



## Deuteronomy - Chapter Twenty Three

### III Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19 - Moses' Second Speech: Specific Covenant Stipulations (continues)

#### III.k Deuteronomy 21:15-23:8 - Protecting sexual morality (continues/concludes)

#### Summary of Chapter Twenty Three

Men with damaged or missing genitals are not permitted into God's assembly. Neither are those born outside of wedlock. This is to be applied to the tenth generation. Ammonites and Moabites are also excluded from the assembly for ten generations because they opposed God's people's passage through into the Promised Land. Edomites are to be abhorred for all time by Israel but not so the Egyptians, who gave sanctuary to Israel for more than four hundred years. In fact, third generation Egyptians who are born in Israel are to be permitted into the assembly of God.

<sup>22:30</sup> A man shall not marry his father's wife, thereby violating his father's rights.

Verse 30 is Chapter 23:1 in the Hebrew and was commented on in that chapter.

#### III.k.v Deuteronomy 23:1-8 - Those Excluded from the Assembly

These verses describe those who are not permitted to join others in corporate worship of God, whether in the tabernacle or the temple.

<sup>1</sup> No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

## Deuteronomy 23:1

**No one whose testicles are crushed.** This probably refers to men made eunuchs in the context of pagan worship or men taken as slaves and put in charge of their master's harem. It may also apply to those with birth defects or who have been damaged as the result of an accident since the Levitical law concerning the priesthood also identified other disabilities: <<*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles*>> (Leviticus 21:16-20).

**Whose penis is cut off.** In Galatians 5:12 Paul uses the same verb, translated in the NRSVA as 'castrate themselves,' as appears in the Greek translation of Deuteronomy, perhaps to imply that his opponents are acting like pagans; by this action the ancient Israelites would disqualify themselves from entry into the assembly.

**The assembly of the Lord.** Generally the term is used in Deuteronomy to refer to Israel gathered at Horeb/Sinai. In this chapter it anticipates Israel gathered in the land at worship. However, it is also used in the context of the elders gathering and therefore could anticipate exclusion from political life as well.

Eunuchs may have been excluded from the assembly because God's covenant with Israel was vitally connected with the idea of the seed, and emasculation is a 'crime' against the seed of man. However, the prophet writes: <<*Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.'* For thus says the Lord: *To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off*>> (Isaiah 56:3-5), which shows that even eunuchs and foreigners could be accepted into the presence of the Lord if they would obey him, and they would be accepted before the 'whole' people who disobeyed God.

<sup>2</sup> Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

## Deuteronomy 23:2

**Those born of an illicit union.** Although this is normally understood as those being born outside of recognised wedlock, it is difficult to define exactly what is meant

by the term of illicit union. Some later Jewish writers defined this as someone who was born of an incestuous relationship between Jews; others said it refers to those born of mixed marriages between the people of Israel and their pagan neighbours, as witnessed during the period following the return from exile: <<*In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab*>> (Nehemiah 13:23).

To the tenth generation is possibly an idiom meaning forever.

<sup>3</sup> No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, <sup>4</sup> because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. <sup>5</sup> (Yet the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you.) <sup>6</sup> You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live.

#### Deuteronomy 23:3-6

No Ammonite or Moabite. The Moabites and the Ammonites not only treated Israel cruelly on their way to the Promised Land, but they also were a people with a disgraceful beginning. Moab and Ammon were the two sons born to the daughters of Lot through their incestuous relationship with their father (Genesis 19:30-38). The story of Ruth indicates that there were exceptions. Ruth was a Moabite, married to a Hebrew called Mahlon. There was no formal prohibition against marrying Moabites, as confirmed by Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7:1-4. However, marriage to Moabites was discouraged because of their commitment to other gods such as Molech, the Balaam debacle, Israel's debauchery with Moabite women in the wilderness, and the ten generation Moabite male exclusion from the assembly of the Lord; refer to Numbers Chapters 22-25, Ezra 9:2, 9:12, and 10:44, and Nehemiah 13:25.

