

MARRIAGE, ADULTERY, AND SEXUAL PURITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Basic Commandment

In Exodus 20.14 God commands Israel, “You shall not commit adultery.”¹ The restatement—“And you shall not commit adultery”—is made in Deuteronomy 5.18. This is the seventh of ten commandments and is the law of sexual and social purity. The Hebrew word translated “commit adultery” is *na’aph*. The statute indicates and prohibits the violation of contractual or covenantal union (i.e., betrothal, marriage) between male and female usually because of sexual intercourse with someone else. And there is a strong female orientation to Mosaic stipulations regarding adultery. The word often is used metaphorically, especially by Hebrew prophets, to highlight and indict Israel’s frequent violation of the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20.3; Deuteronomy 5.7).

Specific Laws

God in his wisdom provided Adam, the man, with “a helper fit for him” and thereby created the sacred union between a man and a woman. Adam recognized the benefit of the Lord’s gracious gift and said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Later on, Adam “called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.” In spite of their fall due to violation of God’s prohibition against partaking of the fruit of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” in the midst of the garden of Eden, Adam recognized the blessing of his union with Eve his wife. It

¹English translations of scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

was true then, and it is true now that “a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis, chapters 2 and 3).

For the rabbis, it was an important religious duty to marry, to have children, and to nurture the family in the ways of the Lord God (Genesis 1.28ff.). In the Talmud, early marriage was stressed. The age of eighteen was suggested for the male. For the female, the father was to find her a husband early. The exhortation in Leviticus 19.29–“Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute”—was seen as referring to the man who delayed to arrange marriage for his daughter while she was young.

Under the Law of Moses, appropriate restrictions were placed on marriage primarily to maintain the holiness and the sanctity of the husband-wife union and to distinguish the practices of the Israelites from that of other peoples. Incestuous practices were forbidden. “None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 18.6). “‘Uncovering nakedness’ is a Hebrew idiom for sexual intercourse (compare Ezekiel 16.36; 23.18). Although the term is general, the passage is primarily interested in [prohibiting] marriages between individuals of close kin.”²

For example, sexual union between a male Israelite and each of the following was a violation of the Law.

Mother (Leviticus 18.7, 8; Deuteronomy 22.30; 27.20). Union with one’s mother constituted an “uncovering” of the father’s nakedness, and, in so doing, sin against him. Punishment was the death of the two guilty parties (see Leviticus 20.11).

²Clyde M. Woods, *People’s Old Testament Notes: Volume 1, Genesis-Exodus* (Henderson, TN: Woods Publications, 1972), 44.

Sister (Leviticus 18.9, 11; Deuteronomy 27.22). By taking his sister, a man “uncovered” his parents. For this sin, both were to be expelled from Israel (see Leviticus 20.17).

Grand-daughter (Leviticus 18.10). By committing this, a man would be sinning against himself.

Aunt (Leviticus 18.12-14). If the aunt were the immediate sister of a man’s mother or father, the incest would reflect on them. But if she were an uncle’s wife, then it would reflect on the uncle. In either case, the penalty for such was dying without children (see Leviticus 20.20).

Daughter-in-law (Leviticus 18.15). This is punishable by death because of “confusion” (KJV) or “perversion” that occurs (Leviticus 20.12). Such an act would cause a man to be the father of his own grandchild.

Sister-in-law (Leviticus 18.16). This union was an unlawful one except in the situation where the brother died childless. In such a circumstance, it was a duty or obligation, according to the Law, “to take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her” (Deuteronomy 25.5).³ But if the brother were alive, it was fitting that those who broke this statute would die childless (see Leviticus 20.20).

Three-way marriages (Leviticus 18.17-18; Deuteronomy 27.23). Marrying both a woman and her daughter would be the equivalent of marriage to a mother-in-law; similarly, a woman and her granddaughter, marriage to a grandmother-in-law; and, a woman and her sister, marriage to a sister-in-law. Even though polygamy was permitted under the Law, such “wickedness” (KJV) or

³See Woods, *People’s Old Testament Notes: Volume 2, Leviticus-Numbers-Deuteronomy* (Henderson, TN: Woods Publications, 1974), 269-270.

