

Deuteronomy

Lesson #12

The Deuteronomomic Code, Part 4

(22: 9 – 26: 19)

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Review

As we moved into Lesson #11, we encountered six individual sections on the sixth commandment:

6. You shall not murder.

Chapter 19 gave us the first three sections: 1) cities of refuge; 2) boundary markers; and 3) witnesses. Like Moses' discourse on the first five commandments, the sixth commandment provides the *principle*, and the specific laws, statutes and ordinances then branch out from that principle. The common theme is *protecting life*, and the rules are examples of how to apply the principle in specific cases.

Chapter 20 then addressed killing in warfare, while chapter 21 added six additional laws in which life confronts death, and chapter 22: 1-8 addressed the obligation of protecting life, in all its forms.

Preview

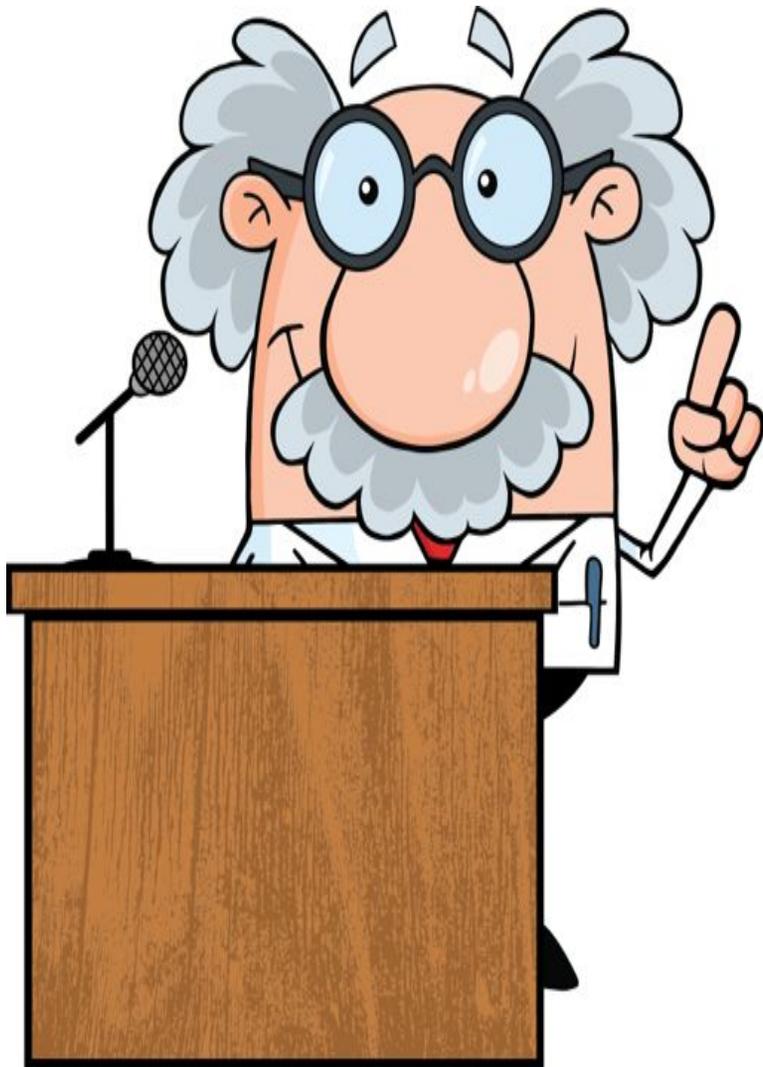
In Lesson #12 we address issues that mirror the last four commandments:

7. You shall not commit adultery;

8. You shall not steal;

9. You shall not bear false witness; and

10. You shall not covet.

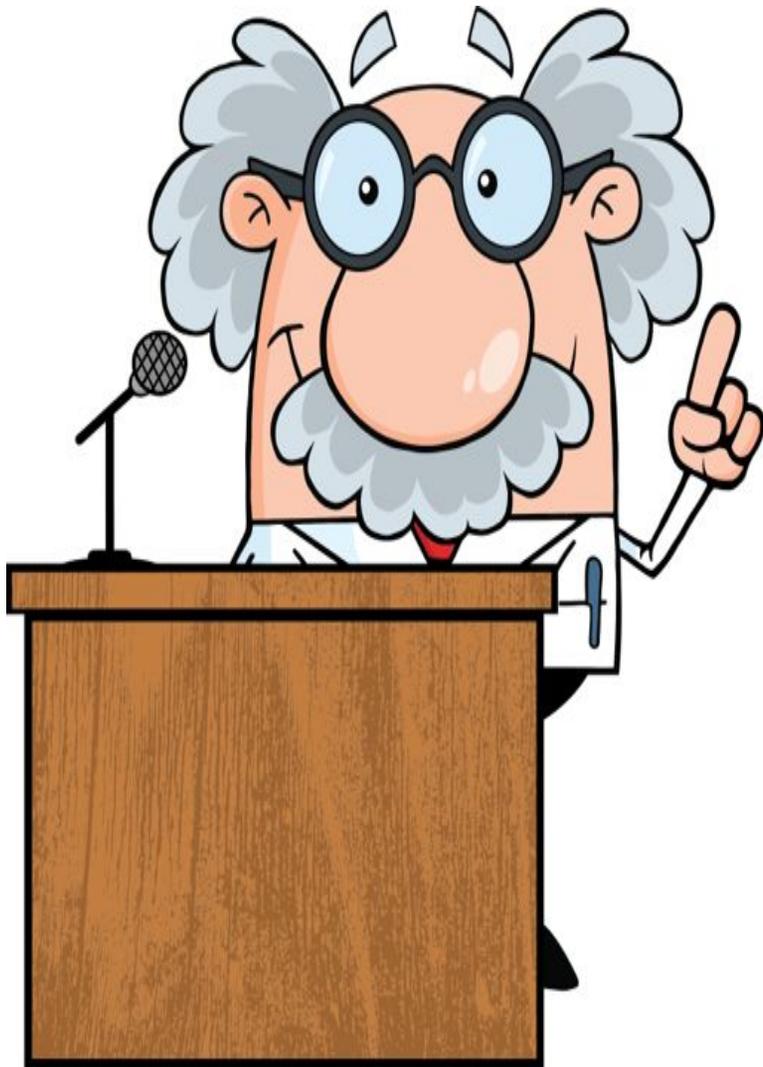


“You shall not commit adultery.”

