

## Bible Study # 39 Exodus 23.1–19 03–23–2021

In legal cases no slander was permitted, whether only a single person was involved or many. Nor should one join oneself with a wicked man, (lit. ‘you shall not set your hand with a wicked man’). The intention of such a relationship was that the person would become ‘a malicious witness’.

‘Malicious’ translates a Hebrew word that denotes ‘violence’, almost always sinful violence. The impact of its use is to highlight the fact that no testimony was permissible that would do serious harm to the other person. Basically, the same prohibition occurs in Deuteronomy 19:16-19 and Psalm 35:11.

There was always the danger that a witness would side with the vast majority (‘the many’, ‘the crowd’). The double mention of this danger (‘do not fall with the many, ‘siding with the crowd’) points to the danger of going with the majority. That could easily result in ‘tilting’ the case in a way that distorted the legal process.

The prohibition of showing favor to a poor man in a law case might seem odd, as we would expect it to apply to a rich man. However, the point is that, whatever the social standing of anyone, the law was to be administered fairly.

With regard to animals that were wandering off or collapsing under a heavy load, the relationship of the one helping the owner of those donkeys was not to be decisive when assistance was needed. Even if they belonged to someone who was an enemy (v. 4), or who showed animosity (v. 5), help was to be given.

The direction in both cases is stated in an emphatic way: ‘Be sure to take it back’, and ‘be sure you help him’. These regulations are amplified and extended in Deuteronomy 22:1-4.

The case of a poor man is taken up again, this time by the instruction that there must be no perversion of justice (Heb. lit. ‘you shall not turn aside justice’). The same idiom is also found in Deuteronomy 16:19, 24:17, 27:19, and 1 Samuel 8:3. A poor man must neither be favored (v. 3) nor prevented from obtaining justice (v. 6). One way in which justice would be denied was by stating what was not true.

Hence verse 7 directs that one must stay far off from lying, a direction that could apply to anyone involved in a legal case, even a defendant himself. The worst possible case of lying is when someone does so with the result that an innocent or honest person is put to death.

The case of the death of Naboth is a notable example from the biblical text of violation of this principle (1 Kings 21:8-13). Once again (cf. 22:22-24), it is God Himself who will dispense justice (‘I will not acquit the guilty’).

In addition to the aspects of the administration of justice already mentioned, bribery was not to have any place in the life of God’s people. This was because they were expected to pattern themselves on God Himself, who was not partial and who took no bribes (Deut. 10:17). The reasons given for this instruction are that a bribe blinds those who are clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

In Deuteronomy 16:19-20, the same injunctions of not perverting the cause of justice (v. 6) and not taking bribes (v. 8) occur in almost identical language. The case of Samuel shows us both faithful adherence by him of the principles set out here and the abuse of them by his sons (1 Sam. 8:3).

This section of the text concludes by affirming again the motivating principle behind observance of these laws. The Israelites’ own experience in Egypt had to compel them to act fairly to aliens in their midst. The wording in this verse differs slightly from that in 22:21 as it speaks of knowing how it feels to be an alien, (lit.

‘you know the soul [or, life] of the stranger’). This expression points to the understanding that the Israelites had of the limitations placed upon aliens.

The law of the Sabbath (20:8-11) is explained in these verses and the principle behind it is extended to include the sabbatical year. Fields, vineyards, and olive orchards were all embraced in the application of the rule regarding rest. Obligation to God and humanitarian concerns were included in observance of the sabbatical year.

The sabbatical principle in regard to land was that after six years of cropping it was left fallow in the seventh year. This was not just to allow the land to rejuvenate but also so that the poor among the people could eat from the produce of that year, and what they left could provide fodder for beasts. The same principle applied to vineyards and olive orchards. How this principle worked out in practice is unclear.

There could have been a nationwide observance of it every seventh year, but this would mean the poor had very little food in other years. Most probably, individual farmers had the right to set their own sabbatical year, and so at all times there would have been some fallow ground about, on which the poor could rely.

Immediately following the regulation concerning the sabbatical year, the law relating to the weekly sabbath is given, which in no way could be neglected. Rather, the Fourth Word (20:8-11) is repeated as it was a sabbath to the Lord (31:15). The emphasis is placed on the need for oxen and donkeys to rest, and also that any slave born in the household (lit. ‘son of your maidservant’) and any alien could be refreshed by a sabbatical rest.

The verb for ‘refresh’ is very rare, only occurring here and in Exodus 31:17 and 2 Samuel 16:14. It appears to be a verb made up from a word, which among other meanings can indicate ‘breath’ or ‘life’.

This section closes with an instruction to observe carefully all that the Lord had told the people to do, and a warning not to recite the names of other gods. Everything was important, and the people were encouraged to take good care that they kept what was required. The verb used here is often employed in contexts in which giving careful attention to the obligations of the covenant is in view.

The gods of the peoples they were going to meet in Canaan were lifeless idols (see the description of them in Psalm 115:4-7), and not even mention of them was allowed.

