

DEUTERONOMY 23:3-4 UNDERSTOOD WITHIN PROPER CONTEXT

(THE CONCEPT OF SO-CALLED ILLEGITIMATE BIRTH REVISITED)

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³A *mamzer* may not enter the assembly of ADONAI, nor may his descendants down to the tenth generation enter the assembly of ADONAI. ⁴No 'Amoni [Amonite] or Mo'avi [Moabite] may enter the assembly of ADONAI, nor may any of his descendants down to the tenth generation ever enter the assembly of ADONAI, (...) (*Deut 23:3-4, The Complete Jewish Bible*)

Note: The Complete Jewish Bible agrees with the 1917 English translation of the Hebrew Tanakh in the above numbering sequence. There are other translations with similar renderings too (e.g. the Afrikaans translation of 1933). On the other hand, translations such as the King James Version and the Holman Christian Standard Bible present them as verses 2 and 3, having rendered the first verse of the Tanakh and similar versions as Deuteronomy 22:30. To avoid confusion for readers with differently-numbered versions I will render my numbering references as a 3(2) and 4(3) format.

INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS

The 'born out of wedlock' topic

When I studied Biblical Counselling some two decades ago, one of the topics we were taught described the "Biblical fact" that Deuteronomy 23:3 described someone who was born out of wedlock, the so-called illegitimate birth. The Amplified Bible uses the terminology "conceived out of wedlock," while the Holman Christian Standard, among others, renders it "one of illegitimate birth."

The teaching then underlined the need for the counsellor to pray a deliverance prayer over such a person in order to break this "generational curse." Popular seminars (and let me underline, some are largely wonderful seminars) I attended and even went on to minister to others, often included this same teaching and actions. The preceding explanation to a counselee (or seminar attendee) in this regard would be based on the saving grace and atonement that came with Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross.

No matter how much spiritual cotton wool was applied, I saw the hurt in people who were expected to confess in a group of seminar attendees that they were conceived and perhaps born out of wedlock. One case stands out of a young man who was devastated because this principle would apply to his brother's little son, a small and innocent boy. "How can God be so unfair?" was his cry.

Some years ago, as I was working on an academic thesis I began to ask questions on the correctness of this teaching. In addition to my own literature research, I also approached Jewish Rabbis in this regard and the combined knowledge gained changed my understanding. Because of this I saw no other option but to terminate my involvement as a regional coordinator for a very good seminar that unfortunately included this topic as an important application.

James Russell Lowell said, "The foolish and the dead alone never change their opinions"
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Recently I was asked by a friend to comment on material that explained King David erected the Tabernacle of David in Jerusalem (1 Chr 6:32; Isa 6:5; Amos 9:11; Acts 15:16) because he was the descendant of a Moabite (Ruth) and was consequently not allowed in the Tabernacle of Moses

according to Deuteronomy 23:4(3). This had my attention and took me into a renewed study of the true meanings and implications of these two verses in the Book of Deuteronomy.

THE TRUE MEANING OF THE *MAMZER* CONCEPT

Verse 3(2) contains three elements:

1. A *mamzer* and his descendants;
2. may not enter the assembly of ADONAI;
3. down to the tenth generation.

The *mamzer* explained in proper cultural context

Various Bible versions translate the Hebrew word *mamzer* in various ways, for example:

- Bastard (Hebrew Tanakh, 1917 English Translation; King James Version)
- One of illegitimate birth (Holman Christian Standard Bible)
- A man born from an illicit union (God's Word)
- One born of forbidden relations (Tree of Life Version)
- An illegitimate child (Literal Translation of the Holy Bible)
- He that is "*borne of a comen woman*" (1534 Tyndale Bible)
- A person begotten out of wedlock (The Amplified Bible)

There may be more variations, but overall, I have found that translation-wise the expression "bastard" seems to be the majority preferred one. Of the above examples, only that of the Amplified Bible leaves no uncertainty to the average reader as to what the concept is considered by the translators to mean. All of the others necessitate definition or explanation. And it is just here that the gate for error in teaching stands wide, wide open.

