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MINISTRIES

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Excluded From the Assembly? (Deuteronomy 23:1-8)

At the beginning of Deuteronomy 23, there is a passage that seems very strange. On the surface it appears as though Moses is saying that certain people are forbidden from being part of God’s people, the “assembly of YHWH.” What’s especially strange is that these people are excluded based on their ethnicity and other circumstances beyond their control.

For instance, Deuteronomy 23:1 says, “[No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord \[YHWH\].](#)”

Is this saying that eunuchs are not allowed to be part of God’s covenant community? Are men who’ve been mutilated or who have some sort of deformity, perhaps because of a birth defect, prohibited from taking part in worshipping God?

Verse 2 says, “[No one born of a forbidden union may enter the assembly of the Lord \[YHWH\]. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord \[YHWH\].](#)”

The “one born of a forbidden union,” is translated from the Hebrew *mamzer*, a very rare word that occurs only a couple of times in Scripture. According to scholars, those born of a forbidden union refer to those who were conceived through cult prostitution, or possibly those conceived through adultery or incestuous unions. Dr. Daniel Block writes this:

While the etymology of the word is uncertain, linked to the preceding this seems to refer to offspring of prostitutes who lived at pagan cult sites. Moses’ earlier warning concerning improper worship (12:30-31) and the linkage of the tenth generation in verse 2b with Ammonites and Moabites in verse 3b reinforce this interpretation. Since Israelites traced both of these peoples to an incestuous act (Gen. 19:37-38), *mamzer* may refer to one conceived through incestuous intercourse (prohibited in Lev. 18), or more broadly to one born of illicit sexual relationships (Deut. 22:13-29).

-Dr. Daniel Block, The NIV Application Commentary on Deuteronomy

However, children are not responsible for the circumstances of their conception. So how does it make any sense for God to prohibit such people from being full members of His covenant people? Is this verse really saying that these people are denied access to God's presence in His assembly? Wouldn't that be unreasonably cruel?

The passage goes further to say that Ammonites and Moabites are likewise forbidden from entering the assembly of YHWH, "even to the tenth generation," which verse 3 clarifies as "forever." Moreover, Edomites and Egyptians are also forbidden, but only temporarily: "[Children born to them in the third generation may enter the assembly of the Lord \[YHWH\]](#)" (v. 8).

Again, are we to understand that this passage is saying that certain people—that is, eunuchs, children conceived from sexual immorality, Ammonites, Moabites—are to be forever excluded from God's covenant community? Well, that's what many atheists and other critics of the Bible assert.

In an article titled, "The Character of God in the Bible," one atheist website mockingly declares, "God shuns crippled people!" and "God is unjust: He punishes offspring who have committed no crime!" And, of course, Deuteronomy 23 is cited as the proof-text for these assertions (www.mnatheists.org).

Now, Internet atheists are notorious for misinterpreting the Bible, but many people who read this passage might think that the atheist has a point. At first glance, this passage could appear to suggest that God has excluded certain people from the covenant community on the basis of their ethnicity and other circumstances beyond their control. And if that's the case, that would be an understandable criticism.

But there's something more to be considered here. First of all, excluding children from God's people on the basis that they were born of sexual immorality would appear to be a clear violation of biblical teaching. Ezekiel 18:20 states:

Ezekiel 18:20

[The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.](#)

Interestingly, this passage in Ezekiel seems to be based upon a passage in Deuteronomy 24, which is just a chapter after our current passage regarding exclusion from the assembly of YHWH:

Deuteronomy 24:16

[Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.](#)

But how can this biblical principle be true if, just a chapter earlier, Moses demands that children forever be excluded from God's people because of the sins of their parents? Was Moses confused?

There is still more to be considered. For instance, this passage mentions that Moabites are excluded from the assembly of YHWH. But that can't mean that Moabites are never allowed to be part of God's people. Why? Because they are welcomed among God's people in other parts of Scripture.

An obvious example would be Ruth, a Moabite, who is clearly brought into the family of God, as the Book of Ruth testifies. If the Torah says that Moabites are forever excluded from being part of God's people, Ruth would not have been allowed to marry Boaz and join the covenant community, and her

descendants—Obed, Jesse, and David—would not have been born into the nation of Israel.

