

# THE MATRIARCHATE AND HEBREW REGAL SUCCESSION

by R. K. HARRISON

**P**ROFESSOR HARRISON is already well known to our readers as an explorer of interesting by-paths in Biblical history and literature. None of these by-paths is more fascinating than the one he explores in this paper. That the principle of "Mutterrecht" still exercised some influence on the succession in Israel as late as the early monarchy seems to be established. No doubt some of Professor Harrison's suggestions are less cogent than others. For instance, we should certainly have found some positive indication in the Biblical text if David's wife Ahinoam had really been identical with Saul's wife of the same name (even if, as we learn from 2 Samuel 12: 9, he did inherit Saul's wives after he succeeded him on the throne). David's marriage to Michal gave him sufficient title to the succession. The narrative of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13: 1-22 gives little support to the view that Amnon's criminal act had a political motivation. On the other hand, the power exercised by Maachah (= Michaiiah), Absalom's granddaughter, during the reign of her husband Rehoboam, her son Abijah and her grandson Asa, supports the thesis of this paper; it may well be that her deposition by Asa was the revolutionary act which broke the matriarchal tradition. The implication of Adonijah's request for the hand of Abishag, as Solomon viewed the matter, is also plain enough. And (to take two further instances) Ish-baal's anger with Abner for taking Saul's concubine Rizpah (2 Samuel 3: 7) has a similar explanation, and it is plain that Absalom's accompanying with his father's concubines in the pavilion which was erected for that purpose on the palace-roof in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 16: 20-22) publicly sealed his seizure of David's throne.

**T**HE widespread influence of the ancient Egyptian matriarchate has been amply demonstrated in the social life of ancient Egypt. The importance of this system in those remote times may be gauged by the fact that all property passed down through the female line, and this made the position of the woman-heiress of particular significance. The widespread inter-marriage of the Egyptian Pharaohs was condoned, if not actually sanctioned, by the absence of a specific formulation of marriage laws, with their consequent

designation of forbidden marital relationships. But more particularly, the necessity for the adoption of intermarriage amongst members of the royal house arose from the matriarchate, which established the position of the king by virtue of marriage only, whereas the queen was born queen. If possession of the throne was to remain within the royal family, it would obviously be necessary for the Pharaoh to marry the heiress to the throne, and although such a person might be his sister or even his mother, such a relationship would not be allowed to constitute an impediment. Considerations of consanguinity as we know them from the Mosaic Code had no parallel in ancient Egyptian life, and Egyptologists have shown the widespread nature of intermarriage, dictated by considerations of matrilineal descent.

There is some reason for believing that this ancient custom had at one time been in vogue in Palestine to some extent, and that the development of the Israelite monarchy saw a gradual transition from matrilineal descent to an hereditary patriarchy. King Saul was descended from a royal line through his great-grandmother Maachah, the wife of Jehiel. Jehiel is described as the "father" of the tribe of Gibeon in 1 Chronicles 8: 29; 9: 35; and if his wife Maachah was so named after the small kingdom at the foot of Mount Hermon, it may well have been in accord with the ancient custom of giving the ruler the same name as the country being ruled, thus making Maachah a royal personage in her own right.

After Merab, the elder daughter of Saul, had been given in marriage to Adriel the Meholathite instead of to David (1 Samuel 18: 19), the younger daughter of the king, Michal, became the wife of David, which gave him a degree of tenure upon the throne. A further marriage was contracted with Maachah, who became the mother of Absalom (2 Samuel 3; 1 Chronicles 3: 2), and this lady was also of royal descent, being the daughter of Talmi, king of Geshur. Thus David was heir to this kingdom also, if the ancient matriarchate had any validity in Palestine, by virtue of marrying the heiress, and it is interesting to note that it was to this small kingdom east of the Jordan and south of Mount Hermon that Absalom fled after he had killed his brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13: 37 f.; 14: 23, 32; 15: 8).