“perversion” would bring about confusion. The penalty was death, as the offenders were to “be burned with fire” (Leviticus 20.14).⁴

Unclean woman (Leviticus 18.19). For “uncovering the fountain of her blood” by engaging in sexual intercourse while the woman was having her menstrual period, both of the parties were to be “cut off” or expelled from the people of Israel (Leviticus 20.18).

With the guidelines and restrictions indicated above, the Lord God restrained the marriages or unions of ancient Israel in order to exalt his people among the nations as a holy and pure society.

Other limits to and special laws for marriage were given by God to the Israelites. For instance, because the tribe of Levitical priests were required to maintain the highest standard of holiness, the priest was instructed to “take a wife in her virginity . . . of his own people” and forbidden to marry “a widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, or a prostitute” so as not to “profane his offspring among his people” (Leviticus 21.13-15). And, if any daughter of a priest defiled herself by prostitution, she was to be burned with fire to preserve his purity (i.e., “if she profanes herself by whoring, [she] profanes her father”; Leviticus 21.9).

Another explicit restriction denied intermarriage between the people of Israel and other nations. Most of the nations were polytheistic, so intermarriage with these peoples would cause Israel to serve their gods (Deuteronomy 7.3-4). A specific example occurred at Shittim where Israel “began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of

⁴Woods, *ibid.*, 51 clarifies, “Capital punishment in these cases was probably by stoning (compare verse 2) with the corpses then being burned (compare Joshua 7.15, 25).” But some commentators feel the burning with fire was not literally burning the guilty alive but rather a type of branding or marking with a hot iron.

their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods” (Numbers 25.1ff.). Although on one occasion Midianite women were kept for matrimony, these were virgins who were void of their people’s seed or influence (Numbers 31.18). Other laws for purification and conversion of a captive woman to Jewish ways are listed in Deuteronomy 21.10-14.

Sodomy, homosexuality, and bestiality all were condemned in biblical law, and such perverse and unnatural behavior was punishable by death (i.e., a capital offense; Exodus 22.19; Leviticus 18.22-24; 20.15, 16; Deuteronomy 23.17; 27.21). By these aberrant sexual acts, abhorrent to the Lord God, the Israelites would make themselves unclean and no different from the ungodly nations. “For by all these,” the Lord told Moses, “the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants” (Leviticus 18.24-25; cf. verses 26-30).

When a man took a wife in ancient Israel, he was free from military duty and any other public service for an entire year “to be happy with his wife” (Deuteronomy 20.7; 24.5). This excuse was used by one invitee to dismiss himself from the great banquet in God’s kingdom (Luke 14.20). But under the Mosaic covenant, this was an authentic reason. If, however, after taking a wife, the man believed that she was not a virgin, the parents of the woman were to present her before the elders of the city. If it were determined that she was guilty and not a virgin, she was stoned to death. But if it were decided that she was innocent of any wrongdoing, her husband, because he brought an evil name on a virgin of the people of Israel, had to pay a fine of one hundred shekels of silver,⁵ was whipped, and was forced to keep the woman as his wife all his life (Deuteronomy 22.13-21).

⁵This sum was given to the woman’s father as compensation.

As noted above, monogamy (i.e., the marriage of one man and one woman) for life was God's intention for humans from the beginning. The Law of Moses, though, permitted divorce because of the hardness or stubbornness of the people's hearts (Deuteronomy 24.1-4; Matthew 19.8-9). While the cause for divorce ("some indecency"; literally, "nakedness of a thing") was interpreted differently by later schools of thought among Jews (e.g., the strict view of Shammai versus the more lenient view of Hillel), the statute from Moses did prescribe "a certificate of divorce" to protect the woman, and the man could never "take her again to be his wife" which would constitute "an abomination before the Lord" that would "bring sin upon the land."⁶

As with divorce, polygamy was not the ideal situation, but it was permitted and regulated under Moses. George Foot Moore states, "Polygamy was legitimate under Mosaic law, not only with women of the husband's status, but with bondwomen, and the rabbinical law corresponds."⁷ Before the giving of the Law, though, the historical record shows that the Hebrew patriarchs practiced polygamy as well. Lamech, a killer and the son of a murderer (i.e., Cain), was the first to practice polygamy (Genesis 4.9, 19, 23-24). Abraham had Hagar, his Egyptian bondwoman, in addition to his wife Sarah (Genesis 11.29; 16.3). Jacob had four wives—Leah, Rachel, and their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah (Genesis 29.21-23, 28; 30.4, 9). The custom of preserving one's heritage through concubines certainly was prevalent in ancient communities, and this undoubtedly was handed down to the Israelites. So, just as their ancestors practiced a certain

⁶See the comments in J. H. Hertz, editor, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation, and Commentary*, Second Edition (London, UK: Soncino, 1971), 850; and J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, general editor, D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1974), 243-245.

