

Deuteronomy 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Deuteronomy chapter 23 And with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pithor of Mesopotamia to curse you.

But the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam. Instead the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you. You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever.

You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a sojourner in his land. Children born to them in the third generation may enter the assembly of the Lord.

When you are encamped against your enemies, then you shall keep yourself from every evil thing. If any man among you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal omission, then he shall go outside the camp.

He shall not come inside the camp. But when evening comes, he shall bathe himself in water, and as the sun sets, he may come inside the camp. You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it, and you shall have a trowel with your tools.

[1 : 30] And when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it, and turn back and cover up your excrement. Because the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you, and to give up your enemies before you.

Therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you, and turn away from you. You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you.

He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him. None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, and none of the sons of Israel shall be a cult prostitute.

You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord your God, in payment for any vow. For both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God.

You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest.

[2 : 30] That the Lord your God may bless you in all that you undertake, in the land that you are entering, to take possession of it. If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it. For the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.

But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips. For you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.

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 your bag. 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 chapter 23 concludes the section devoted to the seventh commandment, and moves into the material associated with the eighth.

It begins with entrance into the assembly in verses 1 to 8. The assembly is presumably the gathering of all the males ruling and worshipping on behalf of the nation. It's a matter of full citizenship and participation in Israel's public life.

[3 : 33] There would be the people responsible for crowning kings, for making war, for administering justice, allocating land, participating in worship, these sorts of things. And there would

be an assembly operative at both the national and at the local city or town level.

The public life of Israel was formed by men and almost entirely run by them. The public worship of Israel was also especially focused on men for this reason. It was the men who had to present themselves before the Lord at the pilgrim feast, for instance.

The women could attend, but their attendance was more optional. From the perspective of the modern reader, it can easily be falsely presumed that the exclusion of women from the public life of Israel, for the most part, was because they were being oppressed and purposefully excluded. What this misses is that the public life of Israel and other nations was largely created by groups of men. It wasn't this pre-existing neutral space that was colonised by men in a way that prevented women from coming in.

The men would create the wider political structures, forge the realm of public life, forge unities between families and clans and the larger life of the nation. It was the men who had to create and preserve the realm of public life through their force of arms and their creative power.

[4 : 48] The realm of public life would be forged through their collective exertion of social, physical and institutional power. And it would have seemed very strange to them that someone who wasn't ever expected to fight as one of the military assembly should have a place in the assembly when it exercised its rule.

It was a male realm at its origin. It is only in fairly recent history that the realm of public life has been greatly abstracted from the work of male groups in guarding the realm of the polity and also establishing its institutions and power structures.

The idea that men and women should be interchangeable in their status as citizens is only something that really develops as there is an abstraction, for instance, of the enjoyment of political citizenship from the military responsibilities of the citizen, things which would have been seen as naturally going together in most ancient societies.

Finally, it's also important to recognise that the men weren't participants in public life as detached individuals, but rather persons were deeply embedded in families, standing for and symbolising their families.

They maintained the interest of larger groups, and the members of those groups would see themselves in the men that stood for them. As people who think in terms of a more atomised and individualistic society, we find it very difficult to understand how such people would have thought.

[6 : 07] However, some sort of understanding along these lines is important if we're to appreciate what's taking place in Scripture. That, on the one hand, it isn't merely this power grab by men over women. It's a far more complicated reality than that.

And Scripture's use and handling of such structures is an accommodation to them. Often an accommodation less to sin than to immaturity, to a society that has not yet been able to develop the structures that would allow for a more free and equitable way of living.

With such an understanding of these structures, on the one hand, we learn not to condemn them so instinctively, and on the other hand, we learn not to idealise them. The person excluded from the assembly could still live in Israel.

They weren't exiles. However, they lacked the civil rights enjoyed by full citizens. The eunuch, or the person with crushed testicles, is probably someone who was mutilated in the service of a false god.

However, priests were also disqualified from ministry by defects of this type, which may suggest that such emasculation was seen as unfitting in the holy assembly of the men of Israel. The next restriction is upon someone born of a forbidden union.

[7 : 17] Many readings have seen this as a bastard, or perhaps as a child of incest, or a forbidden marriage of some other type. Ammonites and Moabites are then set apart as groups that would not have the right of citizens for a long period of time, if at all.

Both of these nations were descendants from Lot, and both of them were born through incest. But here they're seen as nations that were inhospitable to Israel in their time of need, and also nations that explicitly tried to subvert them.

It's on account of that history that Israel is supposed to be careful about their dealings with these peoples. The Edomites and the Egyptians are different, though. The Edomites are related to Esau, their twins, and their close kin.

And Egypt, before the pharaoh of the time of the Exodus, showed hospitality to Israel. For this reason, Edomites and Egyptians could assimilate to Israel and become members of its assembly far more rapidly than other nations.

Israel was supposed to welcome the stranger, but in many ways aliens and strangers were prevented from participating in Israel's life as full members of the people until a few generations of assimilation and other factors.

[8 : 25] The nation of Israel had to preserve its religious character. Foreigners in the land were not given the right of free worship of their foreign gods. They were not permitted to participate in some of Israel's worship without being circumcised and becoming Israelite themselves.

They were also restricted in their ownership of the land. They would probably live in the cities, as ownership of the land was largely restricted to those who had ancestral holdings within it. We shouldn't assume that such sorts of legislation were timeless, however.

Israel's relationship with surrounding nations could change, and it might be prudent to admit some earlier and exclude others for longer. Ruth is an example of a Moabitess who became part of the people of God.

