

Deuteronomy 23:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the LORD.

Analysis

A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the LORD.

The Hebrew word *mamzer* (מַמְזֵר) traditionally translated 'bastard' specifically denotes a child born from an incestuous or adulterous union forbidden by Leviticus 18, not merely illegitimate birth. This narrow definition distinguished between children born to unmarried parents and those conceived through relationships that violated divine law. The exclusion extended to the tenth generation, effectively meaning permanent exclusion, as 'ten' often symbolizes completeness in Hebrew thought.

This severe restriction served multiple purposes:

1. it reinforced the sanctity of marriage and sexual purity within the covenant community
2. it deterred heinous sexual sins by extending consequences to offspring
3. it maintained the genealogical integrity essential for Israel's tribal land inheritance and messianic lineage
4. it distinguished Israel's sexual ethics from Canaanite practices that accepted incest and cultic prostitution.

Yet Scripture repeatedly demonstrates God's redemptive grace overcoming these barriers.

Rahab the Canaanite prostitute, Ruth the Moabitess (also excluded by v. 3), and Bathsheba (David's adulteress) all appear in Christ's genealogy (Matthew 1). The law's severity highlighted sin's devastating consequences while God's grace revealed that no ancestry disqualifies those whom Christ redeems. The New Covenant removes all genealogical barriers: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek... for ye are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

Historical Context

In the ancient Near East, legitimacy and genealogical purity carried enormous social, legal, and religious significance. Inheritance rights, tribal membership, land ownership, and social standing depended on demonstrable lineage. Unlike surrounding cultures where temple prostitution was accepted and its offspring had recognized status in religious systems, Israel's law created clear boundaries.

Canaanite religion incorporated sacred prostitution in Baal and Asherah worship, producing children who were considered dedicated to these deities. Mesopotamian law codes like Hammurabi's addressed inheritance rights for children of concubines and secondary wives, showing complex attitudes toward legitimacy. Israel's stricter standard reflected Yahweh's covenant demands for holiness that extended beyond the individual to community purity.

The historical context also included Israel's identity as God's chosen nation with specific covenant promises tied to lineal descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Maintaining genealogical integrity was essential for fulfilling these promises. However, the law's tenth-generation limit (unlike the eternal exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites in v. 3) suggested potential restoration, pointing toward God's ultimate redemptive purposes that transcend ethnic and genealogical boundaries.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How does Christ's genealogy, which includes those who would have been excluded under this law, demonstrate the gospel's radical grace?
2. What does this law teach about the far-reaching consequences of sexual sin beyond the individuals directly involved?
3. How should Christians balance upholding God's standards for sexual purity while extending grace to those affected by others' sins?

Interlinear Text

לֹא יָבֹא מִמֶּנּוּ לְבִקְוֵה לַיהוָה׃
H3808 shall he not enter H935 A bastard H4464 into the congregation H6951 of the LORD H3068 H1571

דּוֹר עֲשִׂירִי לֹא יָבֹא לְבִקְוֵה לַיהוָה׃
H1755 generation H6224 even to his tenth H3808 shall he not enter H935 H0 into the congregation H6951

יְהוָה׃
H3068 of the LORD

Additional Cross-References

Zechariah 9:6 (Parallel theme): And a bastard shall dwell in Ashdod, and I will cut off the pride of the Philistines.

Isaiah 57:3 (Parallel theme): But draw near hither, ye sons of the sorceress, the seed of the adulterer and the whore.

Hebrews 12:8 (Parallel theme): But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.