Furthermore, the passage says that eunuchs are to be excluded from the assembly of YHWH. But again, that can't mean that they are forever excluded from being part of God's people. Why? Well, consider this passage from Isaiah:

Isaiah 56:4-7

For thus says the Lord [YHWH]: “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 [YHWH], to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord [YHWH], 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.**”

In this passage, God explicitly states that He desires the eunuchs to draw near, to keep His Sabbaths, and to bring offerings to His house of prayer. As we've already mentioned, eunuchs would fit within the category of “**those whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off,**” and thus they are to be excluded from the assembly of YHWH according to Deuteronomy 23. And yet, they are included in God's covenant community and welcomed into His presence according to Isaiah 56.

We might also consider Acts 8:27-40, which is a story about an Ethiopian eunuch who receives Yeshua as Savior and is baptized into the believing community.

So clearly, eunuchs, Moabites, and others are welcomed and included among God's people. And why wouldn't they be? After all, the very covenant God made with Abraham included a promise that states, “**In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed**” (Genesis 22:18). This promise, of course, precedes these instructions in Deuteronomy.

Did the plan for Abraham's offspring to bless the nations change sometime between Genesis and Deuteronomy? Of course not. Scripture later designates this very promise as “the Gospel,” whereby Gentile believers are grafted into the believing remnant of Israel through Messiah:

Galatians 3:8

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.”

Now, surely “all the nations” includes Ammonites and Moabites. Surely there are eunuchs and those born of a forbidden union among the nations who have been blessed through the offspring of Abraham. And indeed, as we've already seen, members of these groups are not excluded but welcomed among God's people!

So what's going on here? The key lies in how we understand the phrase, “assembly of YHWH.” This phrase is mentioned a total of six times in Deuteronomy 23, but appears nowhere else in the entire book of Deuteronomy.

The term “assembly”—*kehal*—simply means a gathering of people. Deuteronomy, several times, uses the term broadly in reference to the nation of Israel as a whole (5:22; 9:10; 10:4; 31:30). However, as

we've already covered, the phrase "assembly of YHWH" *cannot* be referring to the broad community of Israel.

Again, that would entail that members of the groups mentioned in Deuteronomy 23 are excluded from God's people. And, as we've already established, that would contradict Scripture in other places in which members of these groups are clearly permitted to be part of God's people.

In light of this problem, some scholars have suggested that the phrase "assembly of YHWH" has a more narrow meaning.

One suggestion is that this phrase refers to the community of God's people gathered specifically *for worship*, including bringing offerings to God at the sanctuary. Thus, there is a worshiping community within the broader people of Israel from which members of the groups mentioned in Deuteronomy 23 are excluded—but they are permitted within *the broader community* of Israel.

Support for this view can perhaps be drawn from passages in Leviticus as it concerns the priesthood. For instance, if a son of Aaron has "crushed testicles"—that is, if he's a eunuch—he is disqualified from serving as priest, according to Leviticus 21:20.

The idea in Leviticus is that the act of a priest serving before God with a blemish profanes the sanctuary. Priests are to be without blemish just as sacrifices must be without blemish (Leviticus 22:24).

Thus, the parallel to eunuchs in Deuteronomy 23 has caused some to interpret the phrase, "assembly of YHWH," in light of the context of Leviticus—that is, assembling before God in worship at his sanctuary. That is to say, just as God requires priests to be without blemish, God is calling for a certain level of wholeness and holiness in order to be part of this specific worship assembly within the broader people of Israel.

However, this interpretation still falls short. First, nowhere else is *kehal*—"assembly"—used in reference to God's sanctuary in Deuteronomy or even the entire rest of the Bible.

Second, as we read earlier, Isaiah clearly has worship in view when he declares that God desires the eunuchs who keep His Sabbaths to draw near. It specifically mentions their offerings being accepted on His altar and that God will make them joyful in His house of prayer for all peoples. It seems very clear from Isaiah 56, in addition to other passages throughout Scripture, that God's heart is for the eunuchs to worship Him and be blessed in His presence.

So with all that considered, there is one other option for understanding the phrase, "assembly of YHWH," in Deuteronomy 23. And this option, we think, makes the most sense out of all of them.

The term "assembly"—*kehal*—is used *in a specific way* in a number of places throughout Scripture, and these occurrences might shed light onto what Deuteronomy 23 is speaking of.

Biblical scholar, Dr. Jeffrey H. Tigay, writes:

Sometimes it [*kehal*] is used in a very broad sense meaning simply "all Israelites." But it also refers to the **national governing assembly of the Israelites**, that is, the entire people, or all the adult males, meeting in plenary session, and perhaps sometimes **to their representatives acting as an executive committee**. This Assembly convenes to conduct public business such as war, crowning a

king, adjudicating legal cases, distributing land, and worship.