(Deuteronomy 5: 18)

Strictly defined, adultery is a married man or woman having sexual relations with anyone other than his or her wife or husband. Understood in this way, adultery threatens the foundational building blocks of a covenant community: the family, clan and tribe.

In Lesson #12 we stretch beyond a strict definition to define adultery broadly as confusion over proper boundaries, over what should and should not mix. This broader definition includes any improper mixings or “adulterations,” including those in the realms of agriculture, community, clothing, war and worship.



In the creation story of Genesis 1 & 2, God creates all that is through a series of actions that order chaos, that structure and populate an ordered universe:

- Day 1** **God separates light from dark;**
- Day 2** **God separates up from down;**
- Day 3** **God separates land from water;**
- Day 4** **God places lights in the sky;**
- Day 5** **God fills the water with life;**
- Day 6** **God fills the land with life; and**
- Day 7** **God rests.**

Each day ends in fulfillment and completion, and God pronounces each day “good.”

Creation is balanced and symmetrical, each element of creation linked inextricably in a great “chain of being.”¹

¹ See Arthur O. Lovejoy’s classic, *The Great Chain of Being: a Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936, 1964).



William Blake. "Ancient of Days" (Plate from *Europe a Prophecy*, copy K), 1794. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge University.



Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (2nd register, Side A) shows the Israelite King Jehu bowing before the Assyrian king, c. 825 B.C. British Museum: London. Notice the fringes on their royal garments.

Deuteronomy mirrors this concept of a great, divinely-created “chain of being,” observing separations, distinctions and boundaries in all areas of life.

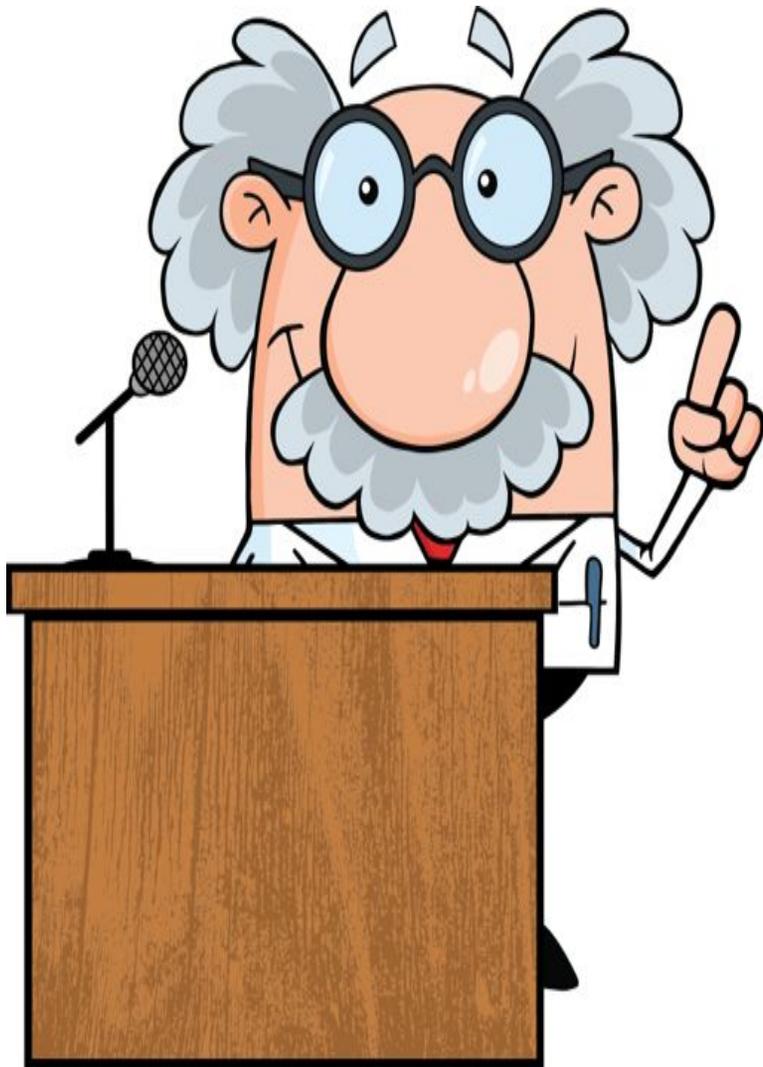
God has separated Israel out from the rest of humanity to be a unique people, God’s “treasured possession,” “a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Exodus 19: 5-6). The tassels or fringes the Israelites are to wear on their garments, prescribed in Deuteronomy 22: 12, distinguish the Israelites as God’s royal people, as such fringes distinguished Assyrian royalty.



We introduced previously the metaphor of Israel as a tree, planted by flowing waters that sinks deep roots in fertile soil, producing abundant fruit, like the blessed man in Psalm 1.

And, indeed, Israel *is* a tree whose roots are Abraham, Isaac and their many offspring; whose trunk is Jacob; whose main branches are Jacob's twelve sons, founders of the twelve tribes of Israel; and whose annual leaves are the Israelites of each generation.

In this genealogical metaphor, every Israelite is a blood relative, a tightly-knit family of clans and tribes, each drawing nourishment from the same sap.



In such a metaphor, adultery is a particularly heinous crime, one that undermines the integrity of the entire community, both now and forever into the future.

Consequently, adultery is not a “private sin” that remains hidden within a family, but a public offense—an assault on the covenant community—punishable by death.

With the seventh commandment as a framework, we may engage the statutes in Deuteronomy 22: 9 – 23: 18 that mirror the commandment.

We set the stage with a Prologue:

“You shall not sow your vineyard with two different kinds of seed, or else its produce shall become forfeit, both the crop you have sown and the yield of the vineyard. You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey harnessed together. You shall not wear cloth made from wool and linen woven together. You shall put tassels on the four corners of the cloak that you wrap around yourself.”

(22: 9-12)



We start off immediately with not mixing opposites: seeds, ox and donkey, wool and linen. Mixing those would make quite a mess! Mix the seeds and you couldn't harvest your crops; an ox and a donkey yoked together would break the plow; and a garment of wool and linen would come apart in the wash!



That's like mixing a dog and a cat— bad idea!



Don't even think about it, Buster

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With the principle of boundaries established, we now move to human relationships.

