

OpenTheo

Q&A#108 Levirate Marriage

February 19, 2019



Alastair Roberts

Today's question: "What were the purposes of levirate marriage? I can see that it would help to provide for widows, but its described purposes appear to go beyond that. In our culture, if a brother dies, he and his brother already share a name and his nieces and nephews by a brother will carry on the family name. My understanding is that the Israelites did not have family names in the same manner as modern English-speaking cultures. What was different about Israelite culture that causes the first child born of a levirate marriage being described in Deuteronomy 25 as assuming the name of the dead brother (and what does such a taking of the brother's name mean, in cultural context)? Also, does levirate marriage imply polygamy because of how, with regard to the levirate marriage, it apparently contains an increased risk that the surviving brother will not have a child from that marriage to succeed him (if, for instance, he only has one son by that wife)?"

I mention a series of videos by Rabbi David Fohrman. That can be watched here: <https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/shavuot-does-the-book-of-ruth-matter>.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed these talks, please tell your friends and consider supporting me on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>. You can also support me using my PayPal account: <https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>.

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what were the purposes of levirate marriage? I can see that it would help to provide for widows, but its described purposes appear to go beyond that. In our culture, if a brother dies, he and his brother already share a name, and his nieces and nephews by a brother will carry on the family name.

My understanding is that the Israelites did not have family names in the same manner as modern English-speaking cultures. What was different about Israelite culture that causes the firstborn child of a levirate marriage being described in Deuteronomy 25 as assuming the name of the dead brother? And what does such a taking of the brother's name mean in cultural context? Also, does levirate marriage imply polygamy? When we look at these questions through scripture, we'll see a number of examples of levirate marriage. We see it in the story of Ruth, most notably.

We see it also in the story of Judah and Tamar. And we see it alluded to at various other points, and most notably mentioned in the law in Deuteronomy 25. There it is associated with brothers dwelling together.

And when one of the brothers dies, the wife of the deceased brother, his widow, is taken on by one of the surviving brothers as his wife to bear children, to maintain the name of the deceased brother. And so it's a duty done to kin. It's a duty done between two brothers.

And it's to preserve the line of that brother and to prevent the need for the deceased brother's widow to go outside the family. Within this situation, we should remember that we have patronyms. Ultimately, our surnames are named for male ancestors.

So if you're called Johnson, there was a John in your long back in your family tree. There was a John. If you're called MacDonald, there's a Donald.

If you're called O'Keefe, there was a Keefe. Or someone else that within your line gave that name, a male ancestor, and you bear that name. Now, our family names are widespread and they've grown so that there are many thousands of people and millions in some cases that share the same name.

When we're looking at scripture, those patronyms are more closely associated with the immediate male descendant, male ancestor. And in that case, we see that they can die off very easily. And so the duty of brothers towards their brother to preserve that family name, that family name is not just a surname in the way that we would think about it.

It's a line. It's something that is associated with inheritance, a particular portion. And for this reason, brothers would have it in their interest perhaps to allow that name to die off.

They would have more of the inheritance. And yet there was the duty to dwell together and be faithful to each other by not allowing that to happen. And so to preserve that legacy, preserve that line and lineage.

And we can easily think of that as just about the brother. But it's about the widow too. The widow has a vested interest in maintaining the name of her deceased husband, that that's her household.

And if that is allowed to just die off and she has to marry outside, she loses a lot of her standing and her status. She loses the line that she has become part of. And this is the lever of marriage is designed to preserve her place.

It's also something that does provide for her needs. That in a society where a lot of the needs are provided for by the family, the immediate structure of the extended family and the relations that will provide for you, that is a concern that when someone was widowed, that they would have someone coming in to provide for them. Otherwise, we'll see poverty stalks the heels of people who have lost providers.

That's why the scripture talks so much about the widows and the fatherless. Orphans, not just orphans as those who have lost mothers and fathers, but particularly fathers, because they lack the provision that they will need to survive. And they can often lose a sense of their name.

When we're thinking about this, it's also important to consider the way that, that, for instance, if we're looking in the story of Ruth, that twist in the tale shows that it could be performed in a number of different ways. The story allows us to see the way that Elimelech's name was preserved through Boaz's action. Now, Elimelech and his two sons had died and Ruth has allied herself with Naomi.

And so when the child is born, when Obed is born, it is described not as Ruth's child, not as the child that preserves the name of Ruth's husband, but the child that maintains the name of his father-in-law. And it's Naomi in particular that it's associated with. Then the women said to Naomi, Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you to stay without a near kinsman, and may his name be famous in Israel.

