

FAQ

FROM THE MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS ARCHIVES (2000-2018)

J.K. McKee

MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS
messianicapologetics.net

Frequently Asked Questions

FROM THE MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS ARCHIVES

© 2021, 2024 John Kimball McKee

All rights reserved. With the exception of quotations for academic purposes, no part of this publication may be reproduced without prior permission of the publisher.

Cover Image: nullplus via Istockphoto

ISBN 979-8317009786 (paperback)

ASIN B09F1MWGB7 (eBook)

Published by Messianic Apologetics, a division of Outreach Israel Ministries

P.O. Box 516

McKinney, Texas 75070

(407) 933-2002

outreachisrael.net / outreachisrael.blog

messianicapologetics.net / messianicapologetics.blog

Fair Use Notice: This publication contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We make use of this material as a matter of teaching, scholarship, research, and commentary. We believe in good faith that this constitutes a “fair use” of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law, and is in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107. For more information go to: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/17/107>

Outreach Israel Ministries is a non-profit 501(c)3. All prices listed on the publications of Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics are suggested donations.

Abbreviations and Special Terms

The following is a list of abbreviations for reference works and special terms which are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

- ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*
AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament
Ara: Aramaic
ASV: American Standard Version (1901)
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)
b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.
BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)
BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.
CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)
CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)
CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)
CJB: *Complete Jewish Bible* (1998)
CJSB: *Complete Jewish Study Bible* (2016)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls
EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*
EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*
ESV: *English Standard Version* (2001)
Ger: German
GNT: *Greek New Testament*
Grk: Greek
HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)
HCSB: *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (2004)
Heb: Hebrew
HNV: *Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible*
IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*
ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*
Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)
JBK: *New Jerusalem Bible-Koren* (2000)
JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
KJV: *King James Version*
Lattimore: *The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore* (1996)
LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)
LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)
LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)
LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)
LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
LXX: *Septuagint*
m. Mishnah
MT: *Masoretic Text*
NASB: *New American Standard Bible* (1977)
NASU: *New American Standard Update* (1995)
NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*
NEB: *New English Bible* (1970)
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*
NETS: *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (2007)
NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*
NIV: *New International Version* (1984)
NJB: *New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic* (1985)
NJSB: *Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (1999)
NKJV: *New King James Version* (1982)
NRSV: *New Revised Standard Version* (1989)
NLT: *New Living Translation* (1996)
NT: *New Testament*
OT: *Old Testament*
REB: *Revised English Bible* (1989)
RSV: *Revised Standard Version* (1952)
t. Tosefta
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TLV: *Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life Version* (2014)
TNIV: *Today's New International Version* (2005)
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: *United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition*
v(s). *verse(s)*
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*
Vul: *Latin Vulgate*
YLT: *Young's Literal Translation* (1862/1898)
WMB: *World Messianic Bible* (2020)

Levirate Marriage

Can you explain to me what levirate marriage is?

The term “levirate” is derived from the Latin *levir*, meaning “brother-in-law,” a translation for the Hebrew *yavam* reflected in the Vulgate. The instructions regarding levirate marriage appear in Deuteronomy 25:5-10:

“When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be *married* outside *the family* to a strange man. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. It shall be that the firstborn whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother, so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. But if the man does not desire to take his brother’s wife, then his brother’s wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, ‘My husband’s brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel; he is not willing to perform the duty of a husband’s brother to me.’ Then the elders of his city shall summon him and speak to him. And *if* he persists and says, ‘I do not desire to take her,’ then his brother’s wife shall come to him in the sight of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face; and she shall declare, ‘Thus it is done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.’ In Israel his name shall be called, ‘The house of him whose sandal is removed’” (Deuteronomy 25:5-10, NASU).