“If a man, after marrying a woman and having relations with her, comes to dislike her, and accuses her of misconduct and slanders her by saying, ‘I married this woman, but when I approached her I did not find evidence of her virginity,’ the father and mother of the young woman shall take the evidence of her virginity and bring it to the **elders at the city gate**. There the father of the young woman shall say to the elders, ‘I gave my daughter to this man in marriage, but he has come to dislike her, and now accuses her of misconduct, saying: ‘I did not find evidence of your daughter’s virginity!’ And they shall spread out the cloth before the elders of the city. Then these city elders shall take the man and discipline him and fine him one hundred silver shekels . . .

“. . . which they shall give to the young woman's father, because the man slandered a virgin in Israel. She shall remain his wife, and he may not divorce her as long as he lives.

But if this charge is true, and evidence of the young woman's virginity is not found, they shall bring the young woman to the entrance of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death . . .”

(22: 13-21)





Dr. C. teaching at the city gate of Dan, the place where men conduct business.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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To modern readers this passage seems astoundingly sexist, but when read within the context of a patriarchal, patrilineal, tribal culture in which men wield absolute authority within a family, chastity is a woman's highest attribute, fathers control daughters' sexuality and marriages involve covenants and monetary contracts with other families, it becomes understandable.

Within its own time and culture, this statute addresses two important issues. First, if two families negotiate a marriage contract, and a young man betroths a woman as a result, those two families have joined together for mutual financial, social and political benefit. If the betrothed woman has had sexual relations outside of that contract prior to her marriage, she has entered into the contract falsely, undermining the foundation for the relationship between the two families.



Second, if she has had sexual relations with someone else prior to her betrothal and marriage, she may already be pregnant on her wedding night, and any son she might bear would become the legal heir to her new husband's property. Furthermore, if her husband were the eldest son in his family, and she bore someone else's son (unbeknownst to her husband), the child she bore would become legal heir to the entire family's property!

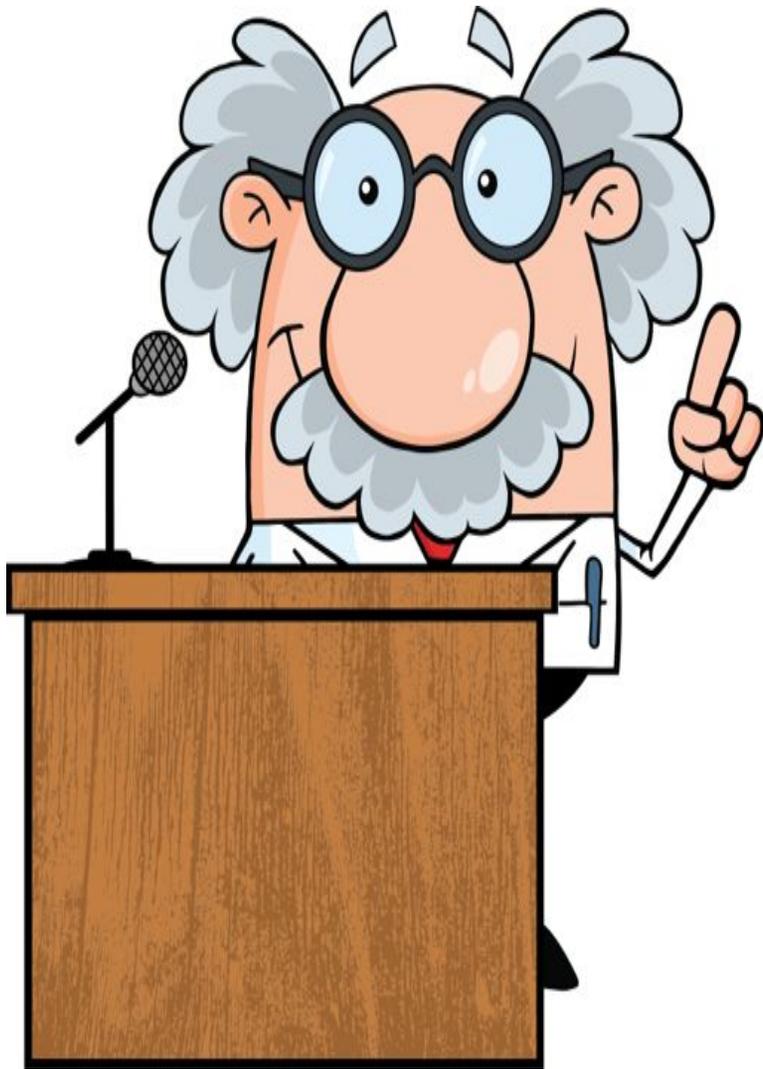
In today's terms all this might seem much ado about nothing, but within Scripture's own historical and cultural context it is central to maintaining the integrity of the family, clan and tribe; their farmland; and their very covenant with God.



Of course, if the husband simply tires of his new wife and uses this statute as an “escape route” from the marriage, the punishment is 100 silver shekels, about \$1,000 in today’s value.

And he would be shamed in front of the community, and never allowed to divorce his wife!

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Now we look at a different twist on sex before marriage, one that has an important application for Christians:

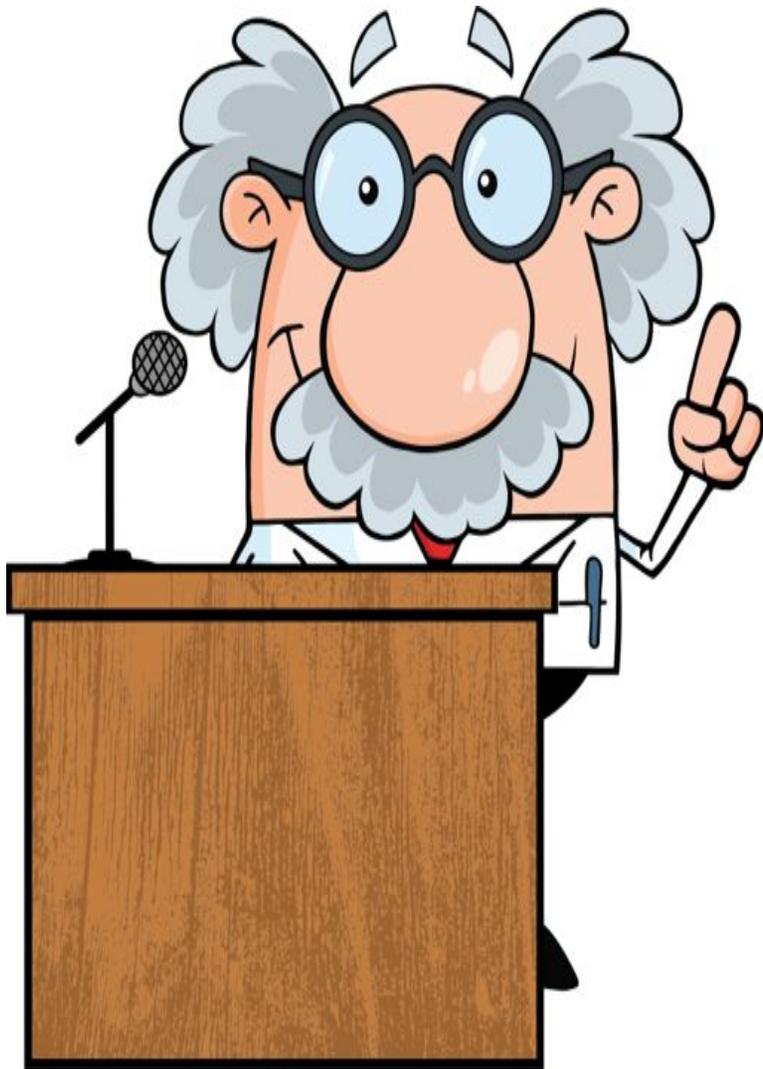
“If there is a young woman, a virgin who is betrothed, and a man comes upon her in the city and lies with her, you shall bring them both out to the gate of the city and there stone them to death: the young woman because she did not cry out though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst.”

(22: 23-24)



**Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *The Annunciation* (oil on canvas), 1849.
Tate Britain, London.**

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**This is the exact statute to
which Joseph could have
subjected Mary!
Here's the story:**

“In the sixth month [of Elizabeth’s pregnancy], the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, ‘Hail, favored one. The Lord is with you.’ But she was **greatly troubled** at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High . . . but Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I have no relations with a man?’ . . .

“. . . and the angel said to her in reply, ‘The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God . . . [and] Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.”

(Luke 1: 26-38)



We read that Mary was “greatly troubled” at Gabriel’s appearance and message, and rightfully so.

The Greek word translated “greatly troubled” is διαταράσσω, [dee-ah-tah-rah’s-so] a compound of διά [a preposition denoting the channel of an act] and ταραύσσo, the feeling of being gripped by the icy hand of “fear” and “dread.”

Mary meets all the criteria for Joseph to invoke Deuteronomy 22: 23-24, drag her to the town gate of Nazareth and have her stoned to death!

Deeply troubled at the news himself, however, Joseph is “unwilling to expose her to shame, [and] decided to divorce her quietly” (Matthew 1: 19).



Now we move to more examples of improper mixing—of “adulterations,” at the same time recognizing that Israel must be flexible and creative in implementing these statutes if they are to prove viable for future generations and the possibility of new life:



• ***“A man shall not marry his father’s wife, nor shall he dishonor his father’s bed” (23: 1).***

• Recall that Reuben did this and was later cursed for it by his father, Jacob (Genesis 35: 22; 49: 3-4). Conversely, a man in Corinth had taken up with his father’s wife—and the Corinthians accepted him and were [wrongly] proud of their tolerance (1 Corinthians 5: 1-5)!

• ***“No one whose testicles have been crushed or whose penis has been cut off may come into the assembly of the Lord” (23: 2).***

• An Ethiopian eunuch had gone to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship, when Philip encountered him heading home on the road to Gaza. Reading Isaiah 53 brought the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ, and Philip baptized him (Acts 8: 26-40).



• ***“No Ammonite or Moabite may ever come into the assembly of the Lord, nor any of their descendants even to the tenth generation come into the assembly of the Lord” (23: 4).***

• ***Ruth the Moabitess says to Naomi the Israelite: “Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God. Where you die I will die, and there be buried” (Ruth 1: 16-17).*** Ruth later marries Boaz and becomes the great-grandmother of King David and the ancestress of Jesus.

• ***“Outside the camp you shall have a place set aside where you shall go. You shall keep a trowel in your equipment and, when you go outside to relieve yourself, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement” (23: 13-14).***

• **Well, duh!**



The public latrine, going where St. Paul went in Ephesus!

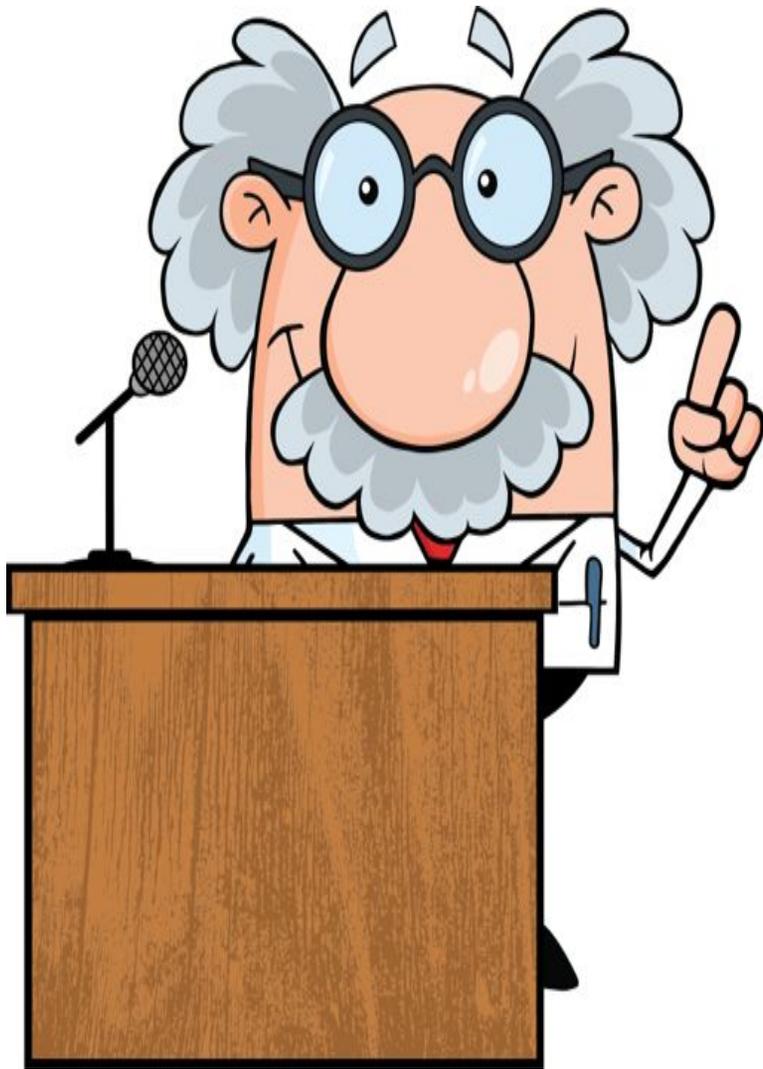
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**I can't believe you
threw toilet humor
into this lesson!**

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“You shall not steal.”