Balaam son of Beor was a seer appointed by the Moabite king Balak to put a curse on the Israelites. However, under the instruction of God, he was unable to do so and each time Balak asked him to curse the Israelites, he blessed them instead. Balaam was still recognised as being an opponent to God's people: <<*They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness*>> (2 Peter 2:15-16)

<sup>7</sup> You shall not abhor any of the Edomites, for they are your kin. You shall not abhor any of the Egyptians, because you were an alien residing in their land. <sup>8</sup> The children of the third generation that are born to them may be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

#### Deuteronomy 23:7-8

You shall not abhor any of the Edomites. Israel's kinship with Edom is closer than that with Moab and Ammon (v.3). Edom is descended from Esau, Jacob's twin brother; refer to Genesis 25:19-26. Interestingly, one of the most famous Edomites in history, Herod the Great, was abhorred by Israel. Many of his spectacular building projects in Judæa, especially the temple in Jerusalem, were intended to not only glorify his own name, but to win the favour of the Jews who despised him as an Edomite.

You shall not abhor any of the Egyptians. The Egyptians were also to receive more favour than the Moabites or Ammonites, because Israel was a guest in Egypt for around 430 years. Although the years Israel spent in Egypt were hard, God had a great purpose for them. Egypt was like a mother's womb for Israel; they went in as a large family, and came out as a distinct nation.

The children of the third generation. The possibility of foreigners becoming worshipping Israelites shows that, with God, faith is the issue more than race.

#### III.I Deuteronomy 23:9-25 - Sanitary, Ritual, and Humanitarian Precepts

Israel's army fighting against the enemy was a religious gathering in the midst of which God was present. Hence laws of cleanness applied.

The specific stipulations conclude with an assortment of laws, many of which seem to be property offenses related to the eighth commandment: <<*You shall not steal*>> (Deuteronomy 5:19).

<sup>9</sup> When you are encamped against your enemies you shall guard against any impropriety.

#### Deuteronomy 23:9

When you are encamped against your enemies you shall guard against any impropriety. God commanded ceremonial cleanliness among the army of Israel.

<sup>10</sup> If one of you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal emission, then he shall go outside the camp; he must not come within the camp. <sup>11</sup> When evening comes, he shall wash himself with water, and when the sun has set, he may come back into the camp.

### Deuteronomy 23:10-11

If one of you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal emission means an emission of bodily fluids such as semen or menstrual blood; refer to Leviticus Chapter 15. It is probably the former that is intended since the reference here is to the army and the pronoun he is used, although it was known for wives to follow their men on some campaigns. After following the rituals for cleansing the person may come back into the camp.

**<sup>12</sup> You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go. <sup>13</sup> With your utensils you shall have a trowel; when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement. <sup>14</sup> Because the Lord your God travels along with your camp, to save you and to hand over your enemies to you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.**

### Deuteronomy 23:12-14

You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go. No person was to urinate or defecate inside the camp primarily for sanitary reasons. The men were to include a trowel or shovel in their equipment to ensure they could bury their stools, which may otherwise have given rise to disease within the army's camp.

Later rabbinical interpretations and traditions, however, apparently modified this law until it reached the point where Jerusalem was considered the camp of God and the people were expected to travel outside of the city boundaries to go to the toilet. Since the length of this journey for some exceeded the distance they were permitted to travel on the Sabbath, this ruling in effect forbade some people from going to the toilet on the Sabbath. It was just such traditions that led Jesus to rebuke the Pharisees, who missed the point of many of God's laws by upholding the traditions of the elders.

**<sup>15</sup> Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them. <sup>16</sup> They shall reside with you, in your midst, in any place they choose in any one of your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them.**

### Deuteronomy 23:15-16

The refugee slave is most likely a foreigner, not an Israelite slave. Paul again showed his understanding that Jesus had fulfilled all such laws when he offered the runaway slave Onesimus back to Philemon, but he did so with the intention of radically changing the relationship between the two men because both were

Christians: <<Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord>> (Philemon 15-16)

**<sup>17</sup> None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute. <sup>18</sup> You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a male prostitute into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are abhorrent to the Lord your God.**

#### Deuteronomy 23:17-18

A temple prostitute. Cultic prostitution was practiced in Canaanite religion as a fertility rite. It was strictly prohibited for ancient Israel. Although the NRSVA translates the terms for male (Hebrew *kedesh*) and female (*kedeshah*) cult prostitutes the same, females were often referred to as ‘ritual harlots.’ The Hebrew word for male prostitute (v.18) is *kelev* or sodomite and literally means ‘a dog’ and is sometimes translated as a ‘perverted one.’

In v.18 the word *zonah* is used meaning secular prostitutes; her fee refers to the reward she is given for the use of her body. The wages of a male prostitute seems to imply that for him it is the main way of earning a living. The money earned is not acceptable by God in payment for any vow.