-Jeffrey H. Tigay, *"The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy,"* p. 210

In other words, *kehal* is sometimes used to refer to a "governing assembly" of elders within the community of Israel. This governing body of leaders is given executive powers and the authority to make important decisions for the nation. Here are some examples:

- In Numbers 16:3, an "assembly" of Israelite leaders confronted Moses and Aaron.
- In Judges 21:5, 8, the "assembly" is made up of arms-bearing adult males.
- In 1 Kings 12:3, an "assembly" of Israel comes before Rehoboam to choose a king.
- In Jeremiah 26:17; Ezekiel 16:40; 23:45-47, an "assembly" serves as judges or adjudicators.
- In Micah 2:5, lots are cast in the "assembly of the Lord" for acquiring property.

Dr. Tigay also notes that *kehal* is synonymous with the Hebrew word *edah*, "community." Like *Kahal*, while *edah* sometimes can refer to the entire nation, it's also used to refer to "tribal leaders acting as an executive on behalf of the nation" (p. 210). Here are some examples:

- In Exodus 12:3, 21, the "community" of elders act as executive.
- In Numbers 27:2; 35:12, 24-25, the "community" of elders serves in judiciary matters.
- In Numbers 32:2, the "community" of elders functions in allocating land.
- In 1 Kings 12:20 and 2 Chronicles 23:2-3, a "community" of elders elects and crowns a king.

With all that said, we would propose that the proper understanding of the phrase, "assembly of YHWH," in Deuteronomy 23, is that it refers to a governing assembly of elders who are given authority to make governmental decisions for the nation of Israel. Therefore, the laws in Deuteronomy 23 regarding exclusion from the assembly are concerning *that* ruling body of elders.

In summary, Deuteronomy 23 does not exclude members of the mentioned groups from being part of God's people nor from being able to assemble together to worship God.

But that still leaves us with a question: Why are these specific people forbidden from becoming members of this governing body of leadership in Israel? Well, there are logical reasons for this.

Since this governing assembly of elders had the important task of making decisions in the best interests of the nation, in addition to upholding godly values and fostering a stable society, we would expect the qualifications for becoming members of this assembly to have been very strict. Let's go through each of these groups and examine why they would have been excluded.

Deuteronomy 23:1

[No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord \[YHWH\].](#)

Why would eunuchs be excluded from this governing assembly? A couple of reasons. First, in the ancient near east, ritual self-castration often occurred as part of pagan cult practices. Some pagan nations also used castration as a form of punishment as we read in what are known as the Middle Assyrian Laws, for instance. So Deuteronomy may exclude eunuchs from the governing assembly on the basis of the close association of castration with paganism.

Secondly, eunuchs are unable to have children; thus, logically, they wouldn't have much incentive to

govern with a concern for future generations. Therefore, it would be imprudent and shortsighted to permit eunuchs to become members of this governing assembly in Israel.

Let's move on to the next group:

Deuteronomy 23:2

[No one born of a forbidden union may enter the assembly of the Lord \[YHWH\].](#)

As we discussed earlier, this would refer to those who were conceived through cult prostitution, adultery, or incest. The idea here is that those who serve within this governing body of rulers in Israel ought to come from stable homes since the hope is that their decisions would foster a moral and spiritually healthy society.

Let's move on to the next group:

Deuteronomy 23:3

[No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord \[YHWH\].](#)

In this case, the passage actually goes on to give us the reason Ammonites and Moabites were excluded—that is, because of their lack of hospitality and their hostility toward Israel when Israel passed by their territory:

Deuteronomy 23:4

[Because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.](#)

Since Ammonites and Moabites have proven themselves to be enemies of Israel, it could reasonably be said that they wouldn't govern with Israel's best interests in mind. Thus, they are forever prohibited from serving in Israel's governing assembly of leaders.

Finally, Edomites and Egyptians are excluded from the assembly of YHWH, but not forever. The grandchildren of Edomites who have joined Israel are permitted on the basis of family ties going all the way back to Esau. The grandchildren of Egyptians who have joined Israel are permitted on the basis of the fact that Israel was a sojourner in their land. That is, Egypt provided a haven for Israel during a time of famine in Joseph's day:

Deuteronomy 23:7-8

[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 \[YHWH\].](#)

In summary, the interpretation we've proposed—that the “assembly of YHWH” refers to a governing body of elders—seems to make the most sense in light of all the data.