And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons has born him. Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom and became a nurse to him. Also, the neighbour women gave him a name saying, There is a son born to Naomi.

And they called his name Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David. Now, if we look through the story, I think it also helps us to answer the question of polygamy, because it seems that there must have been restrictions upon taking a wife if you are performing the duty of Leveret.

Because the temptation in that case would be just to not perform the duty of the Leveret, to raise up your own inheritance and allow the inheritance of your brothers to fail. But the duty towards the widow was something that was, that limited, it seems, the

right of the surviving brother to take a wife for himself and to maintain his own inheritance. And so it's one of the concerns of the Nerekins men in chapter four of Ruth, that the Nerekins man does not want to ruin his own inheritance.

Now, why is that? Presumably because if he redeems the land and if he redeems Naomi, then there's a problem. He must raise up the name of the dead using the wife of the dead. Who is the wife of the dead? The wife of the dead is not Ruth, but Naomi.

And the problem is if he marries Naomi, his own inheritance is going to suffer for it, because he will not be able to raise up descendants for his own line. And so that is his concern. And Boaz knows that he can perform the Leveret by taking Ruth, because that's been made clear to him in the scene in the threshing floor.

Now, that is a twist in the tale that helps us to understand how an actual practice, something like the Leveret can be played out. But it's also playing with deep themes that are running throughout the Old Testament with lines that are playing out. So we see Lot's line and Moab and Lot's daughters who sleep with him when he's intoxicated.

This theme is playing out. And then Judah as well. Judah, the descendant of Judah, who's Boaz.

And Judah, his failure to sort out the Leveret arrangement with Tamar. And then Tamar's trick to get Judah to lie with her. There is a playing out of these themes again.

And the relationship of the line of Moab, the line of Lot and Haran, the deceased brother, with the line of Judah. And so there are things playing out here that help us to see that this theme of the Leveret is not just an odd law that existed back then. This is a deeper concern.

And the concern of endogamy is also part of what we see in the story of Israel more generally. The concern that inheritance not be lost, that lines not be dried up and wither. That Israel not marry outside in a way that undermines their own identity as a people.

And so the concern of marrying foreign wives that worship other gods, that speak other languages, that aren't training the children in the way of the Lord, that is a deep concern. And so the society of Israel within scriptures described as highly endogamous, marrying within the group. We see this in the line of Abraham, for instance.

Abraham marries his sister, Sarah. And Sarah is the daughter of Terah, but she's not the daughter of Abraham's mother. Now, there have been suggestions, and these are very intriguing, that Sarah is related to Ishka, who is one of the daughters of Haran, the brother of Abraham, that dies.

And so the brother of Abraham dies, and one of his daughters, Milka, is taken by Nahor, who's Abraham's other brother. And Ishka is that other daughter, and there's Lot as well

as the son. The question is, is Abraham trying to preserve with Nahor the line of his brother, his deceased brother Haran? And that is an interesting question, particularly as we see lots of endogamous relationships later on.

Isaac and Rebecca, for instance, or Jacob and Rachel and Leah. These are marrying into lines of the family. And here, what we're seeing again in the story of Ruth and Boaz is the line of Haran and the line of Abraham joining again.

If we look through this, I think there are suggestions and possibilities that Sarah could have been of the line of Haran. The question is, is Abraham going to build up the line of his brother, even though Sarah is childless? And these are questions that are interesting. There's a very good piece that's done on this by Rabbi David Foreman on his site, and he explores all of these themes and how it relates to the story of Shem, Ham, and Japheth and their father Noah, and then how it relates to the story of Judah and Tamar, and then finally how it relates to the story of Ruth.

Lots of things going on there. I think the main point, the main takeaway should be the significance of the Levirate Commandment is about maintaining the integrity and the life of the family, that the line will not be allowed to die off. And this is a matter of duty to the deceased brother.

So you do not take advantage of the deceased brother, but you're faithful to that brother, and you do not allow his line to die off, to increase and to benefit your own inheritance. And also a duty to his widow, because his widow is connected with his legacy. His widow is invested very deeply and personally within his legacy.

And so it's her life that is not allowed to be drained, to be lost as well, that you're preserving her legacy, her part in that legacy. So the child that's born is the child for Naomi and the child for Elimelech. It's for both of them.

It's to preserve what has been lost and a legacy that seemed to have died out within the land of Moab. There are many other questions you could ask about this. If you have any, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

If you would like to support this and other videos, please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts. And at the moment, I'm trying to work towards transcribing all of my videos, and that will take quite a bit of work, and I want to pay for someone to do this. So if you would be interested in making that possible, please consider contributing in some way.

It would be very much appreciated. Thank you very much for listening, and Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless.