

**Text: Dt 21.1-23****THEOLOGICAL OUTLINE OF DEUTERONOMY<sup>1</sup>**

1. **Consider:** a review of God's faithfulness (1.6–4.40)
2. **Covenant:** an exposition of the law (5–26)

5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>						

3. **Commence:** preparations for renewing the covenant (27.1–28.68)
4. **Commit:** an exhortation to obedience (29.2–30.20)

**Deuteronomy 21**

Our chapter contains two seemingly unrelated sections, but there is one key idea that brings them together. The two sections are:

1. Expiation of a Crime (1-9)
2. Domestic Relations (10-23)<sup>2</sup>

**Expiation of a Crime (1-9)**

“Laws pertaining to homicide up to this point have involved the presence of witnesses. Commonly, however, corpses are discovered bearing evidence of foul play but with no witnesses to the act or none willing to testify. How could such dilemmas be resolved in Israel in such a way as to exculpate the community, which otherwise must bear corporate responsibility and guilt? The answer lay in a ritual, the details of which comprise the present section.”<sup>3</sup>

Key word: “**slain person**” (21.1) — lit., one “pierced with the sword”<sup>4</sup> — not one who died of natural causes

Key word: “**the land**” (21.1) – *i.e.*, the holy land, the land of promise, “It became a sin against the Lord as well as against the victim, for it had taken place on the Lord’s own estate, on common ground.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from an outline in Lawrence O Richards, *The Bible Readers Companion*, electronic ed. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991), 117.

<sup>2</sup> Headings from the *New American Standard Bible*

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary, v. 4 (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 287–88.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Köhler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 288.

Expiation by the elders of the nearest town: non-bloody sacrifice of an unbroken heifer (2-6)

Prayer of expiation (7-9)

Purpose: (8) “do not place the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of Your people Israel”

## Domestic Relations (10-23)

Laws concerning wives:

1. Wives from among the captives of Israel (10-14)
2. Adjudicating inheritance in polygamous situations (15-17)

Laws concerning rebellious sons (18-21)

Laws concerning executions (22-23)

A few comments:

1. The first section does not imply polygamy, it simply involves marrying foreign wives, and regulating what might happen if the man decided to divorce a foreign wife.
2. The second section deals with inheritance when a man has more than one son by more than one wife.

It should be stressed that both situations are regulated, not approved. See this comment from Merrill:

“It must be stressed that the allowance of divorce (the meaning of *šillahtâ*, ‘let her go,’ in v. 14) is not a blanket endorsement of it. This and other references to such termination of marriages in the Old Testament (cf. Lev 22:13; Num 30:9; Deut 24:1–4) must be balanced against others that either show it in a negative light or bar it altogether (Lev 21:7, 14; Deut 22:19, 29; Mal 2:16; cf. Matt 5:31–32; 19:3–9; 1 Cor 7:10–16). In the pristine days of Israel’s election to be a covenant people, the Lord tolerated many of their ‘subbiblical’ ways, slowly but surely educating them to the moral perfections that he gradually revealed to them. Forbearance toward improper behavior and affirmation of it are altogether different responses.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Merrill, 291–92.

### *The rebellious son:*

Four charges (18, 20): Stubborn, rebellious, glutton, drunkard

“This English rendering of ‘a glutton and a drunkard’ for *zôlēl wasōbē’* (Hebrew: זולל וסבא) has largely been assumed without investigating the food and drink consumed by the rebellious son in the text’s particular cultural context. The severe punishment appears to those of us in the modern West to be at odds with the alleged crime. What did the rebellious son do that was so threatening to the community that stoning was required?”

“Since nothing suggests that consuming large quantities of food or drink per se was seen as detestable or deserving death in ancient Israel, the crime of the rebellious son in *Deuteronomy 21:18-21* could not be gluttony and drunkenness as we know them today. To understand what he did wrong, we must look at the contexts in which food was eaten and the socioreligious customs associated with food and drink.”

“Laws such as the centralization of sacrifice in *Deuteronomy 12* and the law of the rebellious son in *Deuteronomy 21:18-21* were likely created in response to the widespread sacrifices to other deities across the land.”

“The Hebrew word *zôlēl* (זולל), commonly translated as ‘glutton,’ in this passage is difficult to render in a way that conveys its socioreligious meaning, as there is no real equivalent in English. This is also the case for the word *sōbē’* (סבא), which is frequently translated as ‘drunkard.’ Perhaps a better translation of this passage would be, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a deviant eater and a deviant drinker.’ This translation would place the rebellious son’s actions in the clearer context of non-Yahwistic worship—specifically the accepted foodways—a crime that is repeatedly proscribed in the Bible and carries the penalty of death.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Rebekah Walton, “Gluttony and Drunkenness in Ancient Israel,” *Biblical Archaeological Review* 46, no. 5 (Winter 2020): 52–57.

*Treating an executed body:*

Key idea: “so that you do not defile your land”

Not defiling the land unifies these widely different regulations, see v. 8, v.21 and v. 23.

By nature, sin is defiling. It is like “swimming in a cesspool” — the nature of sin is that it pollutes a life and it pollutes a land.

The Day of Atonement cleansed the land from its pollution. If you fail to expiate the pollution, you put a barrier between God and yourself, God will not hear you.