**Deuteronomy 15:19-23**

[*https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-15/deuteronomy-1519-23/*](https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-15/deuteronomy-1519-23/)

*Moses commands the Israelites to set apart all the firstborn males of their domesticated animals to the Suzerain (Ruler) God.*

The final section of this chapter deals with firstborn male cattle, which includes sheep and goats. Like the firstborn males of human beings, all the firstborn males of animals needed to be set aside because they belonged to their Suzerain LORD ([Exodus 23:2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+23.2&t=NASB95), [12](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+23.12&t=NASB95)). Human firstborn males were set apart for God’s service, so they were to be living sacrifices. Firstborn animals were offered as sacrifices to God. Each were to be wholly devoted to God’s service.

Moses told the people that they were to*consecrate to the LORD your God all the firstborn males that are born of your herd and of your flock*. To *consecrate* something is to set it apart for a specific purpose and was not to be used for common, everyday purposes. The *firstborn* of the *herd* and of the *flock* refer to the *firstborn* male oxen, sheep, and goats that the worshiper sacrificed to God ([Exodus 13:2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+13.2&t=NASB95); [Numbers 18:15-18](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+18.15-18&t=NASB95)).

In addition to not using*firstborn*animals for everyday tasks, Moses added that they should *not work with the firstborn of your herd*. This probably refers to using the *firstborn* for personal profit. This would include using the *firstborn* to do work such as agriculture or other types of daily tasks. In ancient times, people used some animals (the ox for instance) for farm work, such as plowing ([Deuteronomy 22:10](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+22.10&t=NASB95)). These animals were also used to transport burdens. Moses warned the Israelites against using the *firstborn* males of their cattle for any work done for economic purposes because they belonged to the Suzerain God.

In addition to the prohibition against using *firstborn* animals for farm work, the Israelites were commanded not to*shear the firstborn of*their*flock*. To *shear*an animal means to cut off the hair (wool) forming the coat of that animal (sheep or goat), a process that was most often done in the springtime. The farmers could then use the hair or wool to make cloth or sell the wool for personal gain. So, instead of using the *firstborn* for work that enriches the owner, the Israelites were to dedicate every *firstborn* animal to the LORD.

The *firstborn* animal was to be set aside for a special time. Specifically, Moses commanded that y*ou and your household shall eat it every year before the LORD your God*. The *firstborn* animal was to be set aside to be a sacrifice in the presence of the LORD *every year* (lit. “year after year”). After the animal was killed, the family could eat it in His presence. This was a visible acknowledgement of the people’s dependence on the provisions given to them by their Suzerain LORD. He gave to them (His people), and now they were to give back a part of His gifts to Him. Their sacrifice to the LORD was to be followed by fellowship with one another, in sharing a celebratory meal. This is consistent with God’s covenant, which has the primary goal of preventing tyranny or exploitation of one Israelite over another, while emphasizing social harmony and mutual benefit.

These meals were to be eaten in the LORD’s presence *in the place which the LORD chooses.* God was the Suzerain ruler; only He gave the law. The Israelites were to follow His ways. This includes *the place*where they were to sacrifice and consume the first born in God’s presence.

The Israelite was not free to choose where to worship the LORD with the sacrificial meal. God makes the laws, not the people. He and his household were urged to partake of that meal *every year* at the central sanctuary, the place chosen by God for such religious tasks. This would give an occasion to remind the people of the basic structure of the covenant they had agreed to follow. The Suzerain ruler decides the law, including the place to worship, and the people are to fellowship with Him by offering these sacrifices to Him, then enjoy fellowship with one another in consuming the bounty of the cooked meat. The purpose of God’s law was to lead His people to love one another, and build strong and prosperous communities together.

