the

¹² *Midrash Yelammedenu*, Ruth Rabbah 7:2, Shabbat 113b, Ruth Rabbah 5:6 and Ruth Zuta 2:13.

¹³ *Tanna deBei Eliyahu Zuta* Chapter 3.

future redeemer of the world. Yet Judah marries a nameless daughter of Shua the Canaanite, a race that Israel is forbidden to marry. The rabbis were troubled by Judah's choice of wife and, since the Torah does not intimate that she converted, the rabbis felt the need to explain or justify the marriage between a Canaanite woman and the man who was elevated to the status of the firstborn of Jacob, and who was the ancestor of King David. The collection of *midrashim* studied reveal two approaches to the problem of Judah's marriage to the daughter of Shua. Taking their cue from the biblical text, some rabbis state that Judah's wife was wicked, a trait she passed on to her sons Er and Onan, both of whom died after marrying Tamar because their actions were displeasing to God. Her sudden death is also seen by the rabbis as punishment for her immorality. The twist in the narrative resulting from Tamar's determination not to be sidelined and left as a widow provides fuel for the rabbinic imagination. Thus Aggadat Bereishit (Chapter 64.1) asserts that God deliberately killed the daughter of Shua and her two sons, Er and Onan, so that Judah would father a child with Tamar, the daughter of Shem. This rather cruel scheme was necessary because if the Messiah was to be a descendant of Judah then a Canaanite woman would not be a suitable ancestress for such an important figure in Jewish tradition. Judah's marriage to the daughter of Shua was intolerable to the rabbis leading them to imagine that God intervened and slew her so that Judah would be set on the right path! Judah is redeemed in the rabbis' eyes by the fact that he had a child with Tamar.

The second, less drastic approach to Judah's marriage was to deny that his wife was the daughter of a Canaanite. Taking their lead from Hosea 12:8 and Isaiah 23:8 and 11, where the word *kena'an* has the meaning of 'trader' or 'merchant', the rabbis who follow this approach understand Judah's wife to be simply a daughter of a merchant. This interpretation makes Judah's marriage acceptable to the rabbis because it conforms to the Torah directive banning Israelites from marrying Canaanites. It was unthinkable to these sages that Judah would marry a Canaanite since both his great grandfather (Abraham) and his grandfather (Isaac) had admonished their sons not to take Canaanite women for wives.

Judah was either criticised by the rabbis for marrying a Canaanite¹⁴ or he was cleared from all wrongdoing since Shua was not literally a Canaanite, but simply a trader. It is interesting that it did not occur to the rabbis to declare that Judah's wife converted to Judaism, a solution which they offered in the case of Keturah, Zipporah and Asenath. Had the rabbis used this explanation they would still have had to explain the death of her two oldest sons followed by her own demise. The rabbis would also have had to explain Judah's wider interpretation of the law of levirate marriage which usually does not obligate the father of the deceased husband to marry the widow¹⁵. Tamar was clearly the righteous woman in the narrative, despite the fact that she deceived Judah into fulfilling the precept of *yibum*, 'levirate marriage'¹⁶.

Abraham

Although Abraham instructed his servant to find a wife for Isaac from his homeland of Mesopotamia, charging him not to allow Isaac to marry a local Canaanite woman, he himself took Keturah as a wife, after the death of Sarah. Even though Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac and sent all his other sons to eastern lands so that Isaac would not be prevented from inheriting his birthright, the rabbis were disturbed by the Patriarch's choice of Keturah and felt the need to justify his last marriage. While Naḥmonides criticises Abraham for marrying Keturah, whom he states was a Canaanite, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam and Yalkut Reuveni merely point out that Abraham married a Canaanite but do not make any comment. Other rabbis (Bereishit

¹⁴For which he was punished by having to suffer the death of two of his sons, but for which he also attained pardon by having a child with Tamar.

¹⁵ According to Menachem Elon, quoting Bereishit Rabbah 85:5, the law of the levirate marriage preceded Mosaic law. Elon claims that the law differed in Judah's time in that the obligation to marry the widow also fell on her father-in-law and there was no release through *ḥaliṣah*.

