

Deuteronomy 25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Deuteronomy chapter 25 He says, My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel.

He will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me. Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him. And if he persists, saying, I do not wish to take her, then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house. And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, the house of him who had his sandal pulled off.

When men fight with one another, and the wife of the one draws near to rescue her husband from the hand of him who is beating him, and puts out her hand and seizes him by the private parts, then you shall cut off her hand.

Your eyes shall have no pity. You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small.

[2 : 00] A full and fair weight you shall have, a full and fair measure you shall have, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the Lord your God.

Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God.

Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

You shall not forget. In Deuteronomy chapter 25, we're continuing to work through the Ten Commandments in the penultimate chapter of this section. Chapter 25 begins with the Ninth Commandment, you shall not bear false witness, and ends with the Tenth Commandment, you shall not covet.

As we have already seen, the Ninth Commandment includes a prohibition upon oppression. Verses 1 to 3 continue this theme. It preserves the dignity of the beaten man. It deals with a case that has gone to court and someone has been found guilty.

[3 : 09] Not bearing false witness against one's neighbour includes the concern that punishment not be excessive. The judge supervises the execution of the sentence, ensuring that it is carried out appropriately.

It's important that even a guilty person not be degraded by vicious punishment. No one should be treated like an animal in such cases. The language of being degraded in your sight is very important.

It's all too easy to regard the criminal as subhuman, to care little for their proper treatment, or not to take due concern for their protection from harm or mistreatment. Note that the focus is less upon what excessive punishment does to the person receiving it, but what it does to those giving it, to the way that it dehumanises others in our perception.

The punishment must occur in such a way that they never forget that the person receiving the punishment is a brother. Part of the point here is that the person who has committed a crime can and should be rehabilitated at the end of it.

Verse 4, which says that you should not muzzle the ox as it treads out the grain, is a peculiar commandment for several reasons. First, unmuzzling the ox would make it difficult for it to do its job, and be extremely impractical.

[4 : 18] It needed to be muzzled while it worked the grain, then unmuzzled and fed. If the animal weren't muzzled, it would probably need to be driven with prodding or whipping. So being humane to animals may not necessarily be in view here.

Rather, the potential impracticality and the counter-productivity of the commandment should suggest that something symbolic is going on here, and we must determine what that thing is. This commandment is referenced in the New Testament in 1 Timothy 5, verses 17-18.

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching. For the scripture says, you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain, and the labourer deserves his wages.

In 1 Corinthians 9, verses 7-14, it's referenced again. Who serves as a soldier at its own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit?

Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.

[5 : 26] Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the ploughman should plough in hope, and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop.

If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

Paul makes clear that he doesn't think that oxen are the chief point of the commandment here at all. Rather, it is symbolic of something else. In these cases, the ox is the Christian minister who is working in God's field, preparing his people.

The minister must be permitted to eat from God's field, being materially provided for by the people to whom he is ministering. Paul compares this to the priests in the temple. Interestingly, the priests were symbolized by oxen, and the temple was built on the site of the threshing floor.

[6 : 40] It might seem from this that the commandment fits well under the principle of not bearing false witness in its extended sense of resistance to oppression. We must take concern that people are not oppressed, that they are given their dues for their labor.

However, there might be something more going on here. We'll revisit it in a moment. Verses 5 to 10 that follow concern the law of the leveret marriage.

It's a law about taking concern for the preservation of the name of your brother, so that his name not be blotted out. It begins with brothers living together in a yet undivided property. One of the brothers dies, and the other brother seeks to raise up his name by bearing a child for his dead brother with the widow of his brother.

This is a very great act of charity, as raising up a child for your dead brother would mean that there would be much less of the inheritance left for you. Leveret marriage depended upon the institution of marriage being ordered primarily towards the bearing of seed, not so much of a strong emphasis upon companionship and sexual pleasure.

It seeks to preserve the name of the dead brother, and to raise up seed for the dead person, perhaps the first example that we find of this in the story of scripture is Nahor taking Milcah, the daughter of his dead brother Haran.

[7 : 58] Some have also argued that Sarai is the daughter of Haran as well, so Abram is performing something similar to a leveret marriage for his brother also. The raising up of seed for the dead brother in this fashion is a new life after death.

It's a sort of resurrection. Beyond the concern to provide for the widow of the dead brother, it suggests that even after death, the dead brother was seen to have some active investment in life, in the continuation of his legacy and his name.

One of the most important stories of the performance of the Leveret is found in Genesis chapter 38, where we read of the sin of Onan, who despised his brother and spilled his seed.

This, Callum Carmichael suggests, helps us to understand the strange ritual of the removal of the sandal, as a symbolic inversion of the sin of Onan. Genesis chapter 38, verses 7 to 10 reads, But

Ur, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, Go into your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother. But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, so whenever he went into his brother's wife, he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother.

[9 : 12] And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. Onan did not want to raise up offspring that wouldn't be his, so he degraded his sister-in-law and wasted his seed on the ground.

His motive was greed. He didn't want to create an heir to the firstborn son ahead of himself. And the removal of the sandal from the foot corresponds to Onan's withdrawal from intercourse.

