

Deuteronomy 23:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

There shall be no whore of the daughters of Israel, nor a sodomite of the sons of Israel.

Analysis

There shall be no whore of the daughters of Israel, nor a sodomite of the sons of Israel.

This verse prohibits cultic prostitution, both female and male. The Hebrew qedeshah (קָדֵשָׁה, 'whore') and qadesh (קָדֵשׁ, 'sodomite') literally mean 'consecrated woman' and 'consecrated man,' referring to temple prostitutes dedicated to pagan deities, not ordinary prostitution. These individuals performed ritual sexual acts as part of Canaanite fertility religion, believing such activities ensured agricultural productivity, human fertility, and divine favor. The terms' root qadash (קָדֵשׁ, 'to be holy/set apart') shows these were religious functionaries, though serving false gods.

The prohibition targeted syncretism's sexual dimension. Canaanite religion centered on Baal and Asherah, fertility deities whose worship involved sexual rituals believed to stimulate divine procreative powers and ensure crop yields. Archaeological discoveries at Canaanite sites reveal temples with adjoining rooms for ritual prostitution and numerous figurines depicting sexual acts and nude goddesses. Israel's absolute prohibition of such practices distinguished Yahweh worship from surrounding fertility cults and affirmed sexuality's proper context: covenant marriage, not pagan ritual.

Theologically, this law established several crucial principles:

1. sexuality is sacred, reserved for marriage, not religious ritual

2. false worship inevitably corrupts sexual ethics
3. holiness to Yahweh excludes adopting pagan practices even when culturally normalized.

Despite this clear command, cultic prostitution repeatedly infected Israel (1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:46, 2 Kings 23:7), validating the prohibition's necessity. For Christians, this warns against conforming sexuality to cultural norms contradicting biblical standards and guards against false teaching that baptizes immorality as spiritual freedom.

Historical Context

Archaeological and textual evidence confirms the widespread practice of cultic prostitution throughout the ancient Near East. Temples excavated at Canaanite sites like Megiddo, Hazor, and Lachish include features consistent with ritual prostitution. Thousands of clay figurines depicting nude females, many emphasizing sexual characteristics, have been discovered at Israelite and Canaanite sites, likely representing Asherah. The Ugaritic texts (14th-13th centuries BC) describe ritual sexual acts in Baal worship, confirming biblical descriptions of Canaanite religious practices.

Mesopotamian temples employed qadishtu (cognate with Hebrew qedeshah), sacred prostitutes serving Ishtar and other fertility goddesses. Temple records document payments to these religious functionaries, confirming their official status. Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BC) described Babylonian customs requiring women to serve once in Aphrodite's temple, though his account may be exaggerated. Nonetheless, the practice's religious significance throughout the ancient world is well-established.

Israel's persistent struggle with cultic prostitution, evidenced throughout Kings and Chronicles, demonstrates surrounding cultures' powerful influence. King Josiah's reforms included removing qedeshim from the temple precincts (2 Kings 23:7), revealing that such practices had infiltrated even Yahweh's sanctuary. The prohibition's repetition and the historical record of violation demonstrate both the practice's cultural normality in the ancient Near East and Israel's frequent failure to maintain distinctive sexual ethics. This historical pattern warns against

assuming cultural norms, even religiously sanctioned ones, align with God's standards.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How does the connection between false worship and sexual immorality in this verse illuminate contemporary cultural trends?
2. What does this prohibition teach about sexuality's sacred nature and its proper context in God's design?
3. How should Christians respond to cultural movements that redefine sexual morality while claiming spiritual or religious justification?

Interlinear Text

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|-------------|------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|------------|----------|----------|
| לֹא | תִּהְיֶה | ה | קִדְשָׁה | מִבְנָה | וְתִּהְיֶה | אִשְׂרָאֵל | וְלֹא | תִּהְיֶה |
| H3808 | H1961 | | There shall be no whore | of the daughters | of Israel | H3808 | H1961 | |
| | | | H6948 | H1323 | H3478 | | | |
| קִדְשָׁה | מִבְנָה | אִשְׂרָאֵל | וְתִּהְיֶה | לֹא | תִּהְיֶה | ה | קִדְשָׁה | לֹא |
| nor a sodomite | of the sons | of Israel | | | | | | |
| H6945 | H1121 | H3478 | | | | | | |

Additional Cross-References

2 Kings 23:7 (Parallel theme): And he brake down the houses of the sodomites, that were by the house of the LORD, where the women wove hangings for the grove.

1 Kings 14:24 (References Israel): And there were also sodomites in the land: and they did according to all the abominations of the nations which the LORD cast out before the children of Israel.

Leviticus 19:29 (Parallel theme): Do not prostitute thy daughter, to cause her to be a whore; lest the land fall to whoredom, and the land become full of wickedness.

1 Kings 22:46 (Parallel theme): And the remnant of the sodomites, which remained in the days of his father Asa, he took out of the land.

1 Kings 15:12 (Parallel theme): And he took away the sodomites out of the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made.

1 Timothy 1:10 (Parallel theme): For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine;

Deuteronomy 22:21 (References Israel): Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die: because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father's house: so shalt thou put evil away from among you.

1 Corinthians 6:9 (Parallel theme): Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,