⁷*Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, Volume I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1966), 122.

type of polygamy, the Hebrew people were allowed to practice this unwise custom (see Deuteronomy 21.15). However, “the Mosaic law did not ordain, command, or commend the practice. It confined itself to regulating an old, established, and widely extended institution. To have attempted to uproot it would have seriously disturbed the existing social order.”⁸ But restraints to polygamy were the rule as in Deuteronomy 17.17 where Israel’s king strictly was charged not to “acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away [i.e., from the Lord God].”

Furthermore, God allowed polygamy to only males and only in the covenant union of marriage. Even before the Law of Moses existed, the law of God concerning the sanctity of the marriage bond was firmly established. A woman could have only one husband. God plagued Pharaoh and threatened to kill Abimelech, because each took Sarah planning to wed her (Genesis 12.10-20; 20.1-18). Sarah was Abraham’s wife and his alone. A similar situation occurred with Isaac, his wife Rebekah, and Abimelech (Genesis 26.6-11). And Joseph refused to “sin against God” by yielding to the request of Potiphar’s wife to “lie with me” (i.e., “have sexual intercourse with me”; Genesis 39.6ff.).

Under the Law of Moses, sexual intercourse with another’s wife constituted adultery, and adultery was to be punished by putting the guilty offenders to death (Leviticus 18.20; 20.10; Deuteronomy 22.22). Betrothal or engagement in Hebrew culture and law was considered just as binding as marriage, since the man and the woman had a covenant union (even though the union had not been “consummated” by sexual intercourse). Therefore, sexual intercourse with a young maiden who was betrothed to another constituted adultery, and both of the guilty offenders were

⁸Horace Lorenzo Hastings, *The Wonderful Law* (Boston, MA: H. L. Hastings, 1888), 77.

punished to death by stoning (Deuteronomy 22.23, 24). The exception was when “in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die” (i.e., the equivalent of rape; Deuteronomy 22.25-27). The severe punishments for these sexual offenses may seem extreme and harsh by way of comparison with lenient Western standards, but they indicate the importance of the sanctity and holiness desired by the Creator for the most intimate, and most vulnerable, of human relations.

Interestingly, sexual intercourse with another man’s female bondservant or slave was not punishable by death (Leviticus 19.20). Because concubines possessed no freedom and were considered to be property, a sexual transgression against a female slave was less severe (i.e., “a distinction shall be made”). For this sexual offense, the Law states, “They shall not be put to death, because she was not free.” Also to be considered is the fact that no covenant of marriage existed between the slave and her master. It seems to be implied that the more severe penalty of death was not meted out due to the lack of any covenant violation, and this indicates that sexual sin in ancient Israel was less serious than the sin of dishonoring or profaning the sacred covenant of marriage. In the circumstance above, the slave was to be scourged, and the man was required to offer a trespass offering to the Lord to atone for his sin (Leviticus 19.21-22).⁹

⁹In verse 20, the KJV translates “she shall be scourged”; the NKJV has “for this there shall be scourging.” Woods, *People’s OT Notes: Volume 2*, 48, comments, “*An inquiry shall be held* [RSV]. A problem arises because the word translated ‘inquiry’ is quite rare and its precise meaning therefore somewhat uncertain. Perhaps better would be ‘compensation shall be paid’ (to the offended master or to the girl’s future husband).” But Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 503, in support of the older translations, says, “*There shall be inquisition* [JPS]. Better, ‘there shall be a lashing,’ or corporal punishment. The Hebrew *bqrt* means a lash made of ox-hide (Ibn Ezra).”

In ancient Israel, premarital purity or abstinence from sexual intercourse before marriage was considered to be the standard. Deuteronomy 23.17-18 emphatically warns, “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.” While this statute prohibits specifically the practice of cult prostitution in the temples of the gods and goddesses, by implication this level of sexual purity extends to the sons and daughters of Israel in a more general way. Thus, Moses commands in Leviticus 19.29, “Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, lest the land fall into prostitution and the land become full of depravity.”