My experience in the church and associate ministries environment left no doubt that the common understanding was that which we find reflected in the words of the Amplified Bible. The common terminology used was "illegitimate child" and to the Western mind it meant "conceived/born out of wedlock."

At the completion of my previous study, and based on commentary in the Schonken Bible, The Strong's Concordance, as well as The Complete Word Studies of Zodhiates, I first accepted that the *mamzer* concept referred to someone with a Jewish father and heathen mother. Answering an enquiry in this regard, however, a Jewish Rabbi indicated to me that it referred to someone **born out of incest or adultery**. Such a transgressor incurred the penalty of *koret*, which meant that his/her soul was cut off from God.

- It does not refer to **the child of two unmarried people in the modern western-minded sense** that popular seminars and teachings would have one believe.

The reality once again showed how one can be misled by subjective translation if you do not make sure of what the truth is within accurate cultural and historical context. People are wounded so unnecessarily in the process by well-intended, but less than correct Bible interpretation.

- Zodhiates also adds to the meaning of a *mamzer* someone who does not have a proper pedigree or genealogy and was born out of wedlock. In Zechariah 9:6 it is best rendered as a reference to foreign or mongrel persons (which underlines the critical importance of

context in each usage), according to Zodhiates.

In my current study I cast the net considerably wider than previously as far as literature is concerned, bearing in mind the specific context of Deuteronomy 23. Several sources that reference traditional Jewish sources confirmed that **a *mamzer* is the offspring of an adulterous or incestuous union**. In Jewish law, the mere fact that a child is conceived and born out of lawful wedlock does not make him a *mamzer* and he is not an illegitimate child (one whose status or rights are impaired).ⁱ

- I have now also learned that the adulterous union involved for the offspring to be regarded as a *mamzer*, was with a **married woman**.

Where a child is born of incest or adultery among Gentiles, and he or she embraced Judaism, the flaw of his/her descent is ignored and he/she is not regarded as a *mamzer* (or *mamzeret* in the case of the female). The child of an Israelite by an unconverted Gentile woman is regarded as a Gentile, and when converted, becomes an Israelite to all purposes.ⁱⁱ

The translation of *mamzer* as “bastard” or “illegitimate child” is consequently incorrect as far as Jewish law is concerned.ⁱⁱⁱ A *mamzer* is eligible to hold any public office, even the highest (which is that of a king).

It needs to be understood that in Biblical terms and in the Jewish mind and application, **the concept of *mamzer* applies to the Israelite (or Jewish) nation only**. It does not apply to Gentiles. The offspring of Gentiles through an incestuous or adulterous relationship (even when involving a married woman) is regarded as a Gentile and not a *mamzer*.

This all once again accentuates the role of proper context. The directives recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy, as well as rabbinical injunctions added to it, were given to Israel and not to the nations at large. To remove it from the cultural and theological environment of Israel of the time, is to open the door to strange teaching.

In view of the above I propose that, as there does not seem to be a single word in the English language with which to translate the Hebrew *mamzer*, the responsible approach is to retain the Hebrew word in other language versions of the Bible. That is what David H. Stern has done in *The Complete Jewish Bible*, his English translation of the Hebrew *Tanakh* (Old Testament) and *B'rit Hadashah* (New Testament).

Exclusion from the assembly of ADONAI

The Biblical (and added rabbinical) exclusions of certain people to “enter the assembly (*qāhāl*) of ADONAI (the LORD)” is considered in Jewish tradition to be **solely a limitation on marriage**.^{iv} This also applies to the offspring of Ammonites and Moabites (verse 4). It was never understood to exclude such people from taking part in Israel’s religious gatherings.

The reader may ask how the connection with/of marriage to the expression of “may not enter the assembly of the LORD” was made. The answer comes from the Bible itself, for example:

They assembled themselves against Moshe [Moses] and Aharon [Aaron] and said to them, “You take too much on yourselves! After all, the entire community is holy,

everyone of them, and Adonai is among them. So why do you lift yourselves up above Adonai's assembly [qāhāl]?" (Num 16:3, CJB)

²Because the community had no water, they assembled themselves against Moshe and Aharon. ³The people quarrelled with Moshe and said, "We wish we had died when our brothers died before Adonai. ⁴Why did you bring Adonai's community [qāhāl] into this desert? To die there, we and our livestock? (Num 20:2-4, CJB)

Apart from disqualification with regard to marriage, the *mamzer* suffers no disabilities whatsoever in Jewish law.