There is a difficulty with this interpretation, however. For instance, the objection might be raised that David was a descendant of Ruth, a Moabite. And David, of course, governed Israel as king. But wouldn't David be excluded from such an office according to the laws of Deuteronomy 23? Wouldn't this therefore be a contradiction in Scripture?

There are a few ways we might answer this. But first, this objection could be raised with regard to *any* interpretation you choose. If the “assembly of YHWH” is the general people of Israel or even a worship community within Israel, obviously King David poses a problem to both of those options.

So how is this issue reconciled? One option is simply that the commandment was disobeyed or disregarded in David’s case. Thus, there’s no contradiction or discrepancy in Scripture. David was simply permitted to become King of Israel *in spite of* the commandment in Deuteronomy 23.

The problem with this view is that it entails that God blessed David’s kingship even though it was in violation of His own law.

A possible response to that point is that God works through imperfect people in imperfect situations all the time. David also violated other laws in the Torah, but God still blessed him and used him as king.

For instance, Deuteronomy 17:17 says kings are not to acquire many wives, which, as we explain in our teaching, “[Does the Bible Endorse Polygamy](#),” is a prohibition against acquiring more than one wife. As we know, David, as king, violated this commandment. But God still used David and blessed Him in his position as king *in spite of* the qualifications for kings that are given in Deuteronomy 17:17.

So that’s one way we can reconcile this issue.

Another way we might address this objection is to say that, in the Ancient Near East, nationality was decided by fatherhood. Therefore, any of Ruth’s descendants would have been considered Israelites. Therefore, through patrilineal descent, David was legally considered an Israelite and therefore would have met the qualifications of Deuteronomy 23.

Finally, another option would be to say that kingship is a distinct office that is completely separate from the “assembly of YHWH” discussed in Deuteronomy 23, and therefore the standards given in that passage wouldn’t apply to David.

Each of those options could work. In either case, this objection is certainly not insurmountable but has a few possible resolutions.

Another potential difficulty with our interpretation is found in the book of Nehemiah in which this law is referenced. It seems that the post-exilic community in Ezra-Nehemiah interpreted this “assembly” in Deuteronomy 23 as a reference to the people of Israel in a broader sense, and this is used as a basis for excluding all foreigners from Israel:

Nehemiah 13:1-3

On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. And in it was found written **that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God**, for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. As soon as the people heard the law, **they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent**.

Does this passage shed light on the actual meaning of the phrase, “assembly of YHWH”? Aside from the fact that this passage says *kehal elohim*—assembly of God—instead of assembly of YHWH, this appears to be a direct reference to Deuteronomy 23. Thus, one could easily make the argument that this

passage refutes everything we've said about this phrase referring to a ruling body of elders. That is to say, this passage seems to define the phrase for us as the people of Israel in general.

However, the idea that the phrase refers to the people of Israel generally doesn't seem to work for *all the reasons* we've already covered. So how do we make sense of this?

The key to reconciling this apparent conflict is to try to understand the unique situation in which the post-exilic Israelite community found themselves. They were trying to rebuild the nation after returning from a seventy-year-long exile. The leadership had the best intentions to try to establish the nation on a strong foundation of faith and to cultivate a pure and holy people in accordance with God's Word.

This noble pursuit led to some difficult reforms, including the leadership issuing a decree requiring all Israelite men who had married foreign wives to divorce them and send them away—along with their children (Ezra 10:3)! Moreover, the foreigners who had come out of the exile with Israel likewise were to be removed (Nehemiah 13:3).

By the way, it's worth mentioning that God never told Israel to do any of this. The religious leaders made these decisions based on their interpretation and application of the Torah. And scholars are actually divided on whether or not these decisions were in accordance with God's will.

Some argue that these foreigners must have held to pagan beliefs and practices. Therefore, these deportations were difficult but necessary reforms that had to be applied temporarily in order for Israel to rebuild and thrive, eventually enabling them to be a light to the nations.

Others argue that the author of Ezra-Nehemiah intends for us to see that the post-exilic leaders made the wrong decisions here, and there's actually good arguments to support this. The most obvious reason is that their decisions seem to go directly against the heart of the Torah and the Abrahamic promise to bless the nations. The decree to send all the wives and children away is particularly disturbing, and some would argue that it does not reflect the character of God. But not only that, the religious leaders' decisions seem to be in direct conflict with the very prophecies about what was supposed to happen when Israel returned from Babylonian exile, which included peoples from the nations coming to worship God in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 3:17; Isaiah 2; Zechariah 8:20-23).