(Deuteronomy 5: 19)

Strictly defined, stealing is taking something that belongs to someone else, without their permission. But once again, Deuteronomy opens the strict definition to a broader understanding.

Many things may constitute theft, including various means of exploiting other people and of diminishing their value as human beings. For Deuteronomy, using people and their circumstances for one’s own advantage is fundamentally wrong.

This includes taking interest on a loan.

“You shall not demand interest from your kindred on a loan of money or of food or of anything else which is loaned. From a foreigner you may demand interest, but you may not demand interest from your kindred, so that the Lord, your God, may bless you in all your undertakings on the land you are to enter to possess.”

(23: 20-21)

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Certainly, the Israelites understood the value of time and money, and it was good and proper to charge interest on a loan to foreigners, as long as that interest was not usurious.

One could not charge interest to a fellow Israelite, however. All Israelites are family, and loans were to be an act of kindness, not a means of enriching one's self.

Exodus introduces the principle:

“If you lend money to my people, the poor among you, you must not be like a money lender; you must not demand interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; for this is his only covering; it is the cloak for his body. What will he sleep in? If he cried out to me, I will listen; for I am compassionate.”

(Exodus 22: 24-26)



As charging interest to a fellow Israelite is a form of theft, so is breaking a vow to the Lord —or to anyone else, for that matter:

“When you make a vow to the Lord, your God, you shall not delay in fulfilling it, for the Lord, your God, will surely require it of you and you will be held guilty. Should you refrain from making a vow, you will not be held guilty. But whatever your tongue utters you must be careful to do, just as you freely vowed to the Lord, your God, with your own mouth.”

(23: 22-24)

As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all . . . let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘No.’

(Matthew 5: 33-37)

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Which brings us to an interesting form of theft: a married couple, having divorced and remarried, chooses to marry each other again!

“When a man, after marrying a woman, is later displeased with her because he finds in her something indecent, and he writes out a bill of divorce and hands it to her, thus dismissing her from his house, if on leaving his house she goes and becomes the wife of another man, and the second husband, too, comes to dislike her and he writes out a bill of divorce and hands it to her, thus dismissing her from his house, or if this second man who has married her dies, then her former husband, who dismissed her, may not again take her as his wife after she has become defiled. That would be an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring such guilt upon the land the Lord, your God, is giving you as a heritage.”

(24: 1-4)

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On the surface, this is a puzzling statute. Why would a man (or a woman) want to do a second time what didn't work the first time. Isn't that the definition of insanity, do the same thing repeatedly, expecting different results? Or perhaps it's merely the triumph of hope over experience!

But we digress.

The real issue in Deuteronomy is that such a remarriage brings "guilt upon the land" (24: 4), suggesting that we are dealing with ceremonial uncleanness, the remarriage transgressing "boundaries." Jesus brings clarity to the issue in the Sermon on the Mount:

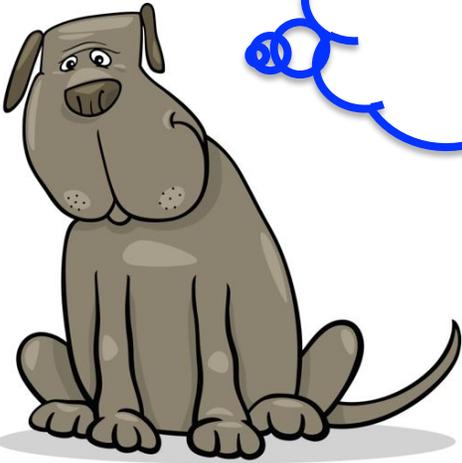
"But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

(Matthew 5: 32)

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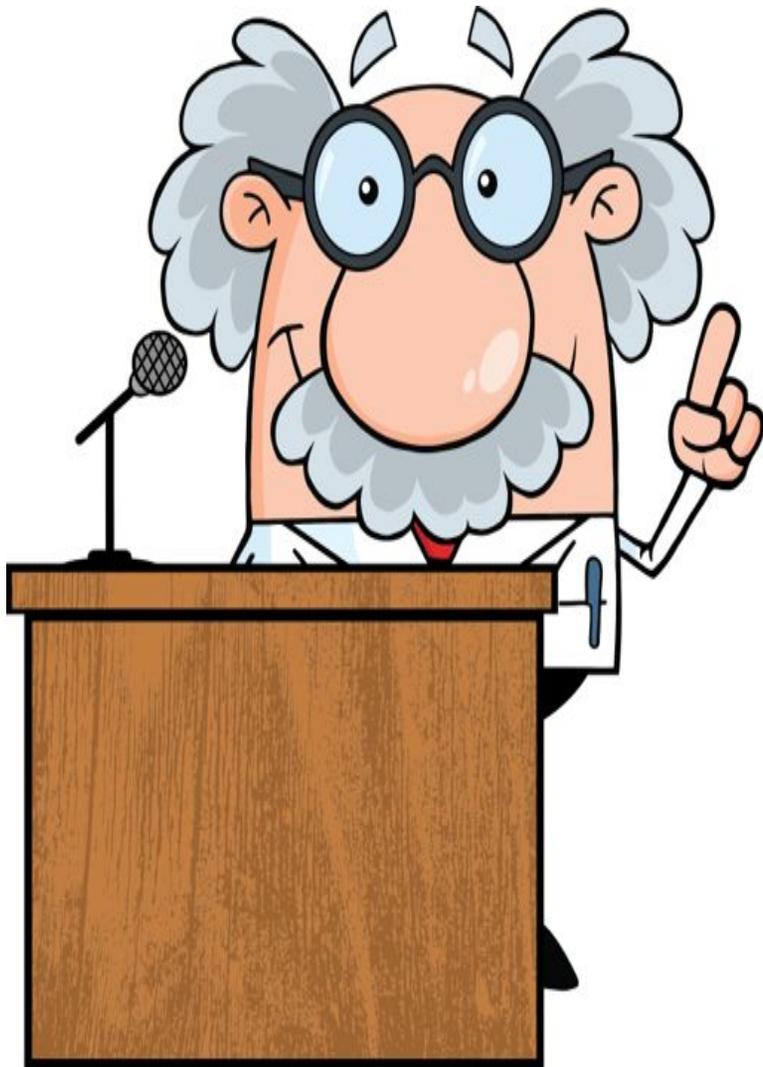