Her offspring became members of the assembly earlier than ten generations. This wouldn't be the only example of a law that changes in Scripture as the times change and the contexts change.

We get another hint of this in Isaiah chapter 56 verses 1 to 8. Thus says the Lord, Keep justice and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed.

[9 : 30] Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil. Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, The Lord will surely separate me from his people.

And let not the eunuch say, Behold, I am 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. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant.

These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered. This material falls under the seventh commandment, against committing adultery.

[10 : 38] Israel's sexual fidelity and integrity is important for its public life. It also needs to be aware of intermarrying with, and having union with peoples of other nations, particularly nations that are not faithful to the Lord, nations that have proved to be enemies of Israel in the past, that have drawn them astray.

Verses 9 to 14 concern the holiness of the war camp. The war camp has a special state of holiness, higher than the regular camp. This enhanced status comes from the fact that the Lord is fighting with his people, and is in the camp with them.

And so, for instance, men must refrain from sexual relations. In 1 Samuel chapter 21 verse 5, Nocturnal omissions mean that someone has to leave the camp.

They have to become clean again before they can come back in. Defecation has to occur outside of the camp. The military are in jeopardy because the Lord's holy presence is in their midst, and they must behave accordingly.

This again comes under the 7th commandment. It's about maintaining the purity of the body. The purity, sexually and otherwise, when you're in the presence of the Lord. And it's also about the holiness of the people to the Lord.

[11 : 58] This is followed by the law of the fleeing slave, in verses 15 and 16. And now we've moved into material related to the 8th commandment. You shall not steal. Man-stealing is a form of stealing that suffers the death penalty.

We don't know if the slave was stolen in such a way. There's no reason to presume that he was.

The slave here is presumably a slave from a foreign country, who is permitted to live in Israel as a free man.

They would not engage in extradition of slaves, unlike other ancient Near Eastern societies. And they don't just give this man temporary asylum. He enjoys permanent asylum in Israel. Israel were once slaves, and they must treat slaves with dignity.

It's not clear that this applies to slaves within Israel, who would have had the right to go free in the 7th year. And so fleeing before that time might not have been viewed in quite the same way.

This comes under the law for stealing then. The escaped slave has the right to his freedom, and it takes priority over any supposed claim his master has upon his service. Verses 17 and 18 are unusual verses in this context.

[13:01] It would seem to belong with the preceding material, the material concerning the 7th commandment. It's about the wages of a prostitute. Some believe that this is to be classed under the 7th commandment, but I don't think that's the case.

The point is less about not being prostitutes, although that's part of the point, but it's about what happens with their money. We like to think of money as an abstract medium of exchange. Any money is as good as any other money.

But money has a history, and money associated with prostitution should not be allowed anywhere near the Lord's house. This comes under stealing, as the money is a sort of cursed possession, and presenting it to the Lord is robbing him of his due, giving him something that is polluted by sin. Verses 19 to 20 concern the restrictions on interest. The type of loans generally in view here are charitable loans for poor Israelites. Money did not play anything like the same role in Israelite society as it does today.

Theirs was not, primarily a money economy. They can charge interest to foreigners, but not to their brothers. The suggestion seems to be that they have a cooperative and a more mutual economy.

[14:07] Rather than one party potentially prospering from the losses of another, both parties would either prosper or suffer together. As a money economy grew, some of this legislation would presumably have been relaxed in various ways.

In Exodus chapter 22 and Leviticus chapter 25, there is the suggestion that the people receiving such loans would have been poor. If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a money lender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him.

Exodus chapter 22 verse 25. If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.

Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. Leviticus chapter 25 verses 35-37.

The principle then seems to be focused upon the poor and charitable loans, but the principle does seem to have some more broad applications, even though the poor were mostly the ones who were borrowing.

[15:13] The ideal is a society where everyone prospers together, rather than one of privatised interests at competitive odds with each other. Israel is a nation of brothers, and they must all take an active concern for and invest themselves in each other's wellbeing.

The foreigner would most likely not be the poor person. He'd be a trader. He'd be someone looking for money for a venture, for his business. And so the considerations regarding the poor Israelite would not necessarily apply in his case, not just because he was a foreigner, although that's important, but because he was using the money for other means.

Not stealing then, involves not taking advantage of the poor. It involves the responsibility to be prepared to give a loan to such a person when they need it. It also pushes in the direction of a society of brothers, where, although differences in personal wealth are quite permissible, the ideal is that all should prosper together.

Verses 21-23 concern the keeping of vows. People would make vows to the Lord for particular purposes, perhaps as thanks for something that the Lord had given them, perhaps in order to seek some blessing from his hand, perhaps in response to God's answer to prayer, and vows when made should be paid, and quickly.

To vow and not pay is to be guilty of a serious offence, though there is nothing wrong with not vowing. The final verses of this chapter, verses 24-25, concern the right to eat unharvested crops.

[16:39] Private property rights are relaxed in Israel, under the principle of not stealing. The land has been given to all of Israel, and the right of every Israelite, no matter how poor, is to have some right of weigh-in, and right to eat of the land.

The owner of a vineyard, or a field, would be stealing if he denied such rights to a fellow Israelite. On the other hand, if the person going through a vineyard, or a field, started to harvest the crop, rather than just taking what they could eat on the spot, they would be guilty of stealing from the owner.

A question to consider. The law concerning the prostitute's wages suggests that God is concerned with the history of the things that people sacrifice or give to him. How might this principle inform our approach to Christian worship?