Did the religious leaders in Ezra-Nehemiah do the right thing in issuing their divorce decree and excluding foreigners from the community? That question is beyond the scope of this teaching. But whether right or wrong, it's clear that in the minds of these religious leaders, the foreigners posed a threat to the community's goal of rebuilding the nation on a strong foundation of faith and obedience. And in their minds, it wasn't a matter of disliking certain ethnicities but about potential spiritual corruption. The last thing these religious leaders wanted was for the nation to be influenced by the pagan beliefs of other nations and to plunge Israel into yet another exile.

So these leaders had some serious concerns, and they thought that the best thing to do was to separate the foreigners from Israel. But they needed to support this decision biblically. So when it came to the expulsion of foreigners, they appealed to Deuteronomy 23:3 as the legal basis for their decision.

However, this does *not* entail that their application of Deuteronomy 23:3 was the original intention or meaning of the law.

What do we mean? To put it simply, Nehemiah and the other leaders saw a need to take the principle

given in Deuteronomy 23, which was originally applied only to the ruling assembly of elders, and apply it to the whole nation.

Using some creative exegesis, the post-exilic community appropriated the phrase “assembly of YHWH” in Deuteronomy 23 for themselves. The “Ammonites and Moabites” mentioned in Deuteronomy 23 became representative of foreigners in general, particularly the foreigners that the post-exilic community saw as a threat to their goals. So the laws in Deuteronomy were essentially reinterpreted to fit the situation in Ezra-Nehemiah.

This reinterpretation of commandments to make them apply to different situations is actually not uncommon in Scripture. For example, you sometimes see the apostles extending certain Torah commandments beyond their original intent and meaning to support a theological point or teaching.

Here’s an example of Paul deriving a principle from a law beyond what is literally stated:

1 Timothy 5:17-18

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.”

“You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain” is from Deuteronomy 25:4. The literal meaning obviously concerns the humane treatment of a working animal. While muzzling an ox might save a little bit of grain, it’s cruel to prevent the animal from eating while it works for you. Furthermore, the animal would be able to work more effectively if it was able to eat while working.

Paul takes this commandment beyond its literal meaning and applies it to elders who labor in preaching and teaching. The idea is that ministers ought to be supported by the community, enabling them to devote their full time and energy to serve the community. Indeed, just like we benefit from the work of the ox, the community benefits from the work of ministers. Therefore, it’s in the community’s best interests to support their ministers.

Another example of this can be found in 1 Corinthians 9:13-14.

1 Corinthians 9:13-14

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.

Here Paul appeals to the tithe that was to be given to the Levites as his basis for teaching that ministers ought to be supported by the believing community. Obviously, the original tithing laws specifically applied to those who served in the temple, but the principle of those laws was taken beyond the original intent and applied to ministers of the gospel.

In the same way, Nehemiah and the other leaders saw fit to extend Deuteronomy 23 beyond its literal meaning and applied it to their situation. So their use of this law does not necessarily give us insight into how the phrase “assembly of YHWH,” *as Moses intended it*, ought to be understood.

So, with all that said, it might be asked, “What do these laws mean for us today?”

We would suggest that these laws are to be applied only within the context of theocratic Israel. As we

argue, the “assembly of YHWH” literally refers to a ruling body of elders chosen to assist Moses in leading the nation. That is to say, the elements and framework that would be necessary to properly observe these laws don’t exist in our current situation.

However, while we’re not in a context in which these commandants can literally apply to us, this passage can perhaps apply to us in principle in some ways. For instance, in the western world, we have the ability to vote for our governmental leadership. Since these laws concern qualifications for leaders, we would do well to consider the principles this passage teaches us when voting, for example. That is to say, we wouldn’t want to vote for those who have a history of corruption or whose policies wouldn’t nurture a moral and stable society. That, after all, was the reasoning for excluding certain people from the assembly of YHWH.

We can also apply these principles in a congregational setting. According to the apostles, congregational leaders are to be above reproach and not lovers of money. They are to have stable families. They are to be concerned with the needs of their community, etc.

If a congregational leader is dishonest or shows consistent patterns of shady behavior, that person needs to be held accountable and probably removed from leadership for the sake of the body. Just as the governing assembly of leaders in Deuteronomy 23 was held to a higher standard, congregational leaders ought to also be held to a higher standard.

Ultimately that’s what Deuteronomy 23:1-8 is teaching us. Our civil and spiritual leadership—which, overlapped in ancient Israel—ought to be held to a higher standard. They ought to have the community’s best interests in mind as they make important decisions. They ought to be concerned with fostering a healthy and moral society.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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