However, not every animal could be offered by the worshiper. The sacrifice that was acceptable in the sight of the Suzerain (Ruler) God was that of an unblemished animal. Moses made it clear when he told them that *if it has any defect* they were not to offer it. The word for *defect* (Heb. “mûm”) is used for something physically abnormal. The example Moses gives here are conditions *such as lameness or blindness, or any serious defect*. The term *lameness* (Heb. “pisēaḥ”) refers to the inability to walk. It was used for both men ([Leviticus 21:16-18](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Leviticus+21.16-18&t=NASB95)) and animals. The term *blindness* (Heb. “ ̀iwwēr”) is the inability to see. These conditions, as well as *any serious defect* (lit. “any evil blemish”) would make the animal unacceptable as a sacrifice to the Suzerain God.

Such an animal, although defective and unacceptable to be offered as a sacrifice, was not completely useless. Moses declared that they could *eat it within your gates*. In other words, a defective animal could be prepared and eaten in one’s household as a normal meal. Those physical defects (lameness, blindness, etc.) did not disqualify the animal from being eaten. They simply disqualified it from being offered to the Suzerain (Ruler) God because it would not be accepted by Him ([Leviticus 22:20-22](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Leviticus+22.20-22&t=NASB95)). This could symbolize that God desired their very best efforts in serving Him.

Furthermore, the defective animal could be eaten by anyone: *the unclean and the clean alike may eat it, as a gazelle or a deer*. The phrase *the unclean and the clean* refers to ceremonial impurity and purity. People who were *unclean* (such as those with leprosy, bodily discharge, women with menstruation) were prevented from taking part in community worship until the proper ritual had been performed to remove the impurity of that person ([Leviticus 11-15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Leviticus+11-15&t=NASB95); [Numbers 19](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+19&t=NASB95)). Conversely, people who were considered *clean* were those who could participate in community worship. This provision likely had health purposes, such as preventing the spread of disease, as well as symbolic meaning. Israelites were to walk in purity before the LORD, loving their neighbors and following God’s ways, which would lead to their great blessing.

The *gazelle and the deer* were wild animals. The *gazelle* was a fleet-footed animal which looked like a small antelope. The *deer* was an antlered animal with two large and two small hooves. Neither of these wild animals were considered clean by the Law and thus were not suitable for sacrificial slaughter. People were free to eat the meat of these wild animals for non-sacrificial purposes. No ceremonial cleanness was required to partake of the meat of these wild animals.

Moses ended this section with a universal command—*only you shall not eat its blood; you are to pour it out on the ground like water* (v. 23). [Leviticus 17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Leviticus+17&t=NASB95) contains the reasons why the blood of animals was not to be eaten. The passage states that

“any man from the house of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement. Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, ‘No person among you may eat blood, nor may any alien who sojourns among you eat blood”
([Leviticus 17:10-12](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Leviticus+17.10-12&t=NASB95))

Therefore, God’s vassals (Israel) were prohibited from eating the blood. Complete obedience is the key to the Suzerain’s relationship with His vassals, the only way by which He could be pleased and by which His people could be blessed. God’s ways have great practical benefit. God created the cause-effect relationships in the world, so clearly He knows best how to live. His instructions show us how to do things in a manner that are in our best self-interest. However, due to sin, our natural inclination is to seek our own way. Instead of loving our neighbors, we are inclined to exploit them. God sets forth clearly that not following His ways will cause adverse consequences that occur naturally. But God, as the Suzerain ruler, as well as the Father of Israel, will also discipline His people, for their good ([Jeremiah 29:11](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Jeremiah+29.11&t=NASB95)).

**Biblical Text:**

**19You shall consecrate to the Lord your God all the firstborn males that are born of your herd and of your flock; you shall not work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock. 20You and your household shall eat it every year before the Lord your God in the place which the Lord chooses. 21But if it has any defect, *such as* lameness or blindness, *or* any serious defect, you shall not sacrifice it to the Lord your God. 22You shall eat it within your gates; the unclean and the clean alike *may eat it*, as a gazelle or a deer. 23Only you shall not eat its blood; you are to pour it out on the ground like water.**