These verses contain the preliminary reference to the three annual pilgrimage festivals, with later passages giving more detailed information about them (see Exod. 34:18-26; Lev. 23:4-44; Num. 28:16-29:40; Deut. 16:1-17). The account here is preliminary since more detailed specification would only be necessary after Israel was established in Canaan.

In the first case (the Feast of Unleavened Bread), the actual month is mentioned in which the festival took place. Here, the connection with the exodus is only specified in the first case (v. 15), later passages make the connection for the other two feasts (Deut. 16:12 and Lev. 23:43 respectively). These annual pilgrimages were meant to be joyous occasions (Ps. 42:4) as the tribes went up ‘to praise the name of the Lord’ (Ps. 122:4).

Two significant words occur in the MT of this verse. The instruction is directed to every individual (‘you’, s. m.) in Israel that three times every year they are to celebrate a festival to the Lord (‘to me’). The verb indicating celebrating a festival has a corresponding Arabic noun (hajj) used currently in English to denote the pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca.

The first of the feasts, that of Unleavened Bread, has already been noted in 12:14-20. It involved using only unleavened bread for seven days, with the festival taking place in the month of Abib, the month when Israel left Egypt. In a modern calendar this is from about mid-March to mid-April.

The specification, 'No one shall appear before me empty', states an important principle. In coming before God no one was to come empty-handed. This gift was an acknowledgement of the source of all bounty and of the Lord's liberality to his redeemed people. The same instruction is repeated in Deuteronomy 16:16-17.

Mention is made (v.17) for the first time of two further festivals. The first, the Feast of Harvest, that is called the Feast of Weeks in 34:22, consisted of presentation of the first fruits of crops that had been sown in the fields. Further details about it are given in Leviticus 23:15-22 and Deuteronomy 16:9-12.

It was to be celebrated fifty days from the opening of the barley harvest, and therefore, under the influence of the Septuagint, it became known as Pentecost (Gk. word means 'fifty'). The second festival is the Feast of Ingathering that marked the end of the agricultural year. Here, and in Exodus 34:22, the same name is given to this festival, whereas in Leviticus 23:34 and Deuteronomy 16:13, 16 it is called the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Hebrew word for 'ingathering' only occurs three times in the Old Testament, two of them in the list of religious festivals (Exod. 23:16 and 34:22). However, it occurs in an important extra-biblical text, the Geza calendar, while the verb 'to gather' is used for the harvesting of summer fruit, grapes and olives (Lev. 25:3; Deut. 28:38; Jer. 40:10, 12).

The instruction of v. 14 is repeated in v. 17 with some variation and additional information. Three times a year every male was called upon to present himself at the sanctuary before 'the Sovereign Lord' (niv). This is the way chosen by the NIV translators to render the Hebrew 'âdon yhwah, whereas the ESV has 'the Lord God'.

Presumably, as seen in 1 Samuel 1:1-8, this instruction to appear three times annually before the Lord meant that whole families were to participate in these journeys.

While there is some ambiguity about this regulation, the best interpretation is that it refers to the Passover offering and prohibits killing the lamb if there was still leaven in the house. Alternatively, it could refer to using blood as an ingredient in bread. Clearly, the prohibition was important since it is repeated in 34:25.

The second prohibition in this verse concerns keeping the fat of an animal overnight, thus endorsing a principle rather like not retaining manna overnight except for that gathered for the Sabbath (see 16:4-5, 17-30). The principle is given fuller expression in Leviticus 3:16-17 that indicates that the fat was to be burnt on the altar, for 'all the fat is the Lord's'.

This meant that the Lord's offering had to be made, not even retained for use the following morning.

The first fruits have already been referred to in verse 16 in relation to the Feast of Harvest. The instruction to Israel was to bring 'the first', i.e. 'the best', of the first fruits to 'the house of the Lord your God'.

No such 'house' existed at that time, but this, and a similar instruction in Deuteronomy 23:18, must be pointing ahead to the tent and temple. The term 'house' is used in relation to both

The reference to cooking a kid in its mother's milk appears also in Exodus 34:26 and Deuteronomy 14:21b. There does not seem to be anything intrinsically wrong with the practice, but rather it was a heathen practice that had to be avoided. Outside the Bible the nearest parallel is in a text from Ugarit/Ras Shamra in northern Syria that contains the line: 'cook the kid in milk, the lamb in butter'.

However, this Ugaritic text is problematical and should not be used to come to any definitive understanding of this verse. It looks as if the Canaanites did practise a ritual that was forbidden for the Israelites. Possibly it involved a fertility rite in which the milk in which the kid was cooked was then sprinkled on the fields.

This verse remains relevant for Orthodox Judaism to this day as it provides the rationale for not eating meat and milk products at the same time. To have a kosher kitchen, you must have separate cooking utensils for meat and milk.

We will continue by studying Exodus 23.20–33.