

### DEUTERONOMY

#### Lesson 30 - Chapter 23

Deuteronomy Chapter 22 took the concept of adultery to a new level and explains it in the motif of “illicit mixtures”. While we tend to think of adultery in purely sexual terms in reality to commit adultery is to take anything pure or clean or in its proper or pristine form and contaminate it with something that corrupts it. It is a correct use of the term “adulterate” to describe (for instance) fresh water being contaminated with sea water, thereby making the resultant mixture either unsuitable or less than desirable for satisfying thirst, it’s original intent and purpose.

So adultery (while used most often to describe the crime of a one partner in a marriage relationship breaking faith by having a sexual relationship with another person who is not their spouse) is in fact the forbidden union of any two things (or more I suppose) that the Lord says are not to be mixed together. It can be in the sexual sphere, the work sphere (an Ox and Donkey yoked to the same plow), the food sphere (eating unclean animals), the plant sphere (2 different kinds of seeds planted in the same space), the clothing sphere (a garment of *sha’atnez*, linen and wool woven together), and others.

As we’ve seen in the Torah the Lord has given many examples of unions that He says ought not to be formed. Sometimes we *cannot* readily see His rationale for choosing the two components of the forbidden mix and in fact OTHER THAN FOR A TANGIBLE ILLUSTRATION of a higher God-principle there may not be any other reason for His choices that we’ll ever be able to discern this side of Heaven.

More often than not the unauthorized union of two things is not about mixing a “good” thing with a “bad thing”. In the example of weaving wool and linen together into a cloth there is nothing bad or evil with linen as a cloth or with wool as a cloth. One kind of thread is not inferior or less acceptable to God than the other. When it comes to planting two different kinds of seeds together, it’s not that one kind of seed is a good seed producing good food and the other kind is a bad seed producing bad food (both seeds are perfectly acceptable and each produces their own kind of good food). When it comes to human sexuality and the prohibition of intimate relations between 2 males or 2 females, it’s not that a male is inferior or superior to a female (each is perfectly acceptable to God). The issue is that ONLY proper use and union of God’s creations for the intent and purpose He created them is authorized, and all else is not. And since the Creator knows the purpose of each of His creations and how He carefully designed each to fit together perfectly in His universe, it is not our job or our right to challenge or to judge His divine rationale but simply to discover and follow the plan and patterns as He

created them.

Most certainly these Laws on illicit mixtures were to be taken literally and were to be obeyed by Israel. Equally as certain the mechanical following of these ordinances without trusting the Lord and comprehending the overriding spiritual principles they are demonstrating misses the whole point. And the point is that from the Heavenly down to the Earthly, from the spiritual down to the physical, from the unseen dimensions (beyond our ability to sense them) down to the familiar 4 dimensions that comprise the Universe we operate in, the Lord created everything in a precise divine order and with perfect harmony. To use something in a manner that is not consistent with His order of things is perverse and chaotic; to take something meant for one purpose in His order and to fuse it together with something that has an entirely different purpose in His order, the Lord calls “adultery”. So adultery has a far wider and deeper spiritual meaning than to have sexual relations outside of one’s marriage commitment.

So at the outset of chapter 23 we will study the particular sphere of forbidden mixture that might be entitled “forbidden relationships”.

Let’s read Deuteronomy chapter 23. But before we do, just know that your Bible version (if it’s not the CJB or JPS) likely has a very slightly modified order of verses. Most English bibles have the 1<sup>st</sup> verse of chapter 23 that I will read to you from in the CJB placed as the LAST verse of chapter 22. So if you’re not reading with me in the CJB, just start at the final verse of chapter 22 and we’ll be together. This is simply the result of a difference of opinion between Hebrew and Christian scholars as to where to put an end to one chapter before beginning the next, which was generally arbitrary as there were no such things as chapter and verse markers in the original anyway.

READ DEUTERONOMY CHAPTER 23 all

The first 9 verses of what we have read is part of a series of 7 laws (starting in the last chapter) that is a commentary by Moses on the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment (adultery). The first 5 laws were in Chapter 22; the one contained in the first verse of chapter 23 is the 6<sup>th</sup> of the series. This 6<sup>th</sup> law on the topic of adultery is that a son is not to marry his father’s FORMER wife.