¹⁶ While Judah was deceived into performing the *mitzvah* of *yibum*, Boaz was willing to fulfil the obligation himself, even though he, like Judah, was not the first in line to carry out the duty of *yibum*. According to rabbinic tradition both Judah and Boaz were male ancestors of the Messiah.

Rabbah, Targum Yonathan, Tanḥuma, Zohar Bereishit, Rashi and Keli Yakar) justify his marriage to Keturah by identifying her with Hagar, Sarah's handmaid who Abraham banished into the wilderness at Sarah's command (Genesis 21:9-14). According to this tradition, Hagar reverted to worshipping her father's gods after she was sent away by Abraham, but eventually repented and converted to Judaism as understood by the rabbis who superimposed their reality back on biblical text. Upon conversion Hagar adopted the name Keturah. The rabbis were careful to explain that Hagar remained faithful to Abraham, not having sexual intercourse with any other man after being banished. Thus when Abraham took her back after her conversion and married her he did not transgress the Torah command that forbids a man to remarry his estranged wife if she has married and divorced another man (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Thus the rabbis employed the rabbinic process of formal conversion unknown in biblical times to exonerate Abraham from any guilt, even though his marriage to Keturah did not pose any threat to the survival of Judaism, other than the possibility that others might follow his example.

Joseph

Conversion was also used by one tradition to explain Joseph's marriage to Asenath, daughter of the priest of On. Joseph's marriage to Asenath was justified by some traditions that state that the daughter of Poti-phaera converted to Judaism (Yalkut Shimoni, the *midrash* "The Prayer of Asenath" and the pseudepigraphic work "Joseph and Asenath"). This explanation is, however, only a minority approach. The majority of midrashic sources identify Asenath as the daughter of Dinah, Joseph's sister who was raped by Shechem. The offspring of this unfortunate incident was sent to Egypt where she was adopted by Poti-phaera and his wife. According to this tradition Joseph was not guilty of marrying an Egyptian, but had in fact performed a *mitzvah* by returning a stray Jewess to the fold. Not only do the two traditions that justify the marriage of Joseph and Asenath clear Joseph of any

transgression, but they also confirm Jewish status to Ephraim and Manasseh, since rabbinic law traces Jewish status through the mother.

Moses

The rabbis use conversion to explain Moses' marriage to Zipporah. Some *midrashim* (Yalkut Shimoni and Ramban) state that Jethro, Zipporah's father converted to Judaism, implying that Zipporah followed suit, while others (Rabbeinu Baḥya and Sifteī Ḥakhamim) maintain that Zipporah converted on her own, Rabbeinu Baḥya even stating that she converted with the intention of marrying Moses. Sifteī Ḥakhamim includes an interesting alternative tradition, according to which Moses married Zipporah because he had not yet received the Torah with its prohibition against marrying foreign women. This tradition is astounding because the rabbis tend to view the Torah synchronically and usually hold that all the biblical heroes were learned in Torah and observed all six hundred and thirteen commandments¹⁷. It is rather ironic that Moses, the man who, according to rabbinic tradition, received the entire Torah, both Written and Oral, at Mount Sinai, is portrayed as being ignorant of the law. Sifteī Ḥakhamim illustrates the fact that the sages were not adverse to applying diachronic methodology to the text, when doing so would promote their ideology.

Having established that Zipporah converted to Judaism and that she was righteous enough to be Moses' wife, most of the *midrashim* debate whether Moses married a second wife or whether the Cushite woman referred to in Numbers 12:1-3 is Zipporah. Other *midrashim* discuss the subject of Miriam and Aaron's challenge to Moses. While some sages (Rashbam, Ḥizquni, Da'at Zekeinim and ibn Ezra) understand the Cushite woman to be a second wife, others (Rashi, Rabbeinu Baḥya, Targum Yerushalmi, Sifrei, Yalkut Shimoni, Midrash Tehillim and Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer) claim that the Cushite woman is Zipporah, who was called a Cushite because of her extraordinary righteousness and beauty. All *midrashim* agree that Miriam and Aaron

¹⁷ Vide Chapter One — Abraham and Keturah

challenged Moses because he neglected his sexual obligations to his wife. Thus the rabbis refrained from using the incident of Numbers 12:1-3 to reinforce their opposition to intermarriage, electing to use it as a polemic against celibacy.