Later, in the reigns of Asa (1 Kings 15:12) and Josiah (2 Kings 23:7) male prostitutes were expelled from Israel. This means that for some period of time before they were expelled, they were allowed to practice their ‘holy prostitution,’ which was abhorrent to the Lord your God. This is a reminder of the principle that the work of the Lord does not need money from immoral or ill-gotten gains.

**<sup>19</sup> You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent. <sup>20</sup> On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess.**

#### Deuteronomy 23:19-20

You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite. A distinction is made between a fellow Israelite and a foreigner. To take a loan in ancient times was an act of desperation, often caused by crop failure. Cruelly high interest rates made situations worse. The mention of provisions, and the similar command in Exodus 22:25, leads most to understand that interest was prohibited on loans made to the

poor for their basic needs, and did not prohibit the taking of interest on loans that were not for relief to the poor.

On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest. Since merchants from other nations might come for business reasons to Israel, or take loans or credit from Israelites, foreigners could be charged interest. Legitimate and fair business practices between trading nations and individual business people are permitted.

So that the Lord your God may bless you. Wealth comes from obedience to God, not from selfish economics.

**<sup>21</sup> If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not postpone fulfilling it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you would incur guilt. <sup>22</sup> But if you refrain from vowing, you will not incur guilt. <sup>23</sup> Whatever your lips utter you must diligently perform, just as you have freely vowed to the Lord your God with your own mouth.**

#### Deuteronomy 23:21-23

If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not postpone fulfilling it. Vows were voluntary but, once made, were binding; refer to Numbers Chapter 30 and Ecclesiastes 5:2-6. Vows must be kept because God keeps his promises and desires that his people imitate his moral character. A vow before God is no small thing. God expressly commanded that Israel should be careful to keep its vows and to fulfil every oath made, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you would incur guilt. In many circles today, the breaking of an oath is just standard business practice; before God, it is simply sin.

During the period of the Judges Jephthah made a very foolish vow. If God would give him victory in battle, he would sacrifice the first person he encountered on his return home. It was his only daughter and: *<<When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, 'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow'>>* (Judges 11:35). Human sacrifice was an abomination, and Jephthah should not have followed through with killing his daughter.

But if you refrain from vowing, you will not incur guilt. Many wonder if vows or oaths are permitted for a Christian today. Some think not, because of what Jesus said: *<<But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one>>* (Matthew 5:34-37), and is

summarised in: *<<Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation>>* (James 5:12). However, in context of the rest of Scripture, it can be seen that Jesus was not forbidding oaths, as much as stating that his followers should be so filled with integrity in their words that an oath is unnecessary. Jesus answered under oath in a court (Matthew 26:63-64), and God himself swears oaths; refer to Luke 1:73, Acts 2:30 and Hebrews 3:18, 6:13 and 6:17.

However, what the Christian must remember is that they are just as bound by their oath as were the Israelites. Their oath was not made under duress but **freely vowed to the Lord your God with your own mouth**. One vow that all should keep is that of a vow of praise: *<<My vows to you I must perform, O God; I will render thank-offerings to you>>* (Psalm 56:12), and: *<<So I will always sing praises to your name, as I pay my vows day after day>>* (Psalm 61:8).

**<sup>24</sup> If you go into your neighbour's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in a container. <sup>25</sup> If you go into your neighbour's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbour's standing grain.**

#### **Deuteronomy 23:24-25**

**If you go into your neighbour's vineyard.** The idea is that, as one travelled they had the right to pick off a few grapes or heads of grain to eat along the way. It would also apply to the poor such as in the case of Ruth: *<<And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favour.' She said to her, 'Go, my daughter'>>* (Ruth 2:2). No one had the right to harvest from a neighbour's fields, but they could take what was required for own immediate needs.

**You may eat your fill.** These laws benefit the poor and are not an excuse for theft. The economics of ancient Israel included generosity toward fellow Israelites; refer to the comments made on Deuteronomy 15:4-6 and 15:7-8.

**You may pluck the ears with your hand.** This is the law Jesus and his disciples were operating under when they plucked heads of grain and ate them, rubbing them in their hands (Luke 6:1-5). They were accused by the Pharisees of breaking the Sabbath Law, but not of stealing grain, because the Pharisees knew this law in the Book of Deuteronomy.