119 MINISTRIES

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Hair, Beards, and Markings in Ancient Mourning Practices (Leviticus 19:27-28)

In Leviticus 19:27-28, we encounter a set of unique commandments given by YHWH to his people:

Leviticus 19:27-28

> You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD [YHWH].

This passage commands us to refrain from certain physical alterations: shaving parts of the head, altering the beard, cutting the flesh, and marking the skin.

But what exactly is being forbidden here, and why? Are these commands still relevant today?

To answer these questions, we need to dig into the immediate context, the broader cultural background, and related biblical passages to better understand the purpose of these prohibitions.

The text in Leviticus 19:27-28 presents four distinct prohibitions:

- Rounding off the hair on the temples
- Marring the edges of the beard
- Making cuts on the body for the dead
- Tattooing or inscribing marks on the flesh

What do these prohibitions have in common?

The key to understanding these commands lies in their connection to mourning rituals and pagan practices. All of these practices were pagan mourning rituals for the dead.

YHWH commands us to be a set apart people and not to adopt the mourning and worship customs of surrounding nations.

As the scholar Jay Sklar observes:

> *"Israelites were certainly allowed to mourn (Lev 21:1-4) and did so in various ways, including weeping (Get 23:2), wearing sackcloth (Gen 37:34), and tearing their clothes (Gen 37:34; Josh 7:6). But the Israelites were to avoid certain mourning practices common among the nations in order to set themselves apart."*
>
> Jay Sklar, Leviticus, ZECOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 540

So, these particular restrictions apply only within the context of mourning for the dead. More on that later.

First, let's discuss these commandments in more detail.

The first commandment is to avoid "rounding off the hair on your temples."

Some interpret this as a prohibition against cutting one's hair into certain styles, but is that the correct understanding?

The Meaning of *Pe'ah* (Corners)

The Hebrew word used here is *pe'ah*, often translated as "corner" or "edge."

However, in its broader biblical usage, *pe'ah* simply refers to the "side" or "border" of something. For example:

Exodus 26:20

> And for the second side of the tabernacle, on the north side [*pe'ah*], twenty boards.

Ezekiel 47:20

> The west side [*pe'ah*] shall be the Great Sea…

In Leviticus 19:27, "rounding the *pe'ah*" of the head likely means trimming or shaping the sides of the hair, specifically around the temples.

In ancient times, shaving or rounding the edges of one's hair was often part of mourning rites or pagan worship. The Torah repeatedly instructs us to refrain from adopting the religious practices of surrounding nations.

This command is repeated in Deuteronomy 14:1, where YHWH states, "You shall not cut yourselves nor shall you place baldness between your eyes for the dead."

Since there is typically no hair "between the eyes," this phrase is generally understood to refer to the area at the front of the head, just above the eyes. With this understanding, two important insights emerge from this passage:

The command is not necessarily about a specific hairstyle, such as a "bowl-cut." Rather, it forbids creating bald spots anywhere along the edges of the head.

The context of this prohibition is clearly related to mourning practices. Specifically, it is prohibited to make bald spots on the head as an act of grief "for the dead."

In the ancient Near East, it was common for grieving relatives to express their sorrow by cutting their skin until they bled and shaving parts of their head. These practices were often part of pagan mourning rituals, which Israel was commanded to avoid as they demonstrated their unique faith in YHWH.

We are to place our faith in YHWH even in the face of loss and death, rather than adopting superstitious customs of other nations.

The second commandment prohibits "marring the edges of your beard" in the context of mourning for the dead.

What does it mean to "mar" or "destroy" the beard?

In the ancient Near East, the beard was a symbol of dignity, honor, and maturity. Israelite men typically grew full beards as a natural part of their appearance. In some cultures, however, shaving or altering the beard was associated with mourning rituals or allegiance to foreign gods. To "mar" the beard likely means to shave or cut it in a way that would visibly display grief, humiliation, or pagan allegiance.

As Sklar writes:

> *Shaving the beard completely is not in view, in which case "edge of" would be unnecessary (cf. Lev 14:9); it must therefore refer to disfiguring the beard in a certain way.*
>
> —Jay Sklar, Leviticus, ZECOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 539n135

As with the temples of the head, the beard was also sometimes shaved as an expression of sorrow or mourning, which is the context of the restriction here in Leviticus 19.

