



Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism (HBI Series on Jewish Women)

By Dvora E. Weisberg

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Finalist for the National Jewish Book Award, women's studies category

In this study, Weisberg uses levirate marriage (an institution that involves the union of a man and the widow of his childless brother) as described in biblical law and explicated in rabbinic Judaism as a lens to examine the status of women and attitudes toward marriage, sexuality, and reproduction in early Jewish society. While marriage generally marks the beginning of a new family unit, levirate comes into play when a family's life is cut short. As such, it offers an opportunity to study the family at a moment of breakdown and restructuring.

With her discussion rooted in rabbinic sources and commentary, Weisberg explores kinship structure and descent, the relationship between a family unit created through levirate marriage and the extended family, and the roles of individuals within the family. She also considers the position of women, asking whether it is through marriage or the bearing of children that a woman becomes part of her husband's family, and to what degree a married woman remains part of her natal family. She argues that rabbinic responses to levirate suggest that a family is an evolving entity, one that can preserve itself through realignment and redefinition.

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Editorial Review

Review

“For a scholarly work, *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* makes for easy reading. Weisberg keeps scholarly jargon to a minimum, which allows readers to grapple with the material, rather than the language. Anyone interested in the Jewish family in ancient times or in how rabbinic Judaism reconstructed the Bible will find this work of great interest.” —*The Reporter (Vestal, NY)*

“[Weisberg’s] line-by-line textual analysis is freshened and illuminated by insights from anthropologists who have studied similar institutions in other cultures, especially among African tribes. There are some interesting insights into what the rabbis thought about family, the tension between a married couple and their extended network of relatives, and the different interests and intrigues that can complicate that situation.” —*Jewish Book World*

“[Weisberg’s] book is accessible for general religion scholars and for scholars of anthropology. This book would be a good addition to a cross-cultural course on marriage, ancient to modern. . . . In combining an anthropological with a chronological approach, Weisberg’s book cautions us that when we examine how rabbinic interpretation transforms scriptural practice, we need to give attention to the ways in which a far-reaching comparative lens helps us to make sense of the cultural significance of those transformations.” —*H-Net Reviews*

“Weisberg put a great deal of labour and love into this work. The argument is nuanced, clear, and compelling. The prose is flowing, and the research is thorough. *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* was a pleasure to read and deserves a central place within the growing body of scholarly literature on the family in ancient Judaism.” —*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*

“Weisberg’s book is a useful contribution to the study of levirate and rabbinic conceptions of family. The book is well researched and contains many valuable insights.” —*Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*

“Weisberg’s close analysis of the rabbinic texts gives us a fascinating view of how the rabbis looked at family structure, kinship, and inheritance.” —*JOFA: Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance*

“This is a well written, scholarly work that keeps academic jargon to a minimum. The book draws on rabbinic sources but it also incorporates insights from comparative anthropologists and sociologists. It is recommended for all academic and Jewish libraries.” —*Association of Jewish Libraries Newsletter*

“Weisberg’s book . . . strikes a balance between a keen awareness and respect for the ancient text, on the one

hand, and an ability to elucidate that text and come to significant conclusions, on the other, while breaking new ground in English-language scholarship. Too many scholarly works show a lack of patience for writing a good conclusion, but Weisberg ends the book with a superb concluding chapter, in which she draws together the main themes treated in the book in an elegant and convincing manner.”—*Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues*

Review

“Weisberg explores the meaning and purpose of marriage and family within classical Judaism, revealed in the rabbinic treatment of the biblical law of levirate marriage. Her keen reading of rabbinic texts is supported by her broad knowledge of the family in other antique cultures as well as by her study of current sociological and anthropological approaches to marriage and the family. The result is an essential resource not only for students of the Talmudic literature and the history of Judaism but for all scholars concerned with gender roles, marriage, and the family.” (Alan J. Avery-Peck, Kraft-Hiatt Professor of Judaic Studies, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts)

“This is a very interesting study of an understudied set of texts and problems, a successful combination of anthropology and classical rabbinics. Weisberg shows how a law of the book of Deuteronomy received new nuances and meanings in Rabbinic literature. The book is learned but accessible; anyone interested in the history of Jewish marriage and gender relations, in the rabbinic constructions of sex and marriage, will enjoy this book.” (Shaye J. D. Cohen, Littauer Professor of Jewish Studies, Harvard University)

About the Author

DVORA E. WEISBERG is Associate Professor of Rabbinic Literature, Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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