Elsewhere in scripture, the foot is symbolically and poetically associated with the genitals. The pulling off of the sandal is related to sexual withdrawal. The woman then spits in the man's face, corresponding with the degrading spilling of bodily fluids in Onan's action.

The person who failed to perform the duty of the leveret then receives a dishonourable name for his house, and is shamefully associated with Onan, the great example of someone who failed to perform this duty towards his brother.

There's a further twist here, though. The most famous and the fullest example of the performance of the leveret commandment occurs in the book of Ruth, even down to the removing of the sandal, although in the book of Ruth that isn't presented as a shaming ritual, even though the near kinsman's reasons for not performing the leveret is concerned for his own inheritance.

[10 : 25] Ruth chapter 3 verses 1 to 9 reads, Then Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were?

See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor. But do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do. And she replied, All that you say I will do.

So she went down to the threshing floor, and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her.

And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain.

Then she came softly and uncovered his feet, and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet. He said, Who are you?

[11 : 22] And she answered, I am Ruth your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer. And then in verses 14 and 15 of that chapter, So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another.

And he said, Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor. And he said, Bring the garment you are wearing, and hold it out. So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her.

Then she went into the city. The interesting thing that we see here is that all of the elements of the law of the ox treading out the grain are present, and they're performed as a symbolic representation of the law of the leveret.

Boaz is on the threshing floor. Ruth lies at his feet, as if he were treading her out. Then at the end, he presents her with grain, placing it into her garment, which is held in front of her like a pregnant stomach.

Treading out the grain then serves as a sort of metaphor for having sexual relations with the woman to raise up seed. Ruth chapter 3 then suggests that the law of the unmuzzled ox is a symbolic expression of the law of the leveret.

[12 : 30] How then would this relate to Paul's use of the law? The point is that those raising up the sons of God, children for God's name, should enjoy fruit from their work for his glory, much as the person performing the leveret should enjoy the use of the inheritance of his dead brother, while he was raising up an heir for that brother.

This also suggests that the law of the unmuzzled ox begins the section devoted to the tenth commandment. Performing the leveret was the paradigm case of not coveting one's neighbour's possessions or their station in life.

It was a willingness to sacrifice your own interests in order to raise up your brother's name. The commandment that follows this is stranger still. It's a law concerning a woman who takes the genitals of a man who's fighting with her husband.

This is reminiscent in some ways of Exodus chapter 21 verse 22. When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine.

We can see some similarities here. First of all, there are two men fighting and there's a woman caught between them. In the first case, the man hits out and hits her pregnant stomach, threatening the lives of her children.

[13:43] In the second case, again, there is a woman between two men, and in this occasion, she attacks his genitals, his capacity for fertility. However, the oddness of Exodus chapter 21 verse 22 suggests it is a symbolic commandment, and I have argued that it is related to the story of Rachel.

Something similar might be going on here. Whereas in the first law, the woman is wounded by one of the men, here the woman grabs the man attacking her husband by the genitals. This is a very strange and specific situation to legislate for.

In the preceding commandment, the woman shamed the man by uncovering his foot, removing his sandal, an action symbolically related to uncovering his genitals. Here the woman takes hold of a man's genitals again.

Literally, the two men fighting are a man and his brother. The woman seeks to rescue her husband by taking the assailant's privates, perhaps designing to crush them and render him incapable of bearing offspring.

If he is symbolically attacking her dead husband by failing to raise up offspring for him, then she will grab hold of his genitals to get back at him, preventing him from having offspring either.

[14:53] However, what we see here is not dissimilar from the action of Tamar, who took Judah's privates in a sense when he was threatening her dead husband by refusing to give his son Shelah to her to perform the leveret.

By subterfuge and disguise, she lay with Judah her father-in-law and conceived through him. The woman's hand must be cut off for this action. Her assault upon the privates of a man who failed to perform the leveret for her husband would be a vicious act of envy or some other sort of assault. Why lose her hand in particular? It's the offending limb, but that seems like a weak explanation. Is it because she is trying to rescue him out of the hand of his brother?

Again, that seems weak to me. It does remind me of the scarlet thread tied around Zerah's hand at the end of Genesis 38 though. The woman's hand was cut off and the infant of Tamar with the scarlet cord around his hand had his line cut off while his brother broke through ahead of him.

Once again, this raises the possibility that this law is a symbolic reflection upon the history of Israel and some events within it. Verses 13 to 16 concern fair weights and measures.

[16:03] Use of different kinds of weights was often designed to gain more when purchasing and pay less when buying. This could easily have been placed under the 8th or the 9th commandment, but it is here and it highlights the covetousness that drives such action.

Such dishonesty in trade is firmly condemned. Verses 17 to 19 with which the chapter ends concerns blotting out the memory of Amalek. It's a very shocking commandment and it looks back to the events of Exodus chapter 17 verses 8 to 16.

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, Choose for us men and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.

So Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek. While Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed. And whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed.

But Moses' hands grew weary. So they took a stone and put it under him. And he sat on it. While Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side and the other on the other side.

[17:10] So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