For example, in Jeremiah 41:5, we read of men who had shaved their beards and torn their clothes as a sign of grief over the destruction of the temple. Similarly, the context of Leviticus 19:27 and Deuteronomy 14:1 implies that such shaving or marring was associated with pagan mourning rites.

The command to refrain from "marring" the beard, therefore, is not necessarily a general prohibition against trimming, but rather a specific instruction to avoid pagan mourning customs that dishonor God by symbolizing despair or allegiance to false gods.

The third prohibition forbids making cuts on the body "for the dead."

In many ancient cultures, people would cut or pierce their skin as an extreme expression of grief for the dead, hoping to communicate their anguish to the gods or the spirits of the deceased. This practice was not just a social custom; it was rooted in superstitions and beliefs about appeasing the dead.
1 Kings 18:28 describes the prophets of Baal who cut themselves during a ritual to appeal to their god. This vivid example shows the connection between self-mutilation and pagan worship, emphasizing the lengths people went to in hopes of gaining divine favor or expressing sorrow.

Numerous passages show that making cuts on the body was an ancient mourning ritual (Deuteronomy 14:1; Jeremiah 16:6; 41:5; 47:5; 48:37).

The fourth prohibition is against tattooing or marking the skin. But what kind of markings are forbidden, and why?

The mention of tattooing in connection with mourning is, intriguingly, the least developed prohibition among those listed in Leviticus 19:28. Unlike the other commands, tattooing is referenced only once here and is not directly mentioned elsewhere in the TANAKH as a specific mourning practice. Later in Scripture, however, we do see references to marking the flesh in a different context.

For example, Isaiah 44:5 describes a person inscribing on their hand as an act of dedication to YHWH, signifying loyalty and belonging. But in contrast to Leviticus 19:28, this act is not related to mourning—it is an expression of devotion. This distinction reinforces the idea that the prohibition in Leviticus is specific to practices tied to pagan mourning and idolatry, rather than forbidding all forms of marking the skin. (Jay Sklar, Leviticus, ZECOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 540)

A blatantly consistent theme throughout these commands is the prohibition against adopting pagan mourning practices. Mourning customs in the ancient world were often extreme displays of anguish, involving actions like shaving, cutting, and tattooing. These practices displayed sorrow, but they also symbolized allegiance to superstitions or false gods who supposedly had power over life and death.

YHWH teaches his people to have a different perspective. Death is not to be feared as a mysterious force ruled by other gods; YHWH is sovereign over life and death. For example:

Leviticus 21: Priests are specifically instructed to avoid contact with the dead and are forbidden from engaging in these mourning practices.

Ezekiel 24: The prophet is told not to mourn in the traditional manner after his wife's death, symbolizing that God's people are not to mourn as the nations do.

While the Torah prohibits certain practices related to mourning, we know that in contexts not involving mourning, they are permitted.

For example:

Nazirite Vow (Numbers 6): The Nazirite vow forbids shaving, but at the conclusion of the vow, the individual shaves as part of the purification ritual.

Ritual Cleansing (Leviticus 14:9): A person with leprosy who is declared clean shaves all their hair, including the beard and eyebrows, as part of the purification process.

Consecration of the Levites (Numbers 8:7): The Levites are instructed to shave as part of their consecration, showing that shaving is not inherently sinful.

To summarize, Leviticus 19:27-28, Leviticus 21:4-5, and Deuteronomy 14:1-2 collectively prohibit four specific mourning practices that were common in ancient cultures.

These are:

- Rounding off the hair on the temples as a sign of mourning
- Shaving or marring the beard as an expression of grief

- Cutting the skin as a ritual act of mourning
- Marking or tattooing the skin as a mourning custom

These prohibitions emphasize our call to be distinct from surrounding nations, especially in our expressions of grief and devotion. By refraining from these culturally rooted practices, Israel was reminded to place their trust and hope in YHWH, even in times of loss, rather than relying on superstitious or pagan rituals. We hope that this study has blessed you. And 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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