The ordinance of levirate marriage was given against an Ancient Near Eastern backdrop,¹ so that if a husband died without producing an heir, his brother could take the widow as his own wife, producing an heir for his brother. As *ISBE* mainly describes,

“This form of marriage...allowed a man to receive his deceased brother’s property and manage it for the widow, thereby keeping the family property and possessions intact. If the deceased brother left no male children then the surviving brother was expected to take the deceased’s wife. Any son born of this relationship to the widow would be counted as the dead brother’s heir, who would then be expected to continue the family line” (*ISBE*).²

Even though the Torah explicitly forbade sexual unions between close relatives (Leviticus 18:16), examiners have had to note “that the legislation of Deut 25:5-10 is an exception to the legislation regarding marriage and/or sexual intercourse with one’s sister-in-law” (*ABD*).³

With the unfortunate rise of a sector of Hebrew Roots polygamists, or men believing that husbands can take more than one wife,⁴ such advocates have also frequently claimed that the instructions regarding levirate marriage are a kind of Biblically-commanded polygamy. Is this something which is sustainable, given the few examples encountered of levirate marriage in the Tanach?

The first major example is that of the widow Tamar in Genesis 38, whose husband Er died without providing her any offspring (Genesis 38:7). His brother, Onan, was asked by his father Judah to perform the ritual of the levirate, being told, “Go in to your brother’s wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother” (Genesis 38:8, NASU). During the sexual act with Tamar, it is recorded how Onan

¹ Consult Eugene E. Carpetener, “Deuteronomy: Issues in Levirate Marriage,” in John H. Walton, gen. ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, Vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 505.

² R.K. Bower and G.L. Knapp, “Marriage,” in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 3:263.

³ Victor P. Hamilton, “Marriage (OT and ANE),” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:568.

⁴ For a further review, consult the author’s article “Is Polygamy for Today? The Case Against Polygamy” (appearing in *Men and Women in the Body of Messiah: Answering Crucial Questions*).

withdrew at the moment of climax: “Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother’s wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother” (Genesis 38:9, NASU). Onan’s life was taken by the Lord (Genesis 38:10) because “he spilled the semen on the ground” (RSV). This occurred not because of withdrawal as a form of contraception, but because having committed to the rite of the levirate, he did not follow through during relations with Tamar. There is no indication in the text that Onan was already married, so even though a child conceived would be considered Er’s, Tamar would have been Onan’s first wife.

A second example in the Tanach are the various references to levirate marriage in the Book of Ruth. Boaz was one of the closest of Naomi’s relatives (Ruth 2:20), a man who had the right to redeem the family property by taking Ruth as his wife (Ruth 3:13). After encountering the widow Ruth, this was something which Boaz was actually very interested in doing. A closer relative had the right to the first choice of the family property and Ruth, but as Boaz told him, “On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the deceased, in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance” (Ruth 4:5, NASU), and the relative promptly declined (Ruth 4:6). Boaz was able to take Ruth as his own wife, raising up an heir for the deceased family of Elimelech (Ruth 4:10, 17). Here, it is seen how perhaps the closer relative could have taken on Ruth as another wife, but clearly chose not to do so, as he saw a conflict of interest regarding inheritance.

The instructions regarding levirate marriage concerns a situation *ki-yesh’bu achim yach’dav*, or “When brothers dwell together” (Deuteronomy 25:5a, NJPS). Various interpretations which have been offered of this include: (1) brothers alive together at the same time, (2) those living in the same town, (3) those who live together in a consortium or family estate. The first interpretation is the most likely.⁵ In the view of Thomas L. Constable, “The Israelites were to practice levirate marriage only in cases where the brothers had lived together (v. 5), and the remaining brother was not already married. Living together meant living in the same area, not necessarily residing under the same roof.”⁶ No polygamy or plural marriage, was at all required or necessary by the Deuteronomy 25:5-10 instruction.

How often the ritual of the levirate was actually practiced, does shed some significant light on the fact that a so-called Biblically-commanded polygamy was not the issue. Onan pulled out at the last moment, and the man who had the first choice of Ruth rejected her. Likewise, built into the instructions of Deuteronomy 25:5-10 was the option for the brother-in-law to decline his brother’s widow, with a special procedure of her removing his shoe or sandal. The widow was to go before the elders of her town (Deuteronomy 25:7-8), pull off the sandal of her brother-in-law, and spit in his face saying, “This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother’s family line” (Deuteronomy 25:9, NIV). The brother-in-law who did not follow the rite of the levirate would have had a stigma attached to him (Deuteronomy 25:10). And concurrent with this, “in removing the brother-in-law’s shoe, with the town’s elders as witnesses, the woman assumes the right to her freedom and full control of her destiny” (ABD),⁷ as shoes were often viewed as being a sign of property ownership.⁸