Esau and Ahab

Both Esau and Ahab are considered by rabbinic tradition to be wicked men, the former being the sibling rival of the patriarch Jacob, and, as Jacob's antithesis, the ancestor of Israel's enemies (Edomites, Amalekites and, in rabbinic tradition, the Romans) and the latter being the king that angered God more than any other. The rabbis therefore had no interest in justifying Esau and Ahab's marriages to foreign women, but chose to view their unions as proof of their wickedness and of their unworthiness to bear the ethical legacy of Israel. The rabbis interpret the names of Esau's first two wives as reflections of his wicked traits and use the fact that he married them to vilify him and, by extension, the Romans. Rabbeinu Bahya expresses the rabbis' opinion of Esau and his marriages succinctly: Esau married the wicked Canaanite women because his immoral ways dictated that he should find affinity with equally depraved women. His marriages merely reflected Esau's true self. The rabbis do, however credit him with marrying a daughter of Ishmael in an attempt to make atonement for causing his parents grief. The rabbis deliberately refrained from finding a way of making Esau's unions acceptable because they wished to vilify him as the political and moral enemy of the Jewish People.

The rabbis' approach to Esau's marriages differs to their approach to the marriage of Judah. Those rabbis who accept that Judah married a Canaanite do not vilify the ancestor of the King David, but merely point out that his sons Er and Onan inherited their mother's wickedness and that Judah's wife had to die so that he would father a child with Tamar, a woman more suitable to be the mother of the ancestor of David. This difference in approach is indicative of the rabbis' use of *midrash* to further their ideals.

Ahab's marriage to Jezebel cannot be justified because the biblical text explicitly describes her corruption and immorality, so much so that she is used in Jewish and Christian literature as a personification of womanly wickedness and shamelessness¹⁸. The rabbis use this royal marriage to support their vilification of Ahab and as an example of the danger of foreign women and the influence they can have over Jewish men.

Jezebel's promotion of Baal worship, her persecution of the prophets of YHWH and her instigation of the murder of Naboth made it impossible for the rabbis to speculate that she converted or was in anyway virtuous¹⁹. Both the Bible and rabbinic sources state that Jezebel incited Ahab to commit immoral acts and their marriage was considered a threat to the moral character of Israel and to the survival of Judaism in the kingdom (as viewed by the rabbis in their synchronic approach to the biblical text). The rabbis believed that Ahab, who reigned for twenty-two years and was undefeated in war, must have had some merit and blame his wife for his transgressions in a manner reminiscent to Adam (and rabbinic literature) blaming Eve for his disobedience to God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and bad.

Esther

Conversion could not be a solution to Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus because, like Jezebel, he was too prominent a figure in society to allow for rabbinic speculation that he converted, given the fact that he is considered by the rabbis to be an historical figure. Unlike Jezebel, however, he is not portrayed in the Bible as a wicked man, but rather as a weak king who, having no opinion of his own, relied completely on the counsel of his advisors. Unfortunately for the Jews of Persia he appointed Haman, a man who bitterly

¹⁸ Indeed the word "jezebel" is used in English as a noun meaning 'a shameless or immoral woman' (Concise Oxford Dictionary)

¹⁹ The rabbis do ascribe a small amount of virtue to Jezebel, but not enough to redeem her. *Vide* Chapter Seven — Jezebel and Ahab.

hated the Jews, as his chief official and advisor. There is, however a midrashic tradition that portrays Ahasuerus as a wicked man who hated the Jews more than Haman. Since this characterisation of the king of Persia has no biblical foundation, one can assume that the rabbis made an analogy between Ahasuerus and Jezebel based on the fact that they were both sovereigns. Ahasuerus, as king, could have rejected Haman's request to exterminate the Jews of Persia if he was so inclined.