I see! So if the man divorced his wife and she remarries, she has committed adultery. Thus, if her 2nd husband divorces her, or he dies, and the 1st husband remarries her, he too commits adultery and thus defiles the land.



My head hurts!

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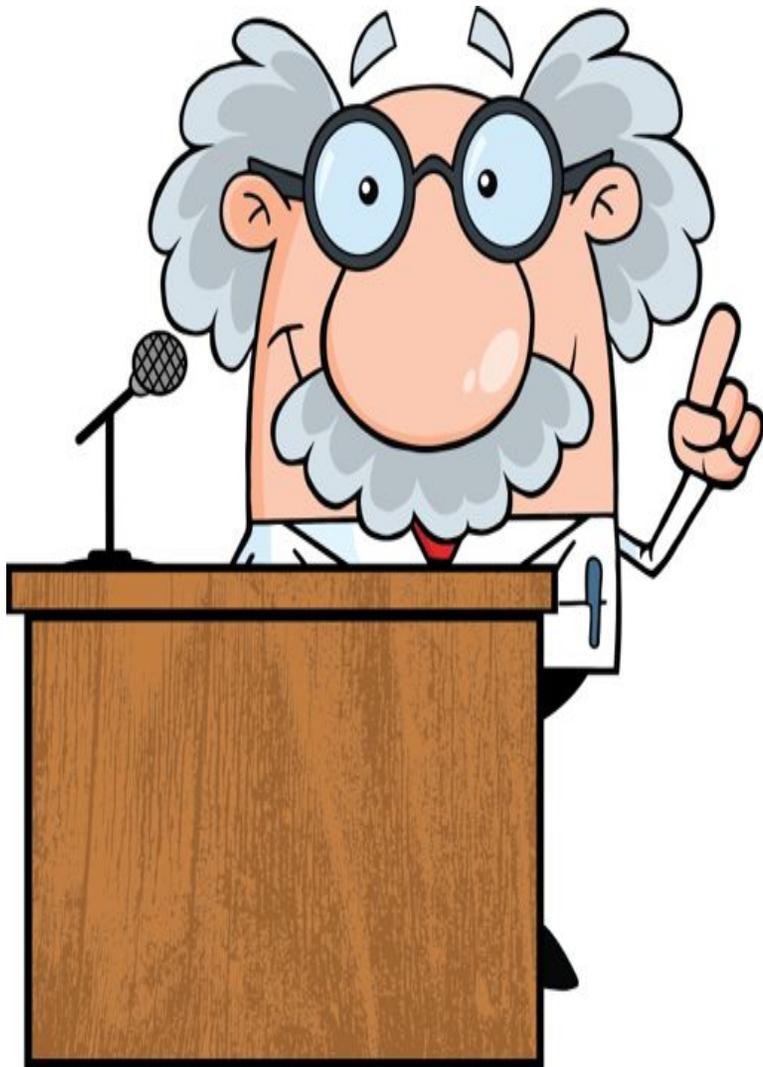


After this bit of legal casuistry, here's a bright gleam of light:

“When a man is newly wed, he shall not go out on a military expedition, nor shall any duty be imposed on him. He shall be exempt fro one year for the sake of his family, to bring joy to the wife he has married.”

(24: 5)

Depriving the young bride and groom of joy is a form of theft!



“You shall not bear false witness.”

(Deuteronomy 5: 20)

Deuteronomy defines “bearing false witness” broadly as any action that diminishes the honor and integrity of another person.

It holds true that the formal definition of “bearing false witness” stands: perjury in court is a grave injustice that can destroy an innocent person’s reputation, financial security and even result in his death. No mercy should be shown to a lying scoundrel who defames another in court.

But here, Deuteronomy defends the dignity of all persons and respect for all life, beginning with community leaders and ending with the humane treatment of the lowly ox.

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This section begins in an odd fashion, with a word on “scaly infection,” or *sara’at*, a generic term for a variety of skin diseases, discussed in depth in Leviticus 13:

“In an attack of scaly infection [sara’at] you shall be careful to observe exactly and to carry out all the instructions the levitical priests give you, as I have commanded them: observe them carefully. Remember what the Lord, your God, did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt.”

(24: 8-9)

Like *sara’at*, false witness, gossip and innuendo are subtle and barely noticed, but they spread quickly, and if not dealt with, they are deadly.