Examiners have had to recognize that given how levirate marriage was a widescale practice among many of Ancient Israel’s contemporaries, that the instruction of Deuteronomy 25:5-10, was restrictive. Eugene E. Carpenter details the following, in the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*:

“In the more ancient Middle Assyrian laws the wife of a son who died could be given by the son’s father to another of his sons, even if he were betrothed to someone else but not yet married. But if the father of that betrothed daughter does not agree to this, the father of the deceased son may proceed as planned and give the betrothed bride to his son. Or he may withdraw from the entire process. If a betrothed daughter dies before the marriage, her father may give his prospective son-in-law another daughter, or the betrothed groom may withdraw.

⁵ Cf. Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp 190-192.

⁶ Thomas L. Constable. (2024). *Notes on Deuteronomy: 2024 Edition*. Plano Bible Chapel. Retrieved 14 June 2024, from <<https://planobiblechapel.org>>.

⁷ Hamilton, “Marriage (OT and ANE),” in ABD, 4:567.

⁸ John H. Walton, and Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 200.

Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees

“If a wife’s husband dies while they are living in her father’s house, if she has borne no children, her father-in-law may marry her to the son of his choice, or she could be given in marriage by her father to her father-in-law. This option was not permitted in Israel (cf. Gen. 38:26). If her husband and father-in-law both died, she became a widow and was free to do as she pleased. If the wife had borne children, she was free to live in a house for her and her son in her father’s household.”⁹

Similar conclusions are drawn in *The Steinsaltz Humash*:

“Levirate marriage was practiced in Israel even before the Torah was given, and was practice in many other cultures as well. The form of levirate marriage described in the Torah is meant to restrict this custom and define it. Whereas among other nations, or before the giving of the Torah, the obligation of levirate marriage applied to all relatives of the deceased, the Torah limits the commandments to his brothers alone.”¹⁰

It is further noted, from Deuteronomy 25:5, that the brother to perform the act of the levirate, must be “of the same father” as the deceased, and how “the brothers must be alive at the same time; if one is born after his brother dies, there is no obligation of levirate marriage.”¹¹

In Yeshua’s discussion with the Sadducees, who denied the doctrine of resurrection, the issue of levirate marriage was mentioned:

“On that day *some* Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Yeshua and questioned Him, asking, ‘Teacher, Moses said, “IF A MAN DIES HAVING NO CHILDREN, HIS BROTHER AS NEXT OF KIN SHALL MARRY HIS WIFE, AND RAISE UP CHILDREN FOR HIS BROTHER [Deuteronomy 25:5].”’ Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother; so also the second, and the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had *married* her’ (Matthew 22:23-28, NASU; also Mark 12:18-23; Luke 20:27-33)

It is contextually clear enough, how each of the successive brothers who took the wife of the brother who died, were unmarried singles and progressively younger. This demonstrates how within the community of Ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism, levirate marriage would have often been observed among brothers of a family unit, without involving any kind of polygamy or plural marriage.

Because opt-out instructions were given for the rite of levirate marriage in Ancient Israel, there is good reason to recognize how this was observed few and far between in the period of the Tanach (i.e., Ruth 4:7). Indeed, the history of the Jewish Synagogue attests how it eventually died out, as the maintenance of property and land within a family was less and less needed as economies changed. At the very most, it is seen how the spirit of levirate marriage is observed today in Judaism when a new child is named after a deceased relative. Jeffrey H. Tigay observes in the *Etz Hayim* commentary, “We find echoes of this sentiment today in the emotionally powerful custom of naming a child after a deceased relative...whose name thus lives on. It may also be a way of ensuring that the widow is left with a tangible reminder of her first marriage...”¹²

⁹ Carpetener, “Deuteronomy: Issues in Levirate Marriage,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, Vol 1, 505.

¹⁰ “The Law of Levirate Marriage,” in Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *The Steinsaltz Humash* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2018), 1088.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Jeffrey H. Tigay, “Deuteronomy,” in David L. Lieber, *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 1134.