The biblical narrative itself offers an explanation for Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus. It was necessary for Esther to become queen of Persia in order to save the Jews from annihilation. Since she was successful, the rabbis express explicitly what the Book of Esther only implies, namely that it was divinely ordained that Esther should marry Ahasuerus. Midrashic literature further justifies Esther's action by stating that at first Mordecai attempted to hide her from the king²⁰, but he was forced to bring her out of hiding so that she would not be found by the king's messengers and executed. The rabbis go to great lengths to assure us that Esther continued to observe *kashrut*, *Shabbat*, the laws of *niddah* and *Pesah*, that she kept her modesty and that she established a sanhedrin and house of study for Mordecai at the king's gate. The Zohar even goes as far as to state that Esther did not marry Ahasuerus since God sent a female demon in the guise of Esther to the king in order to consummate the marriage.

The main rabbinic defence of Esther's actions in marrying Ahasuerus was that she was a woman and therefore could not determine her own life but was submissive to the will of the king. She therefore could not be responsible for her actions. This reflects the social context of the rabbis in which women were not considered agents in their own right and differentiates the attitude of the rabbis towards this intermarriage, as opposed to the other examples in which the Jewish spouse was a man.

²⁰ Some versions claim that Esther hid herself.

Conclusion

The fact that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 74b) raises the question whether Esther should not have accepted martyrdom rather than marry Ahasuerus since doing so would mean transgressing in public,²¹ is indicative of the rabbinic attitude towards intermarriage, namely that it is a sin of such a serious nature that a Jew should rather die than enter into such a union.

Since the rabbis ruled (Sanhedrin 74a) that only the transgressions of idolatry, unchastity (incest, adultery) and murder should not be violated even if threatened with death, the rabbis who questioned Esther's actions would probably have viewed marriage to a non-Jew as a form of unchastity, or perhaps, *avodah zarah*, since the non-Jewish spouse may lead the Jew to idolatry. Indeed this was the rabbis' main concern about intermarriage, a concern reflected in the Bible (Deuteronomy 7:4, Judges 3:6-7).

The Talmud (Shabbat 13b) teaches that at a gathering of Tannaim in the attic of Ḥananiah ben Hezekiah ben Garon, when the followers of the School of Shammai outnumbered the followers of the School of Hillel, eighteen measures were enacted (according to the stringencies of the School of Shammai). Among these eighteen measures was the prohibition of consuming the bread and using the oil of non-Jews on account of their wine, the ban of drinking their wine on account of their daughters, and the prohibition of their daughters on account of 'something else' (Shabbat 17b, Avodah Zarah 36b). The rabbis (Geneva in the name of Rab²² and Rashi) explain 'something else' to mean idolatry:

אמר באלי אמר אבימי נותאה משמיה דרב פיתן ושמן יין ובנותיהן כולן משמונה עשר
דבר הן בנותיהן מאי היא אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק גזרו על בנותיהן נידות מעריסותן
וגניבא משמיה דרב אמר כולן משום עבודת כוכבים גזרו בהן דכי אתא רב אחא בר אדא

²¹ Abaye defends Esther by stating that she was the passive victim of Ahasuerus' advances and could not be blamed for committing the transgression of marrying a non-Jew.

²² (Avodah Zarah 36b).

א"ר יצחק גזרו על פיתן משום שמנן מאי אולמיה דשמנן מפת אלא על פיתן ושמנן משום יינן ועל יינן משום בנותיהן²⁴ ועל בנותיהן משום דבר אחר.²³

(Avodah Zarah 36b)

משום יינן. שהיין בוער בו ומביאו לידי בנותיהן:
ובנותיהן אסורין משום דבר אחר. עבודת אלילים:

(Rashi on Avodah Zarah 36b)

It is evident from Shabbat 17b and Avodah Zarah 36b that the rabbis understood the power of seduction that women had over men and they expressed the fear that if Jewish men ate the bread and used the oil of the pagans, they would be easily tempted to drink their wine which would loosen their inhibitions and they might be seduced by the pagan women, who would influence them to practice idolatry. Indeed, as mentioned above, Jezebel was the archetype of such a woman.

Thus the rabbis, and indeed the Torah, were afraid of the **consequences** of intermarriage, and not intermarriage *per se*. This is also true of the status of the offspring, once it became the rabbinic norm to determine the Jewish status of a child through his or her mother²⁵.

