

Deuteronomy 23:1-8

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Moving from purity in marriage in the previous chapter, Moses now turned to purity in worship. To do this, he instructed the Israelites concerning who was allowed and who was not allowed in the assembly of the LORD.

This section deals with the sanctity of the Israelite community and is divided into two subsections. Vv. 1-6 list the groups that are not allowed in the assembly, and vv. 7 – 8 list the groups that are allowed.

The first group Moses deals with includes one *who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off* (v. 1). Someone who is *emasculated* either has testicles that have been damaged or *has his male organ* removed. This genital condition, which could be caused by genetics, accident, or intention, represents that which is not complete and damaged and thus not whole. This probably refers to a man who was made a eunuch in pagan religions, though it could include someone injured in an accident.

A man in this condition was not allowed to *enter the assembly of the LORD*. The pagan practices of making men eunuchs was associated with the rule of tyrants. Emasculation would eliminate incentive for eunuchs who were made high-ranking officials to attempt to ascend to the throne, since they would not be capable of producing an heir to the throne. God had created a system of self-governance, under His law, where men were to love and serve one another. The practice of creating eunuchs was part of the pagan system of tyranny, where the strong exploited the weak. This vestige was to be given no honor in Israel.

The phrase *the assembly of the LORD* occurs six times in this section. Although it can have various meanings, here it refers specifically to the people who gather before the Suzerain (Ruler) God at the tabernacle (or later the temple) for a worship service. This has a similarity to the Greek word “ekklesia” often translated “church” in the New Testament. “Ekklesia” means “gathering” or “assembly.”

Not only were *emasculated* males excluded from the assembly, Moses said that *no one of illegitimate birth shall enter the assembly of the Lord* (v. 2). The phrase *no one of illegitimate birth* is one word in the Hebrew text (“mamzēr”).

Used only here and in [Zechariah 9:6](#), it refers to the offspring of an illicit sexual relationship. Such a person was not allowed to be a part of the assembly at the tabernacle. This also included *none of his descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall enter the assembly of the Lord.*

The reference to the *tenth generation* likely means permanent exclusion, since ten (as a complete number) was often used in the Bible to refer to that which had no limits ([Genesis 31:7](#); [Numbers 14:22](#)). That means, the descendants of illegitimate *unions* would not be able to take part in the *assembly of the LORD*. This would encourage a culture of fidelity. Culture is shaped by what is honored or shamed. In this shaming of illegitimate births, there is dishonor imposed on anyone who would commit adultery and bring an illegitimate child into the world.

Along with emasculated males and the offspring of illegitimate sexual relationships, Moses declared that *no Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord* (v. 3). In fact, *none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord*. This was a harsh judgment, but there was ample reason for it.

The Ammonites and the Moabites were the product of the incest of Lot and his two daughters. The story of what happened is in [Genesis 19:32-38](#). Both of Lot's daughters became pregnant from his seed, and brought forth sons. One daughter bore a son and named him *Moab*, which means "of my father" ([Genesis 19:37](#)). The other daughter bore a son and named him Ben-Ammi, which means "son of my people" ([Genesis 19:38](#)). Moab became the father of the Moabites, and Ben-Ammi became the father of the Ammonites.

The reason for their permanent exclusion was twofold. The first reason applies to the Ammonites, and it was *because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt* (v. 4). This is a reference to an incident that occurred during Israel's wilderness wanderings. According to [Deuteronomy 2:29](#), the Edomites and the Moabites sold the Israelites food and drink on their journey out of Egypt. But since the Ammonites were not mentioned, it is likely that they refused to offer hospitality, as alluded to in the present passage.

The second reason applies to the Moabites, *because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you*. This story can be found in [Numbers 22 – 24](#), where Balak the Moabite king and his people were terrified of the Israelites camping near them ([Num. 22:1 – 3](#)). Balak decided to hire *against* the Israelites *Balaam the son of Beor from*

Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. Instead of supporting their Israelite relatives, they fiercely opposed them and wanted them destroyed. They thought that Balaam could curse them using pagan practices, and this would bring about their downfall and demonstrate the superiority of their gods over the LORD. The LORD intervened, however, and prevented this from happening ([Num. 23 – 24](#)).

This was a powerful demonstration of the LORD's sovereign presence with His people, that no pagan god could overcome Him. Moses made this clear by proclaiming that *the Lord your God was not willing to listen to Balaam, but the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you* (v. 5).

The LORD did this for His covenant people *because the LORD your God loves them*. Earlier in Deuteronomy, Moses had told the Israelites that the Suzerain God chose (elected) them because of His love for them ([Deuteronomy 4:37](#); [7:8](#)). In those verses, Israel's choice to enter into a covenant (essentially a marriage) was tied to God's love. Here, the LORD's provision and protection of His people was tied to His love.

To sum up the rules about the Ammonites and the Moabites, Moses commanded the people that they were to *never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days* (v. 6). They were not to do anything that could contribute to the welfare of these two nations.

After discussing groups which were not allowed to join the assembly of Israelites in worshipping the LORD at the tabernacle, Moses turned to discussing people that were to be allowed. Moses told the Israelites that they could *not detest an Edomite* (v. 7). The verb *detest* (Hebrew "tā'ab," "abhor") is related to the word translated *abomination* ([Deuteronomy 7:25-26](#)). It is primarily used of something unclean or impure that needs to be rejected. In this context, the verb likely suggests that the Edomites were not to be hated and permanently excluded from the *assembly of the LORD*.

Moses then gave the reason that they were not to be rejected—*he is your brother*. This refers to the fact that the Edomites were kinsmen to the Israelites because they were descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob, the ancestor of the Israelites ([Genesis 25:24-30](#); [Deuteronomy 2:4](#)).

In a similar vein, Moses told the Israelites not to *detest an Egyptian*. The word for detest is the same as used with the Edomites in this verse. The reason for this was because Israel was *an alien in his land*. Israel's ancestors (Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph) spent quite a bit of time as aliens in Egypt (over 400

years) and were treated well until the time of Moses. Then a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph arose and ruled over Egypt ([Exodus 1](#)), starting the period of mistreatment of the Israelites by the Egyptians. This text, however, seems to refer to the time when Israel's ancestors lived well in Egypt.

The acceptance of Edomites and Egyptians into the assembly was not to be immediate. The rule given by Moses was that *the sons of the third generation who are born to them may enter the assembly of the Lord*. Thus, there needed to be a period of probation before being allowed to worship at the temple.

The reason for this is not given, but it could be that, given that both nations were deeply pagan, the third generation of Edomites and Egyptians might have shed their pagan roots and believed and worshipped the one true God, the LORD of Israel.

Biblical Text:

¹No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord. ²No one of illegitimate birth shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of his *descendants*, even to the tenth generation, shall enter the assembly of the Lord. ³No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their *descendants*, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord, ⁴because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. ⁵Nevertheless, the Lord your God was not willing to listen to Balaam, but the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the Lord your God loves you. ⁶You shall never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days. ⁷You shall not detest an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not detest an Egyptian, because you were an alien in his land. ⁸The sons of the third generation who are born to them may enter the assembly of the Lord.