I’m not sure how to get this important message across to you: Moses (or better, God THROUGH Moses) is NOT creating new law in Deuteronomy apart from what was pronounced in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Moses, the mediator, was neither adding to the Law nor was he replacing the old with the new; he was explaining the applications and contexts and nuances of what these laws and their underlying principles meant and how the Father

expected them to be carried out. An imminent change in Israel's physical circumstance (from being wanderers to being settled in Canaan) would mean that the details in HOW they carried out the Law would necessarily be different in some instances. This is a critical principle for us to apprehend because the challenge that we are constantly faced with is how we are to apply the ancient Law to our contemporary circumstances and modern cultures without essentially trying to go back in time and live in a primitive manner.

Yeshua addressed essentially the same challenge regarding the Law during His Sermon on the Mount. I stress this again and again because the fact is that around 4 centuries after Messiah's execution a new and erroneous doctrine began to dominate within the Church; a doctrine that Christ was giving us NEW laws to replace OLD laws when He spoke His famous sermon (as recorded in Matthew 5) there on that beautiful natural amphitheatre overlooking the blue waters of the Sea of Galilee. Rather, Messiah addressed the situation as it currently existed over and against what had always been intended and what it was about to become. He addressed the corrupted state of the doctrines of Judaism over and against the true religion that had always been intended and expected by the Lord. In a very real sense of the word, Jesus was making profound commentary on the Torah when He was giving His Sermon on the Mount, not changing the founding principles upon which it stood.

Probably your Bible doesn't read like the CJB in Deuteronomy 23 verse #1. Likely your Bible says something akin to, "*...A man shall not take his father's wife so that he shall not uncover his father's skirt*".

Uncover his father's skirt? What does that mean? That's why the CJB and a few others will make this verse read what they think it MEANS rather than what it says word-for-word. First understand that in Biblical language, and in this current context, to "take" a woman means to "take a woman in marriage". Remember; in God's economy the act of sexual relations between a man and a woman IS marriage (we'll deal with that a little more in a few minutes). Here's what is happening in this first verse: this is NOT speaking of a son marrying or having sexual relations with his mother. That would be incest and there are other laws that deal with that. And it is also not speaking of a son having sex with his father's current wife (a son's stepmother) because that, too, is covered by other laws and would have been unthinkable in pretty much every Middle Eastern culture.

Rather this is about a son having sex with his FORMER stepmother, who is NOT currently married to his father. AND it also covers the matters of concubines who are currently in the father's household OR concubines that belonged to the deceased father. While it may not seem so on the surface this law has much to do with the laws of inheritance because several of the world's known cultures of this era traditionally passed along the wives and concubines of the deceased father (as though they were some kind of possession) to the inheriting son. So in a situation like that a man's stepmother literally DID become his wife, and his father's concubines now formed his harem, and all the usual sexual rights that went with these

relationships were included. The Lord says that while the gentile world customarily does that, in Israel that is NOT to be the case.

There is another similar custom of that era that is also being addressed and it shows up back in Genesis in the story of Reuben taking one of his father's (Jacob's) concubines. And the custom is that if a man intends on usurping the throne (whether it is of a kingship, or of a tribal leader, or of his own clan, or anything of that nature) he shows his power and authority by having sexual relations with the current or former leader's wives and concubines. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago the implicit sexual references behind so much of what goes on in the Bible, but it is generally hidden from our modern view due to Bible translations that tend to sanitize things in order not to offend us. Well this is but another example.

Let's quickly read that story of Reuben and the result. Turn your bibles to Genesis chapter 35; we'll read from verse 19-23.

READ GENESIS 35:19 – 23

We get several pieces of information in this passage: Rachel died, Jacob was on the move and camping near Migdol-Eder, Reuben was Jacob's firstborn son. Bilah was one of Jacob's concubines who had produced a number of sons for Jacob and she also served as a servant to the now deceased Rachel. Reuben had sex with Bilah and Jacob found out about it. Was this incident a minor family issue or a major problem? Let's read Genesis 49: 1-4.

READ GENESIS 49:1 – 4

Here we see that there WAS a consequence (a serious consequence) for Reuben having sexual relations with Bilah. The facts are: Jacob was on his deathbed. It was time for him to pronounce the blessing upon his sons, which essentially means to read the will. Upon his death the terms of the blessings of the will, the divvying up of property and power, take place. Reuben (acknowledged as Jacob's firstborn) is NOT going to receive what ought to be rightfully given to the firstborn because he had sex with his father's concubine, Bilah.