The fear of idolatry which underlies the proscription of marrying non-Jews is a determining factor in the rabbinic attitude towards the intermarriages enumerated in the Bible. Thus in the case of those characters who had either forsaken the values of Torah or committed grave iniquities (Esau and Ahab, respectively) the rabbis made no attempt to defend or excuse their choice of wife or wives, but used their failure to comply with Deuteronomy 7:1-3 to polemicize against them.

Abraham, Judah, Joseph, Moses, Boaz and Esther are all examples of biblical figures that promoted Jewish values or ensured the survival of the Jewish

²³ Idolatry (note in Soncino Talmud Avodah Zarah 36b).

²⁴ Drinking wine with non-Jews would arouse desire for their women (note in Soncino Talmud Avodah Zarah 36b).

²⁵ Qiddushin 3:12, Mishneh Torah Issurei Bi'ah 15:3-4 and Qiddushin 68b.

People. The rabbis were therefore compelled to defend their marriages to foreigners because it was inconceivable to them that such righteous individuals would ignore the express biblical injunction not to marry non-Israelites (non-Jews). Due to their synchronic understanding of biblical text and their tendency to superimpose their social and historical circumstances onto biblical text, the rabbis were certain that the biblical heroes understood that the prohibition of marrying a member of the seven Canaanite nations expressed in Deuteronomy 7:1-3 was extended to include all non-Israelite (non-Jewish) nations, even though this extension was rabbinic (Avodah Zarah 36b, Qiddushin 68b and Yevamot 23a). The rabbis had to reconcile the greatness of Abraham, Judah, Joseph, Moses, Boaz and Esther with the fact that they had entered into marriages that were unacceptable to them.

As was demonstrated in this study various methods were used by the rabbis to reconcile the legal ban on exogamy and the negative emotional attitude and fear of the rabbis towards non-Jews (especially non-Jewish women) on the one hand, with the seemingly dismissive attitude of the biblical characters regarding the prohibition on the other hand. The most convenient method was to employ the rabbinic concept of conversion, the typical example being Ruth, whose words of commitment described in the biblical text (Ruth 1:16-17) are viewed by the sages as indicative of a formal conversion. According to the rabbis, Ruth's conversion consisted of formal instruction in some of the major and some of the minor *mitzvot* as stipulated in the Talmud (Yevamot 47b)²⁶. Thus Keturah, Asenath, and Zipporah were also deemed by the sages to have converted to Judaism, making them acceptable wives for Abraham, Joseph and Moses respectively, though the rabbis had to be more creative in these cases since, unlike Ruth, these women do not voice their willingness to join their lot with the people of Israel.

A second method was either to employ divine intervention or to claim that the two parties were destined to marry in order to fulfil a higher purpose. Thus the archangel Michael took the infant Asenath and placed her in the home of

²⁶ *Vide* Chapter Six — Boaz and Ruth

Poti-phera so that Joseph would one day meet and marry her. Ruth was destined to be the ancestor of David, and Esther was destined to marry Ahasuerus in order to save the Jews of Persia from annihilation.

Another example of Divine intervention is the statement in the Zohar that God sent a female demon in the guise of Esther to consummate her marriage with Ahasuerus, thus sparing the real Esther from marrying a non-Jew.

Some traditions employ the idea that the reality is other than what it seems to be at first glance. Thus some *midrashim* hold that Asenath was not a foreigner at all, but was really the daughter of Joseph's sister Dinah. This speculation that has no biblical foundation was also used by some traditions regarding Keturah, claiming that she was Hagar with whom Abraham had fathered Ishmael many years previously. Judah's marriage to the daughter of Shua the Canaanite is also justified by some traditions that follow this approach. Using the technique of *gezeirah shavah*, 'word analogy' some rabbis claimed that the word "canaanite" in this context has the meaning of 'trader'. Judah married a merchant's daughter and not a daughter of a Canaanite.

The rabbis who understood "canaanite" to refer to the ethnicity of Shua did not excuse the marriage and viewed the death of Judah's two sons and his wife as a justification of their aversion to intermarriage. God, they claim, brought about the death of Judah's wife so that he would have a child with Tamar. Being a descendant of Shem, and therefore of the seed of Abraham, Tamar was more suitable to be the mother of Perez, the ancestor of David.