From the beginning, God intended that men and women fulfill their sexual desires in the union of marriage (i.e., “one flesh”; Genesis 2.24). The patriarchal narratives as well as the Law of Moses highlight this divine purpose. For instance, Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, “defiled” Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah, by having sexual intercourse with her out of wedlock (Genesis, chapter 34). Another example is the stipulation concerning the man who “violates” a young woman, who is a virgin and not engaged to another man, by having sexual intercourse with her. He must make payment of fifty shekels of silver to the girl’s father (i.e., the price for a bride). He had to marry her. He could never divorce her. And, the father of the young woman had the right to refuse their marrying if he chose to do so (Exodus 22.16-17; Deuteronomy 22.28-29).

Finally, the laws concerning *talmeh* or uncleanness, as well as the corresponding statutes about purification, were given by the Lord God to guarantee that his people achieved the highest

standard of holiness and purity in their most intimate encounters between males and females. In

this respect, Hastings aptly remarks:

No one could give himself up to the excessive and habitual indulgence of animal passion without making himself for the time a social outcast, and debarring himself from the services of the sanctuary, and the associations of common life, as a person whose very presence and touch was defilement, and who must perform the prescribed ablutions and ceremonies before he could again stand as an equal among the sons of Israel. The weaknesses and diseases which naturally result from excessive sensual indulgence subjected him to similar disability and brought his case under the constant notice of parents and priests, thus insuring a speedy remedy.¹⁰

¹⁰*The Wonderful Law*, 89-90.

APPENDIX A: USE OF *NA'APH* IN OLD TESTAMENT [From ESV]

The following scriptures use *na'aph* in various grammatical constructions.

“You shall not **commit adultery**” (Exodus 20.14).

“If a man **commits adultery** with the wife of his neighbor, both **the adulterer and the adulteress** shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 20.10).

“And you shall not **commit adultery**” (Deuteronomy 5.18).

“The eye of **the adulterer** also waits for the twilight, saying, ‘No eye will see me’; and he veils his face” (Job 24.15).

“If you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you keep company with **adulterers**” (Psalm 50.18).

“He who **commits adultery** lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself” (Proverb 6.32).

“This is the way of **an adulteress**: she eats and wipes her mouth and says, ‘I have done no wrong’” (Proverb 30.20).

“But you, draw near, sons of the sorceress, offspring of **the adulterer** and the loose woman” (Isaiah 57.3).

“She saw that for all **the adulteries** of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, **committing adultery** with stone and tree” (Jeremiah 3.8, 9).

“How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me and have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they **committed adultery** and trooped to the houses of whores” (Jeremiah 5.7).

“Will you steal, murder, **commit adultery**, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known” (Jeremiah 7.9).

“Oh that I had in the desert a travelers’ lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all **adulterers**, a company of treacherous men” (Jeremiah 9.2).

“For the land is full of **adulterers**; because of the curse the land mourns, and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up. Their course is evil, and their might is not right” (Jeremiah 23.10).

“But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: they **commit adultery** and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his evil; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah” (Jeremiah 23.14).

“Because they have done an outrageous thing in Israel, they have **committed adultery** with their neighbors’ wives, and they have spoken in my name lying words that I did not command them. I am the one who knows, and I am witness, declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 29.23).

“**Adulterous** wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband!” (Ezekiel 16.32).

“For they have **committed adultery**, and blood is on their hands. With their idols they have **committed adultery**, and they have even offered up to them for food the children whom they had borne to me” (Ezekiel 23.37).

“But righteous men shall pass judgment on them with the sentence of **adulteresses**, and with the sentence of women who shed blood, because they are **adulteresses**, and blood is on their hands” (Ezekiel 23.45).

“Plead with your mother, plead—for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband—that she put away her whoring from her face, and her **adultery** from between her breasts” (Hosea 2.2).

“And the Lord said to me, ‘Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is **an adulteress**, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins’” (Hosea 3.1).

“There is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and **committing adultery**; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed” (Hosea 4.2).

“They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides **commit adultery**. I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your brides when they **commit adultery**; for the men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes, and a people without understanding shall come to ruin” (Hosea 4.13, 14).

“Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against **the adulterers**, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 3.5).

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