The Ammonites and Moabites

The Ammonite and Moabite nations developed out the offspring of the incestuous unions of Lot's daughters with their father (Gen 19:36-38). Their exclusion from "entering the assembly of ADONAI" is not connected to this fact in Deuteronomy 23, however. In their case it is ascribed to "(...) because they did not supply you with food and water when you were on the road after leaving Egypt, and because they hired Bil'am the son of B'or from P'tor in Aram-Naharayim to put a curse on you" (Deut 23:5).

To the tenth generation

The typical Western understanding would have the expression "to the tenth generation" to mean just that – ten generations. That is not the ancient Hebraic/Jewish understanding, however. In the Jewish community of Biblical times this was not limited to ten physical generations. Marriage by an Israelite to a *mamzer* or his/her descendants was **forbidden for all time.**^v

Deuteronomy 23:4(3) applies this exclusion also to Ammonites and Moabites and their descendants. **A Jew was therefore prohibited for all time from marrying an Ammonite or Moabite.** This becomes a contentious interpretation in writings about David and the tabernacle (tent) he erected in Jerusalem to house the returned Ark of the Covenant, a topic I will address in a separate discussion. The critical question in this regard is, was David's grandmother, Ruth, a Moabite?

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

When my wife and I started what was just a small counselling ministry two decades ago, we could not begin to comprehend just how applicable the name we chose, *The Hosea Connection*, which was based on Hosea 4:6, would become in our search for the unpolluted and unadulterated truth in the Bible. My study of this topic has accentuated again just how far many sincere teachings in the Christian environment have drifted from the original truth that was written.

In the case of this topic I can testify of the emotional and spiritual hurt have been caused in its application in seminars and counselling sessions. Had everyone, but especially those in the teaching ministry (where I include my own past in organised ministry), focused on studying this topic in its true cultural and literature context of the time, so much unnecessary hurt could have been avoided. It also underlines again the need for every individual to take responsibility for what one believes to be the truth.

"My people are destroyed for want of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). The words of the prophet Hosea ring clear yet again and again.

IN SUMMARY

A Mamzer is:	A Mamzer is not:
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. An offspring from incest between two Jewish persons.2. An offspring from an adulterous union (between a Jewish man and married Jewish woman).3. Of Jewish descent therefore.4. Excluded from marrying a Jew (all generations for all time).	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. An offspring of incest between two non-Jewish persons.2. An offspring from an adulterous union between two non-Jewish persons.3. Someone of non-Jewish descent.4. A person born out of wedlock – to two unmarried Jewish or non-Jewish persons.

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BIBLE VERSION QUOTED

The *Complete Jewish Bible*, an English translation of the Hebrew *Tanakh* (Old Testament) and *B'rit Hadashah* (New Testament), was used to quote the relevant Scripture portions. Copyright © 1998 by David H. Stern. Published by Jewish New Testament Publications, Clarksville, Maryland.

ⁱ MAMZER, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/mamzer>.

ⁱⁱ JASTROW, M & DEMBITZ, L.N. 1906. Bastard. *Jewish Encyclopedia*. www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2648-Bastard

ⁱⁱⁱ JACOBS, RABBI LOUIS. *What Is A Mamzer?* Jewish Learning. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-mamzer-problem/>

^{iv} Forbidden Relationships in Judaism. 2018. *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forbidden_relationships_in_Judaism. 16 August. JACOBS, RABBI LOUIS. *What Is A Mamzer?* Jewish Learning. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-mamzer-problem/> JASTROW, M & Dembitz, L.N. *Bastard*. *Jewish Encyclopedia*. www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2648-Bastard

^v MAMZER, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/mamzer>.