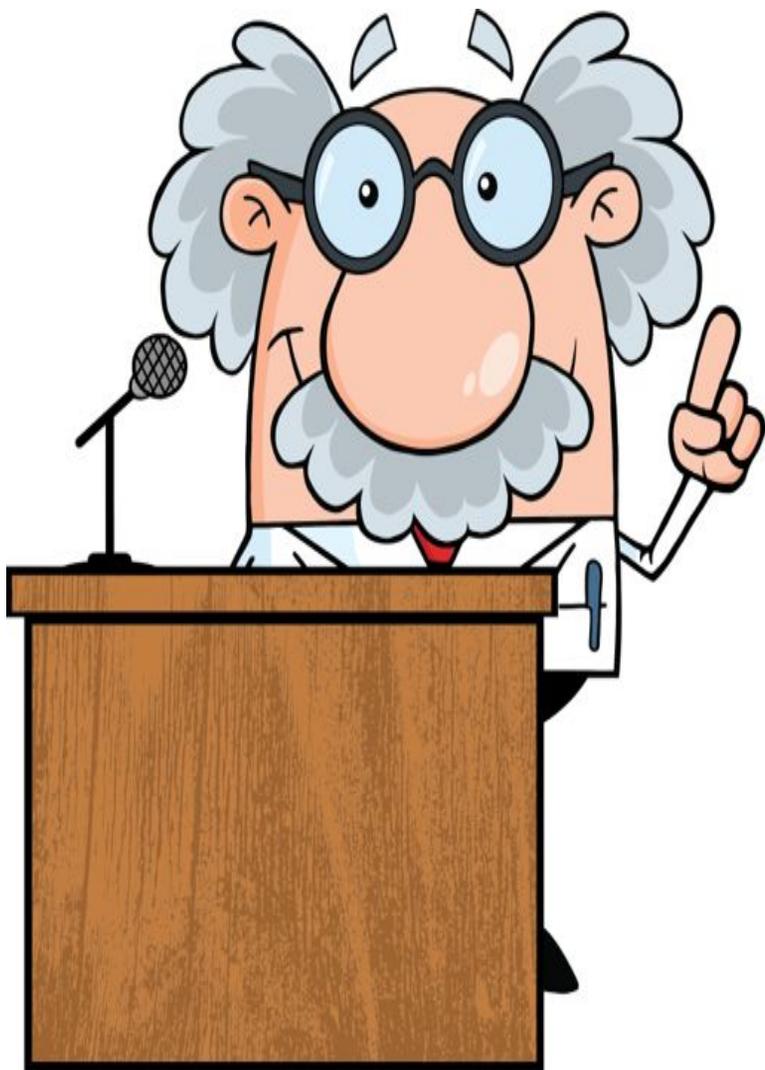
We then move into a series of “false witnessing”:



- *“When you make a loan of any kind to your neighbor, you shall not enter the house to receive the pledge, but you shall wait outside until the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge outside to you” (24: 10-11);*
- *“If the person is poor, you shall not sleep in the pledged garment, but shall definitely return it at sunset” (24: 12-13);*
- *“You shall not exploit the poor and needy hired servant . . . you shall pay the servant’s wages before the sun goes down” (24: 14-15);*
- *“Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents” (24: 16);*
- *“You shall not deprive the resident alien or the orphan [or widow] of justice” (24: 17);*



- *“When you reap the harvest of your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; let it be for the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow” (24: 19);*
- *“Forty lashes may be given, but no more” (25: 3);*
- *“You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out grain” (25: 4).*



“You shall not covet.”

(Deuteronomy 5: 21)

Deuteronomy now moves to the tenth commandment, “You shall not covet,” which broadly embraces the wrongful desires that threaten other people’s property and security, and by doing so, diminish their humanity.

Coveting grows out of a self-referential life, a life in which one feels entitled to property, privileges, and positions that rightfully belong to others. It embodies an ethos in which the ends justify the means, ends achieved by deceit, deception and fraud.

We begin with the “Levirate Marriage” . . . and a story:

“When brothers live together and one of them dies without a son, the widow of the deceased shall not marry anyone outside the family; but her husband’s brother shall come to her, marrying her and performing the duty of a brother-in-law. The firstborn son she bears shall continue the name of the deceased brother, that his name may not be blotted out from Israel.”

(25: 5-6)



The “Levirite Marriage” emerges out of the importance of family, clan and tribal relationships and the genealogical structure of Israelite society. Family cohesion and integrity must be maintained throughout the generations.

When a man dies without producing a son as his heir, it is his brother’s obligation (or the next male relative in the genealogical line) to marry his brother’s widow and produce a son for him. That son will then become the legal heir of the dead brother, thus carrying on his family line.

But what if the brother is not willing to do so?

We have exactly that case in the story of Ruth, the Moabitess.



**Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. *Ruth in Boaz's Field* (oil on canvas), 1828.
National Gallery, London.**

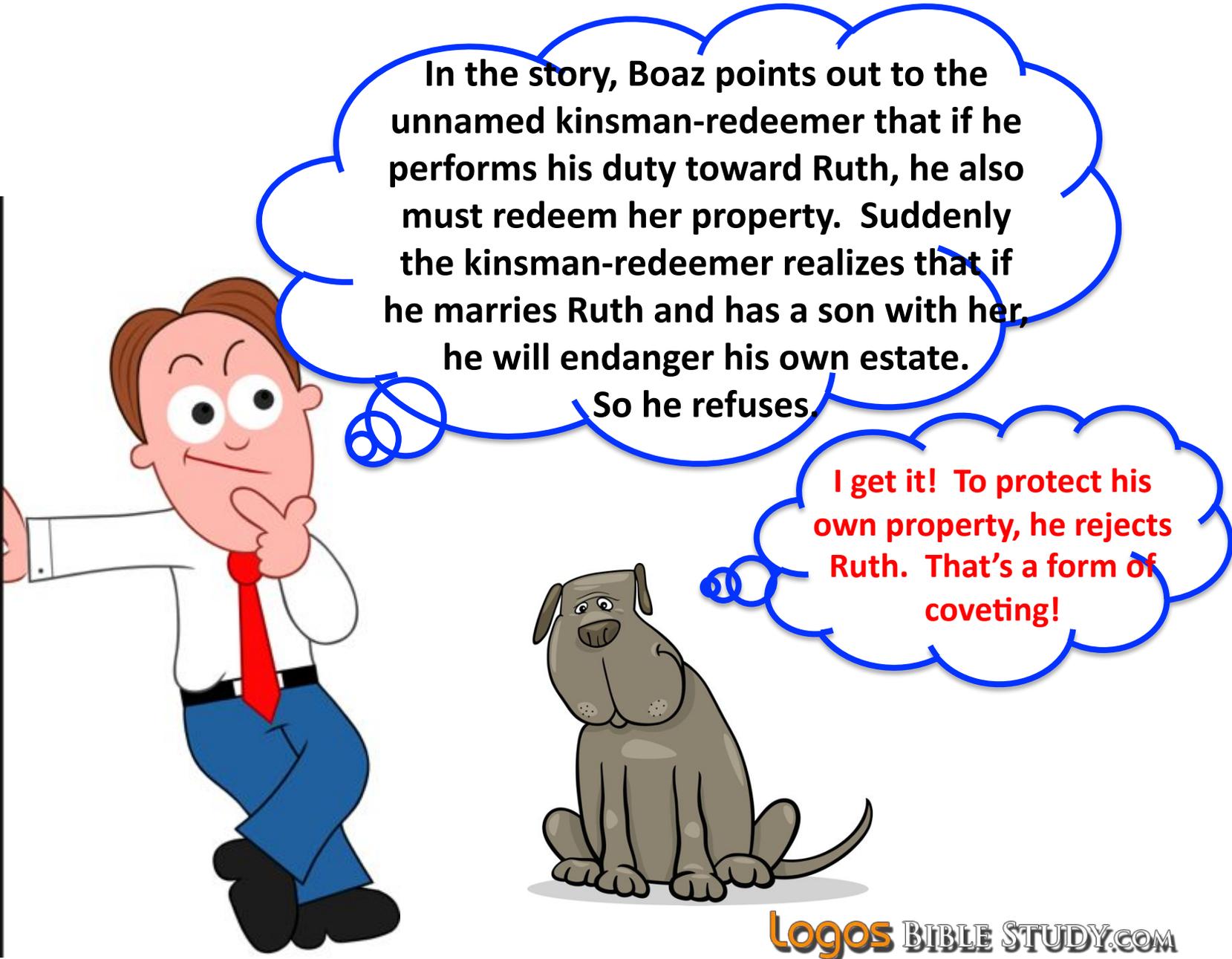
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Ruth had been married to Naomi's son, Mahlon, who died while in Moab. Boaz is a relative of Naomi, and he is head over heels in love with Ruth . . . but there is another "kinsman-redeemer," a closer relative than Boaz.