Besides the claim that Esther married Ahasuerus in order to fulfil a higher purpose, the rabbis made a point of claiming that the heroine of *Megillat Esther* retained her Jewish identity and observed the ritual commandments of her people. There was no reason to fear for the Jewish status of her children.

It is clear from this study and analysis of the *midrashim* pertaining to the eight biblical characters that are examined above that the rabbis' disapproval of

intermarriage at their time influenced their view of the intermarriages which are recorded in the Bible. The rabbis perceived intermarriage as a threat for the survival of Judaism. Due to the rise of Christianity on one hand and the dominance of paganism (which the rabbis equated with a life of immorality and licentiousness), on the other, coupled with the rabbis' fear that the non-Jewish spouse will lead the Jewish partner away from Jewish tradition, the rabbis felt the need to voice their disapproval of intermarriage in no-uncertain terms. As shown above, the concerns of the rabbis are implicitly expressed in many of the *midrashim*.

Since traditional Judaism views the *midrashim* as part of the vast corpus of oral tradition which has Divine authority, the *midrashim* are not understood in their historical context but rather as the 'transmitted' Divine Word (Ross 2004:60). Thus Orthodox Judaism still expresses the sentiments of the rabbis regarding intermarriage.

Progressive Judaism, on the other hand, does not share this maximalistic view of the *midrash*. Consequently its adherents do not place as much weight on the *midrashim* as does the Orthodox stream²⁷. This different view of the oral law is the principle behind the authority, or lack thereof, that the sages' *midrashic* texts and the ideas expressed in them exert on the modern attitude towards Jews who have married non-Jews and the children of such unions. The study of the development of *halakhah*²⁸ has shown that as long as Jewish authorities bestow Divine authority on *midrash*, the legal position on intermarriage will continue to be one of strict prohibition and will echo the *midrashic* attitude of disapproval.

²⁷ There is consent that in fact today only the maximalists among the Orthodox give the whole oral law Divine authority (Tamar Ross 2004).

²⁸ Azila Reisenberger "The Development of *Halakhah* and its Implication to Jewish Women", (July 2005).

Afterthought: modern views of intermarriage

While the Progressive movements do not encourage intermarriage, the rabbis and lay leaders accept the Jewish spouses of such marriages as members of congregations and communities who can still make a valuable contribution to the furtherance of Judaism. The children of such unions are considered Jews if they are raised as Jews, regardless of the Jewish status of the mother. If the mother is not Jewish, the *bar* or *bat mitzvah* ceremony of the children who are actively educated and involved in the Jewish way of life is considered their formal conversion to Judaism.

The Reform Movement in the United States of America and the British Liberal Movement accept patrilineal descent as well as matrilineal descent without the need to convert.

These liberal attitudes towards Jews who marry non-Jews and the more open acceptance of the offspring of such unions are to some extent a result of the fact that the Progressive Movements view the oral tradition in light of the socio-political and historical contexts in which they were formulated as this thesis has clearly shown.

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APPENDIX
GLOSSARY OF LESSER KNOWN MIDRASHIM
REFERRED TO IN THIS STUDY

Midrash Shemuel:

A compilation of *midrashim* on the Books of Samuel, edited in Palestine no earlier than the eleventh century. Midrash Shemuel contains material from the Mishnah, Tosefta, Mekhilta, Sifrei, Bereishit Rabbah, Vayiqra Rabbah, Eikha Rabbah, Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Shir HaShirim Rabbah, Kohelet Rabbah, Ruth Rabbah, Esther Rabbah, Pesikta Rabbati, and the Tanḥuma Midrashim, as well as original material.

Panim Aherim Le-Esther

A collection of *aggadot* and homilies on the Book of Esther redacted not earlier than the twelfth century and compiled from various sources, including, among others, Esther Rabbah II, Midrash Abba Guryon, the Babylonian Midrash on Esther and Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer.

Midrash Abba Guryon

A late *midrash* on the Book of Esther, compiled in the eleventh or twelfth century. Midrash Abba Guryon draws on material from Esther Rabbah I.