By having sex with Bilah Reuben was symbolically demonstrating that he was taking over all that belonged to Jacob. He was usurping Jacob's leadership. This was not some vague or impulsive act with a subtle psychological meaning; this is how things were done in the Middle East. Everyone understood that there was really no difference between this act and Reuben literally marching an army against his father or even attempting to assassinate him. It appears that in this case Jacob decided not to immediately and openly confront Reuben. Rather he chose to let things play out and at the right moment punish Reuben in the most humiliating and

far-reaching manner; Reuben would be denied the birthright he naturally figured for himself, to become the leader of the rapidly growing nation of Israel.

This law of Deuteronomy verse 1 simply takes a formerly “unwritten law” that God had impressed upon humanity in the most ancient of times (as demonstrated in the Reuben affair) and codified it.

Now let’s talk about the original wording of this verse because there is an important Hebrew idiom in it that will be helpful to recognize throughout the OT especially. That idiom is at the end of the verse where it says that a son “shall not uncover his father’s skirt”. Please follow along with me closely because I’m going to give you an insight into the minds of the biblical Hebrews, and how it also pertains to marriage.

First we’ll see variations on this theme in a number of places in the Bible; phrases such as “uncovering nakedness” and “seeing someone’s nakedness” do not mean something like a boy running into the girls shower room at an opportune moment and getting an eyeful. It is an idiom that means having sex relations.

Second in idiomatic Hebrew symbolism, a man’s wife is his garment. Did you catch that? In thinking and in speech, in that era a man’s wife was thought of and referred to as his clothing, or covering, or skirt (a standard men’s garment). This is by no means a demeaning reference. Rather it is the concept that a man’s wife is so important and valuable and close to him that it’s as if he wears her like a garment; she is a kind of covering for him. Therefore for this son to “remove his father’s garment” is to steal what is closest and most meaningful to his father (his father’s wives and concubines) and clothe himself in them. He is taking that which is meant exclusively for the father within the unity of marriage (the sexual relationship with his wives and concubines) and is illegally partaking in it. It is a forbidden mixture, an illicit union that the son is seeking to form.

Conversely just as to uncover nakedness (remove a garment) means to have sex, to COVER OVER with a garment means to betroth and then marry. We see this particular scenario with Messiah’s ancestor Ruth. Turn your bibles to Ruth 3.

READ RUTH 3: 6-9

So the act of Ruth saying to Boaz, “cover over me with your skirt” or garment or robe means “betroth to be married”. This is a great illustration of why we have so many Biblical translation problems that result in understanding problems. Most gentile

Christian Bible translators were excellent scholars of the Hebrew and/or Greek languages but they knew nothing of Hebrew culture. In many cases (Martin Luther, for instance) they intentionally avoided knowing about it (so anti-Jewish were their mindsets). The result was that they didn't understand the Hebrew mind or the common Hebrew idioms or the symbolic and customary nature of many things that went on in the Holy Scriptures that seem straightforward to most folks (yet for Hebrews they are anything but). As I told you awhile back, the symbolic use of Scriptural vocabulary that revolves around clothing, sex and marriage, and holy war is central to the Bible; it is woven and interspersed throughout. We miss it at our own peril because so often it is this vocabulary that describes Yehoveh's desired relationship with us, and what our response is to be towards Him.

OK, back to Deuteronomy. One of the things this law in verse 1 does is that it turns on its head an every day, universally recognized cultural understanding at that time. God says that while everybody else in the world (gentiles) passes they're wives and concubines along as part of the inheritance package, in Israel it is not to be done.

Let's take up another nuance that will be helpful to grasp. We often see the Biblical term "taking" as it regards a man with a woman. We read that Reuben "took" Bilah or here in Deuteronomy 23:1 that a son is not to "take" his father's former wife. "Take" actually has a dual meaning in Bible-speak: it means BOTH to have sexual relations AND it means to marry. In God's eyes having sex IS marriage. Sex and marriage are inseparable. In the Law a man and woman are first betrothed. They are legally recognized as belonging to one another. The ONLY thing that remains to make this a completed marriage union is consummation. On earth, in the era of man, consummation means sexual intercourse. Why is sexual intercourse so important in the present era of mankind? Because it is the beginning of creating a family; it is the first step in having children. And critical to the Covenant of Abraham is fruitfulness and fertility. God expects every Israelite to be active participants in Abraham's covenant by multiplying themselves via God's plan of procreation. Thus marriage is not only a matter of a desirable and permitted union between a man and a woman, it is the starting line for every Hebrew's duty before YHWH: to participate in the Abrahamic Covenant by being fruitful.