To marry Ruth, Boaz must get the closer kinsman-redeemer to refuse her. In Deuteronomy, if the kinsman-redeemer refuses to perform his duty, *"his sister-in-law, in the presence of the elders, shall go up to him and strip his sandal from his foot and spit in his face . . . and his name shall be called in Israel, 'the house of the man stripped of his sandal'"* (25: 9-10).

The story is fraught with meaning (and not a small amount of humor and irony). In the end, Boaz gets the girl, and she becomes the great grandmother of King David . . . and the ancestress of Jesus.



In the story, Boaz points out to the unnamed kinsman-redeemer that if he performs his duty toward Ruth, he also must redeem her property. Suddenly the kinsman-redeemer realizes that if he marries Ruth and has a son with her, he will endanger his own estate.

So he refuses.

I get it! To protect his own property, he rejects Ruth. That's a form of coveting!

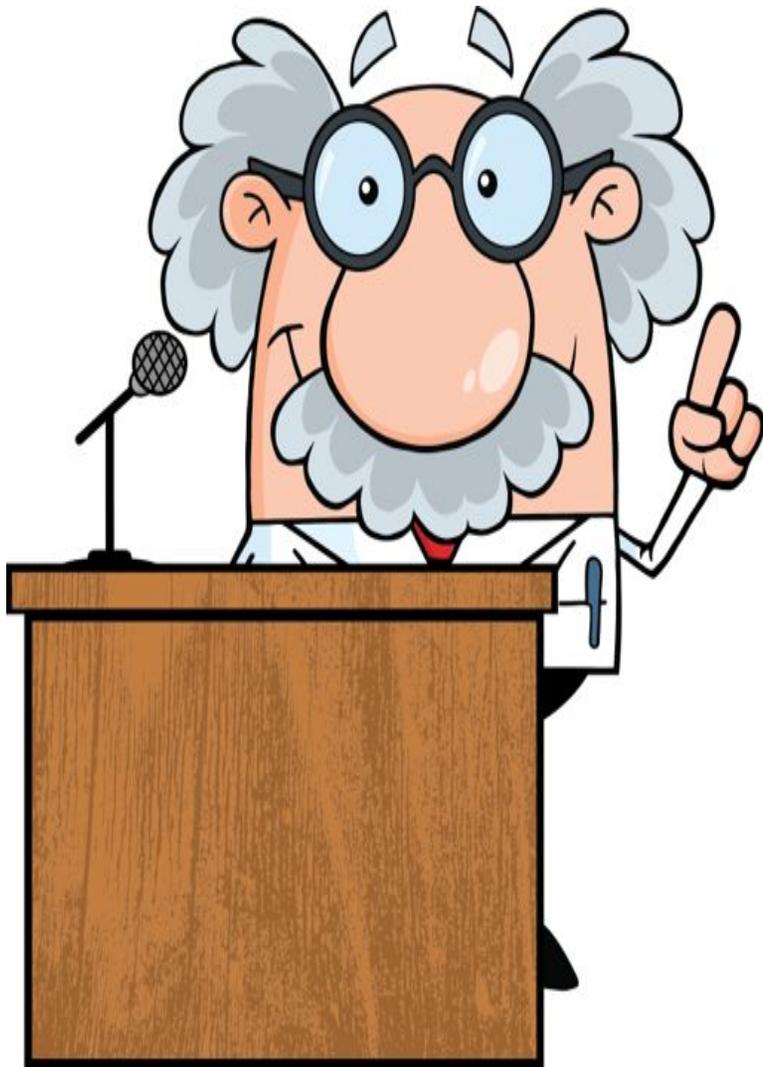
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In English the humor of the Ruth story is beyond subtle, but in Hebrew it is obvious and bawdy!

In Hebrew the word “foot” is *regel* [reh’-gel], and it refers to the entire lower extremity: toes, foot, leg and euphemistically, the penis (see Exodus 4: 25 when Zipporah, in anger, circumcises her son and tosses the foreskin at Moses!).

The sandal, which slips over the “foot,” suggests the vagina. If this is the case, when the kinsman-redeemer rejects Ruth, he says to Boaz: “Acquire it [Ruth and her property] *yourself*,” and he drew off his sandal and gave it to Boaz, graphically giving “Ruth” to Boaz!



Conversely, when the rejected woman in Deuteronomy strips the sandal from the kinsman-redeemer's foot, she is saying: "I reject this man. Keep his 'foot' away from me!"

The story sets up nicely the rest of Deuteronomy 25-26's examples of coveting!



Ha, ha, ha!

Questions for discussion and thought

1. Why is a woman's virginity before she marries so important in Deuteronomy?
2. Adultery is punishable by death in Deuteronomy. Why? What famous example can you think of where this punishment comes into play?
3. Some of the statutes in Deuteronomy—like those dealing with eunuchs and Moabites—are later rightly ignored in Scripture. What does this say about *torah*?
4. Why can a man not remarry a woman he has divorced, once she has remarried and been divorced or widowed again?
5. What is a “levirate marriage” and why is it important?

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