

Extensive mixing among Israelites and non-Israelites in biblical history

I am deeply concerned about a statement in Dr Robert W. Carter’s article from *J. Creation* 31(3), entitled “Extensive mixing among Israelites and non-Israelites in biblical history”. In it he wrote: “Just as there is no clear Jewish bloodline, given the numerous genealogical data presented in the Bible, there is also no clear ‘Jewish’ DNA.” If there are no clear Jewish bloodlines in the Bible, how do we know that Jesus is a descendant of David? How do we know that the 144,000 witnesses of the Tribulation are descendants of Jacob, particularly descendants of his sons by tribe? How have Jewish descendants of Levi been found in Ethiopia? There has to be some connection that is traceable. I don’t deny the mixing (that is obvious), but God would be a liar if Jesus

wasn’t a descendant of David, or if these witnesses weren’t descendants of specific tribes. I firmly believe in the Bible’s statements, but I’m not a geneticist. Isn’t there some way to trace ancestry?

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» **Robert Carter replies:**

James was ‘deeply troubled’ by my take-home point. This means the point was clear, but it also means there were unanswered implications. Please note that I published a follow-up article in the subsequent *Journal* issue.¹

How do we know Jesus is a descendant of David?

We have two separate genealogies in the Bible (Matthew 1 and Luke 3) that claim such. There may be adoptive relationships involved, but within the Davidic line.² Either way, Jesus was a descendant of David.

But genealogy is strange. With the exception of the mtDNA and Y chromosome, a person’s DNA gets split into smaller and smaller bits

over time. Eventually, nothing is left. If you go back in your family tree about 5 generations, you will run into ‘ancestors’ from whom you inherited no DNA. If you go back 10 generations, the majority of your ancestors are ancestors in name only (figure 1).

How do we know that the 144,000 witnesses of the Tribulation are descendants of Jacob?

I do not wish to get into eschatology. But, assuming this refers to 144,000 literal people, this can still be true both genetically and genealogically. Jewish people inherit DNA from their Jewish forebears. Thus, the 144,000 would be descendants of Jacob, both genealogically and genetically. The fact remains, however, that both Jacob and his descendants are products of mixed descent from a ‘Middle Eastern’ genetic background.^{1,6}

It is a little more difficult to divide them by tribe, because there was much tribal intermingling during Israel’s history. For example: Mary, from Judah (Luke 1:32, by association), was related to Elizabeth, who was “of the daughters of Aaron” and whose husband was a Levitical priest (Luke 1:5). Hezron, of Judah, married the daughter of Machir, of Manasseh (Genesis 46:12; Genesis 50:23; 1 Chronicles 2:21). And Aaron, of Levi, married Elisheba, of Judah (Exodus 6:16–20, 23; Numbers 1:7). Which tribe do these people come from? It cannot be purely on paternal/Y chromosome lineage because of tribal mixing. Also, many non-Jewish males and non-Jewish females were incorporated into Israel over time.¹ Many similar but unrecorded events may have occurred.

Have Jewish descendants of Levi been found in Ethiopia?

Most of the information available online about the Ethiopian Jews is incorrect. Please allow me to use another similar case instead: the Lemba of SE Africa.

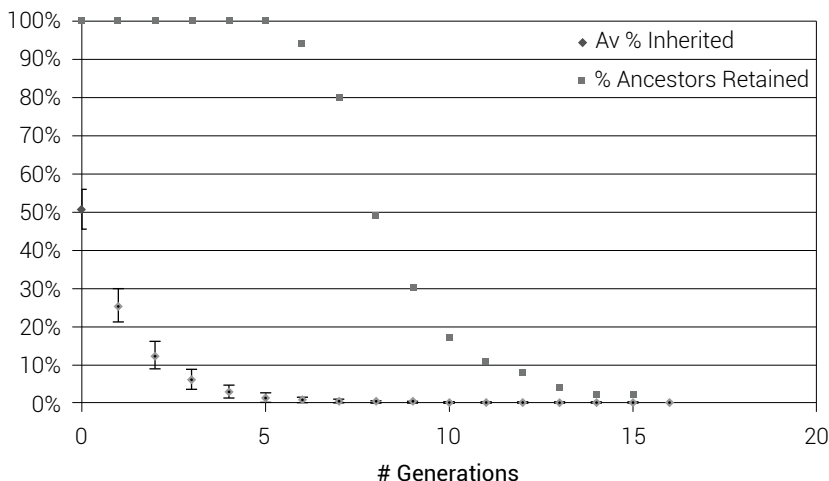


Figure 1. If you trace your family tree back in time, the number of genealogical ancestors increases exponentially. But the percent of their individual DNA contribution to your genome goes down exponentially. Here, I model a human-like genome with one recombination event per chromosome arm per generation. Since the position of recombination is random, there is a small degree of variability in the amount of inherited material (error bars). Once the size of the surviving fragments drops below the average size of the recombination blocks, entire sections of ancestral DNA are lost. Model results are similar to the results reported by Rohde *et al.*^{3,4} and Jagadeesan *et al.*⁵

They claim descent from Jewish mariners, even though they live thousands of miles from Israel. Their genetic background, including the mtDNA lineages, is strongly Bantu, but they have a high rate of ‘Middle Eastern’-looking Y chromosomes.^{7,8} This is strong circumstantial evidence that their claimed history is real.