So with that understanding, what on the face seems to be a law that has little to do with sex and marriage is presented to us in verse 2; the law that says that no male whose genitals are destroyed, altered, or removed may JOIN the assembly of Israel. Why is a eunuch or a sterile man being barred from joining Israel? Because he is incapable of siring offspring and thereby fulfilling God's covenant with Abraham (do you see how this all starts folding together?).

This law of the eunuch (or a foreigner who is sterile) begins a series of regulations that deals with restrictions on who can and cannot join Israel. That subject is pretty interesting because since the time of Abraham the Lord made it clear that not only is the result of God's plan through Abraham meant in some respects for the benefit of the whole world, but that gentiles are to be allowed to join Israel as the means of expanding that benefit beyond the Hebrew

race. Yet here we are meeting a whole series of exclusions that seems to alter that goal.

In order to discuss this intelligently we first have to tackle something more basic: the meaning of the word “assembly” or better “assembly of the Lord” (meaning Israel). Bibles vary greatly not only among versions but within the same version as to when to employ the word “assembly” or “congregation”. The word that is being translated is in Hebrew *kahal*. Most literally *kahal* simply means “gathering”. Yet we’ll find the word “assembly” or the word “congregation” used for the same word at various points in the Scriptures. The context of its use is everything because it can mean a religious gathering, which is usually how we use the English word “congregation”, but *kahal* can also mean a number of other things. *Kahal* can mean Israel as a whole or it can mean the governing body of Israel. It can indicate a committee drawn together for an official purpose (like the 70 elders that Moses selected to help him govern Israel for a time) or it can refer to the tribal leaders. It can even mean a group of citizens that has been drawn together to do public business or to make war.

Therefore it is highly unlikely that IF we use the English term “congregation” to mean a religious gathering that we should use that term here in Deuteronomy 23:2 because when the Torah refers to a gathering of religious significance it is a group generally made up of Levites and Priests who are the set-apart religious authorities over Israel. Therefore “congregation” is not a good choice of words in this instance.

Further when trying to discover just what this section of Deuteronomy 23 means by *kahal*, it is also very unlikely that it can mean “all Israel” in general. That is these restrictions probably cannot be referring to certain people being prevented from joining Israel without exception because of all the other laws that specifically invite foreigners to join. Not only that but we find that (in reality) Israel itself has become enormously genetically diverse going back hundreds of years before the time of the conquering of Canaan. One example of this is the absorption into Israel of the Hivite women and children of Shechem after Levi and Simeon led the slaughter of all the males of the city in retribution for the rape of their sister Dinah. It is unimaginable that very many living Israelites of Moses’ era had genetically pure blood leading back only to Abraham.

So what IS the Hebrew term *kahal* getting at in this context and why can certain people not be part of the *kahal*? Probably the best term to translate it in the current usage is “assembly” and assembly should be taken to mean the broadest possible governing body of Israel in the sense of all who were citizens in full standing and given all the rights belonging to such people. In Israel there were MANY exceptions and various social groups that had varying degrees of privilege of participation in Israel. For instance there was what we might call resident aliens (the Hebrew term being *nokri*). *Nokri* were NOT allowed to be part of the “assembly”, the *kahal*. A *nokri* is a foreigner who lives NEAR Israel, in Israelite territory, under friendly terms, but who is NOT an official member of Israel and one who has no intention of becoming an Israeli citizen. The *nokri* have elected to follow certain of the Torah laws as God requires of

resident aliens; but they are not worshippers of Yehoveh and therefore what they can do in Israel is limited.

Then there is the *ger*; this is a kind of foreigner who DOES live among Israel, worships the God of Israel, obeys the Torah laws of the God of Israel, but is not a full-fledged citizen because he has not taken the final step of circumcision. A *ger* cannot be part of the *kahal*, the “assembly”, either. A *nokri* could never be allowed to own land in Israel, a *ger* could own land under certain circumstances. On the other hand a native-born Israelite was a full-blown citizen who could own land, be in the military, marry a Hebrew girl, sacrifice at the Tabernacle and so on. It was THIS class of person that was included in the “assembly”, *kahal*, in this section of Deuteronomy.