The violent anger which was so prominent a mark of the feelings which Saul entertained towards David during their protracted quarrel has frequently been explained in terms of the pathology of the manic-depressive, the homicidal maniac, or some other equally serious state of mental derangement. Whilst the narratives in 1 Samuel do in fact exhibit a mental pathology of a progressively

deteriorating order, it is possible that the vehemence of Saul may be accounted for in part by other circumstances. In 1 Samuel 25: 43, David is spoken of as marrying a lady from Jezreel named Ahinoam, who along with Abigail, widow of the defunct Nabal, accompanied him in his wanderings. If this Ahinoam was the same person as Ahinoam daughter of Ahimaaz and wife of Saul (an identification which, whilst not certain, is at least possible), the influence of the matrilineal system of descent is again evident, in that David had by some means managed to lure the wife of Saul into marriage, thus making sure of the royal succession for himself. If this is actually what transpired, it becomes somewhat easier to understand the reason for the strenuous efforts which Saul made to destroy the person and authority of David, for as long as he possessed the heiress, the throne would be his by right of marriage, according to the traditional matriarchal pattern. Furthermore, it is of some significance in this connection, that although Jonathan, the logical heir to the throne in accordance with patrilineal theory, was very popular indeed in Israel, he is portrayed as having no direct claim to sovereignty, in spite of the fact that he was the eldest son of Saul, and that the monarchy was moving in the direction of descent by inheritance.

When David had escaped the anger of Saul through the stratagem which Michal employed to save his life at the hands of would-be assassins (1 Samuel 19: 11 ff.), he was separated from Michal for a number of years, and it was during this time that she was again given in marriage by her father, this time to Phaltiel, the son of Laish (1 Samuel 25: 44; 2 Samuel 3: 14 f.). It is important for the theory of matrilineal descent that she was not put to death for allowing David to flee from the men whom Saul had sent for the purpose of killing him, for had she been dispatched, one of the principal heiresses would have been removed from the scene. The obvious attachment of Phaltiel to Michal, as recorded in 2 Samuel 3: 16, is again understandable if she was in fact heiress to the throne, for in marrying her he would be in the direct line of succession.

During the war with Saul, and after his separation from Michal, David is recorded as having two wives, as mentioned previously. They were Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail, formerly wife of Nabal, and these two women were with David when he was living at Gath and Ziklag. At the latter city they were captured by the Amalekites, but speedily rescued by David and his men (1 Samuel 30: 18). After the death of Saul, Ahinoam gave birth to David's firstborn, Amnon, at Hebron (2 Samuel 3: 2), where

David set up his government after being anointed king of Judah (2 Samuel 2: 2; 5: 5). The birth of a son could be interpreted in the light of formal possession of the legal heiress, if Ahinoam had actually been the wife of Saul at a previous time.

The idea of patrilineal descent appears to have been in process of development amongst many of the Israelite tribes, for Abner was able to maintain Ishbosheth, Saul's youngest son and successor, as king over the Israelites for a period of two years (2 Samuel 2: 8), whilst David was king over the house of Judah. When Abner and Ishbosheth quarrelled (2 Samuel 3: 7 ff.), and Abner resolved to go over to the side of David in the hope that this action would help to make David king of Israel as well as of Judah, he discovered that David required, as a prerequisite to an agreement, the immediate presentation of Michal his former wife, married at that time to Phaltiel. If the idea of the matriarchate was still in force, this would constitute a necessary preliminary to the recognition of David as king over Israel as well as ruler of Judah. Though Michal was childless to the end of her days, the succession had been assured as far as David himself was concerned.

From the standpoint of the females, the problem of succession was then brought to bear upon the children of the other royal personage whom David had married, namely Maachah, who bore him Absalom and Tamar. It will be evident that the son of Abigail who was named Chileab (2 Samuel 3: 3) or Daniel (1 Chronicles 3: 1), does not enter into the consideration in quite the same respect, since Abigail was not in any way heiress to the kingdom. Tamar was violated by her half-brother Amnon, David's eldest son, and upon this she fled to Absalom her brother, who murdered Amnon in revenge (2 Samuel 13). If the matriarchate exercised any significant influence in Palestine during the early monarchy, the action of Amnon in dishonouring his half-sister need not be interpreted as the outcome of lustful speculation, but rather as a carefully planned attempt to seize the heiress, and ensure his own succession to the throne. Furthermore, the fact that Tamar pleads as she does in 2 Samuel 13: 13, might be taken as an indication that the marriage of Amnon to Tamar would have been permitted by king David, in accordance with the ancient custom, which allowed considerable latitude when marriage to paternal relatives was being undertaken.