A few of those men carry the Cohen Modal Haplotype (CMH). This Y chromosome type is associated with Jewish men who claim to be Levites. But the CMH is also found among non-Jews. Thus, a strong signal exists among the claimed descendants of Aaron, even though the ‘signal’ can be found outside the group.

Why is the CMH not restricted to one family? First, just because Aaron carried one particular Y chromosome, it does not preclude other men from his extended family carrying it as well. Second, genes tend to diffuse out of one population and into others. Thus, there is a chance that their ancestors were not Jewish. It could have been a group from the Arabian Peninsula, a few of whom also had para-Aaronic ancestry. But combining the oral history with the mitochondrial and Y-chromosome evidence makes a pretty strong case for what I reported earlier:¹ the Lemba are partly Jewish.

There has to be some connection that is traceable

Traceable by whom? God or man? I certainly could not do it.

Is there some way to trace ancestry?

We can trace ancestry back in time until historical recombination cuts an individual’s genome into very small pieces. After that, everything is statistics. In the end most people leave behind no genetic trace.

Everyone on earth shares the same ancestral pool. It is worth quoting Rohde *et al.* at length here:

“... no matter the languages we speak or the colour of our skin, we

share ancestors who planted rice on the banks of the Yangtze, who first domesticated horses on the steppes of the Ukraine, who hunted giant sloths in the forests of North and South America, and who laboured to build the Great Pyramid of Khufu.”³

The genomes of all people on Earth are the result of thousands of years of shuffling among the many small sections of DNA. And it is almost impossible to *not* have DNA from outside of your immediate ancestral group. This is definitely true of the Jewish people, who started off as a mixture of different people, who mixed extensively with their neighbours throughout biblical history, and who have continued to mix with outsiders ever since.

Thus, there is no such thing as ‘Jewish’ DNA. They come from a Middle Eastern melting pot. This makes some people uncomfortable, but these are the facts we must consider as we struggle to interpret various biblical passages.

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Was Terah dead when Abram left Haran?

While reading Andrew Sibley’s summary of the attempts to reconcile Abram’s moving before Terah’s death, it seems the one verse, the key verse never spelled out, is a statement from Abraham himself in Genesis 23:4, “I am a foreigner and visitor among you”, which further shows that Augustine is correct: Abraham did not officially consider himself (nor did the locals consider him) a resident until he bought and *paid* for a piece of land, which is why Abraham insisted on paying for it and not accepting it as a gift.

Abraham was both publicly stating his desire to become a resident of Canaan after Terah’s death and officially asking for such residency status.

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» Andrew Sibley replies:

In response to Chuck Roehrich’s strong support for Augustine’s position, relating to Abraham and Terah’s life, I would suggest there are some difficult issues that need to be resolved. I consider it to be a possible solution, but not the preferred one at this stage. As well as the problem of Terah’s death in relation to Abram/Abraham’s life there are further questions that arise (from Acts 7:15–16) as to when Abraham purchased land in Canaan, and where.

“And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from

the sons of Hamor in Shechem” (Acts 7:15–16, ESV).

There is insufficient space to deal with this question fully in a letter, and there are many angles to consider, but it might be seen from these verses that Abraham had purchased other land in Canaan (this was alluded to in my endnote 26). Abraham is recorded as wandering through Shechem in Genesis 12:6–7, at which point God speaks to him and promises the land to his descendants. Abraham builds an altar.

“Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him” (Genesis 12:6–7).

This might suggest an *earlier* purchase of land, understood through other sources, but not recorded in the Masoretic Text of Genesis.

Secondly, one might argue that there are several places in Genesis where Abraham asserts his right to the natural resources of the land. For instance, Abimelech allows Abraham to wander across his land, and they even make a joint oath at Beersheba with an exchange of sheep and cattle. Genesis 20:15: “And Abimelech said, ‘Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you’”; and Genesis 21:31–32: “Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath. So they made a covenant at Beersheba.” And yet Abimelech does not seem to give up his right to the land; we are only told that that Abraham has rights to take water from the ground. These events occur prior to the purchase of land from Ephron the Hittite to bury Sarah. Interestingly, the text of Genesis 22:19–24 informs us that Abraham lived at Beersheba, and then hears news of Nahor’s family, but no news of Terah, who might be presumed to be long dead.

But thirdly, the text seems to be telling us that Abraham was throughout his life a sojourner, with the land promised to his descendants. This is stated in Acts 7:5, and also in Hebrews 11:9–13:

“By faith [Abram] went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ... These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (Hebrews 11:9, 10, 13).

Taken together, this suggests that the purchase of land from Ephron the Hittite may not be sufficient to claim settlement in the land. Abraham may have purchased land prior to this, and he was making covenants with the existing land owners, but Scripture seems to suggest he did not properly settle in the land. These are questions for further consideration.

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