Therefore to put it in modern immigration terms, to say one was eligible to become a member of the *kahal Adonai*, the Assembly of the Lord, the assembly of Israel, it meant that they potentially had the qualifications for full citizenship. If you are fortunate enough to get a Green Card to be in America you have all rights under our laws BUT you may not act as a member of one of the broadest parts of the governing body of America: full-fledged citizens, those who vote for our governmental representatives, enter the military, serve as judges and lawyers, and get elected to public office. So as a loose analogy: just as there is a difference between a person who is welcome to come to America and participate to a degree in our society versus an American citizen who can participate at every level, so is there a difference in this law of Deuteronomy between a foreigner who could participate in Israeli society to a degree versus a citizen of Israel who could participate completely.

So a foreign eunuch (or possibly even a sterile male foreigner) cannot become a citizen of Israel. A person became a eunuch for a variety of reasons; sometimes it was as a result of punishment. Other times pagan religious sects that worshipped female deities (goddesses) required emasculation of their priests. There were periods of time when voluntary castration was practiced as part of religious ceremony. And yet at other times government officials were castrated and made part a special group called *saris*.

It is not clear whether being a eunuch for any reason was cause for exclusion from Israel, or only in cases where it involved punishment for criminality or was more or less voluntary to serve the purposes of a foreign government or god. This probably did NOT include males born with genital defects or were a result of disease or injury. Intention was likely at the center of the exclusion. I know this may be confusing but probably the simplest way to see it is that foreign men who were emasculated as a result of their paganism were the excluded class.

Let me peel this onion back one more layer. The problem with eunuchs is centered in their reproductive organs (or lack thereof). And the requirement for citizenship into Israel (for a foreigner) has an awful lot to do with their sexual organs because a male must be circumcised



in that organ to be considered a full-fledged member of Israel AND generally speaking must be capable of siring children. A eunuch has mutilated his sexual organ such that it is no longer suitable (and in some unfortunate cases not even available) for circumcision. We can scoff at the idea of circumcision as a religious symbol but the Lord takes it dead seriously. And I'd like to give you an example of just how serious a subject this is and how much it plays into God's order and plan of redemption.

By means of the covenant of Abraham the Lord gave circumcision a spiritual meaning; it indicated inclusion in His Kingdom. To use it for any other purpose is, therefore, perverse. Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi used circumcision in an incorrect manner and were cursed for it. Let's look at this briefly:

READ GENESIS 34:1- 19 AND 25, 26

Here the sacred ritual of circumcision to join Israel was used only for deception; it was used as an opportunity to commit revenge and murder. Levi and Simeon waited until 3 days after the circumcision of all of Shechem's males when they were physically ill and promptly slaughtered them. There was a consequence for this action. Turn to Genesis 49:5-7.

READ GENESIS 49:5-7

On his deathbed Jacob more or less laid a curse on Simeon and Levi for this horrendous act. And even though on the surface it was because of their murdering, it was more because of their misuse of the sacred ritual of circumcision.

So circumcision is the key in making especially a foreigner a member of Israel. It must happen with the reproductive organ because human fruitfulness is all about reproduction as ordained in the Abrahamic Covenant.

Listen to Paul in Romans 2:

READ ROMANS 2:25 – 29

Now again hear Paul in Colossians 2:9-11

READ COLOSSIANS 2:9 – 11

Paul says that even though circumcision was a physical requirement to be part of Israel, it always was a spiritual issue (and now more than ever with the advent of Yeshua). Gentiles (as well as Jews) are to have circumcised hearts. And by now it should be abundantly clear that circumcision is the ONLY entry into the Assembly of the Lord (Israel), and that the circumcision illustration is MOST appropriate for a Believer because part of being joined to God's Kingdom is our ability (and the expectation of the Lord) that we are FRUITFULL. Of course it is spiritual fruitfulness that is most important, but physical fruitfulness is also a good thing.

Now watch this: Simeon and Levi misused circumcision for the purpose of denying the male residents of Shechem from joining Israel (a perverse thing because circumcision is ONLY for the purpose of INCLUDING someone in Israel). Gentiles, I'm talking primarily to you now; when you take your spiritual circumcision of the heart and say you have NOT become a part of Israel (the earthly Kingdom of God) you are misusing that circumcision.

### ROMANS 11:13-22

Gentiles, when we deny our grafting in to Israel we misuse our spiritual circumcision in the same way as Simeon and Levi misused the purpose of circumcision. When we deny our joining into Israel as the Kingdom of God (which is the sole purpose of circumcision), we have misused the spiritual circumcision that Christ has performed upon our hearts by determining to exclude ourselves from the assembly.

We'll end here and begin next week on the next class of those excluded from Israel: those who are called *mamzer*.