According to Josephus, Absalom subsequently married Tamar, whilst 2 Samuel 14: 27 records that he had a daughter of the same name. Although the sole daughter of Absalom is named Tamar in this reference, she is known as Maachah in 2 Chronicles 11: 21,

and was the favourite spouse of Rehoboam. The LXX of 2 Samuel 14: 27 adds a textual note to the effect that Tamar became the wife of Rehoboam (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* vii. 8. 5; vii. 10. 3). In 2 Chronicles 13: 2, however, she is known as Michaiiah, the daughter of Uriel of Gibeah, but it is permissible to understand the term "daughter" as actually signifying "grand-daughter", a usage which is sanctioned by Semitic and Oriental custom generally. If this is correct, it would appear that Tamar married Uriel, and had a daughter named Michaiiah (Maachah), who would thus be the grand-daughter of Absalom (so Josephus, *Ant.* viii. 10. 1), and mother of Abijah (1 Kings 15: 2). A woman of marked personality, she remained as queen-mother until her grandson Asa came to the throne, but after a time she was deposed by him for idolatrous practices (1 Kings 15: 13; 2 Chronicles 15: 16).

By this time, patrilineal descent appears to have been assured, and does not seem to have been seriously queried at any future time. There is, however, a question which arises over the identity of Maachah and Tamar in relation to regal succession. If the assumption in the last paragraph that Michaiiah (or Maachah) was the grand-daughter of Absalom is incorrect, and if Maachah and Tamar are found to be merely different names for the same person, the operation of matrilineal descent would once more be in evidence. Abijah, who succeeded his father Rehoboam and reigned for three years in Jerusalem, was in turn succeeded by his son Asa. This man then reigned in Jerusalem for forty-one years, and according to 1 Kings 15: 10, his mother's name was Maachah, the daughter of Absalom. Thus, in order that Abijah and Asa might be able to claim the same person as mother, it would be necessary for Abijah to marry his own mother, which again would have been in full accord with the ancient custom.<sup>1</sup> It may well be, however, that the term "mother" as applied by Asa to Maachah ought really to be interpreted as "grandmother", which would resolve much of the difficulty.

If the ancient matriarchate did exist to some extent in the early monarchy, it would help to clarify the narratives which deal with the last days of the life of King David, and with the conflict which took place between Adonijah and Solomon over the question of succession to the throne. Although the marital relationship of

[<sup>1</sup> Cf. the Egyptian queen Hatshepsut, who was official wife successively of her half-brother Thutmose II and of his son Thutmose III. But in Maachah's case the suggestion in the following sentence is more probable.—ED.]

David to Abishag was more of a ceremonial than a conjugal one. Abishag appears to have been recognized after the death of David as being, to some degree at least, heiress to the kingdom. This is evident from the indignant reply of Solomon to the request by Adonijah, presented through Bath-sheba (1 Kings 2: 22), that he be given Abishag to wife, possession of whom would imply the right of succession to the throne. From the standpoint of Solomon, this threat to his regal security could only be removed at the expense of violating an earlier oath to spare the life of Adonijah. Abishag drops out of sight at this point, and there is no record of any marriage between her and Solomon, though this may well have been the case.

It will appear from the foregoing discussion that much in the way of a solution to the problem will depend upon the true identity of Ahinoam and Maachah, a matter on which further information may never be forthcoming. In spite of the difficulties attaching themselves to proper identification, however, there seem to be quite definite traces of the influence of an ancient custom which governed the descent of property through the female line. If this assumption is valid, it will serve to interpret the events of the early Hebrew monarchy in the light of the social traditions of a neighbouring country, whose influence was felt at every stage of development in Hebrew history. It may also assist in the understanding of the motives which prompted the political intrigue of the period under discussion, and the actions which, judged by the standards of another culture with a differing level of spirituality, might appear to be unnecessarily immoral, coarse or brutal.

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