

Are Tattoos Sinful?

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I believe, based upon Leviticus 19:28, that tattoos are sinful. What I mean by tattoos is a permanent branding or marking on one's body, whether a religious symbol or other type symbol. *Noah Webster's 1828 Dictionary* defines "tattoo" in the following way:

TATTOO', v.t. *In the South Sea isles.* To prick the skin, and stain the punctured spots with a black substance, forming lines and figures upon the body. In some isles, the inhabitants tattoo the face, in others only the body. The same practice exists among other rude nations.

TATTOO', n. Figures on the body made by punctures and stains in lines and figures.

Yahweh commands against this in the above Scripture, and we should obey Him in this regard. It should be also noted that Leviticus 19:28 covers marking your body by burning or branding when the Hebrew text is consulted. This will be explained in the word definitions to follow.

There is no reason to assume that the law here (in Lev. 19:28b) speaks of marking one's body "for the dead" as some have proposed. The phrase "for the dead" is only used in direct relation to the cuttings in the flesh. It ("for the dead") doesn't refer to any of the aforementioned prohibitions (vs. 26, 27) nor to the sentence concerning printing the marks upon oneself. We see other references in the Bible that show people to have cut or disfigured their bodies for the dead (Jer. 16:6; 41:1-5). Deut. 14:1 does prohibit making baldness between your eyes for the dead, but once again this is specifically stated just as the cuttings in Lev. 19:28.

One should also take into consideration that cuttings in the flesh should not be done even if it is *not* for the dead. Should a person just go around gashing their body and proclaim, "Hey, I'm not doing it for the dead so it's okay." Of course this is ridiculous. 1 Kings 18:28 (and the surrounding verses) shows how the priests of Baal cut themselves to try and appease their mighty one Baal; they weren't cutting themselves "for the dead" in mourning, but the practice was still detestable. I think what we have in the first part of Lev. 19:28 is Yahweh meaning, "Do not make cuttings in your flesh, *even* for the dead." In other words, Yahweh doesn't want a person *mutilating* his flesh to start with, much less for the dead. A person shouldn't think that just because a loved one dies and they are mourning the death of that loved one that they can cut their flesh.

All this being said, we need to keep in mind that the “for the dead” clause isn’t even connected to printing marks on one’s body, but even if by some chance it was, wouldn’t the meaning or understanding be that one shouldn’t do it *even* for the dead?

When we look at the practices of the heathen in ancient times we see that marks were printed on their bodies in devotion to their particular religion or mighty one. Yahweh did not want His people to be like the heathens surrounding them; therefore He prohibited them from doing the same things. I believe this is the origin of tattoos and thus a believer in Yahweh should not get a tattoo even in this day and time, just like a believer in Yahweh should follow the laws of Lev. 19:26, 27, and 29.

This does not mean that a person who tattooed their body prior to knowledge of it being sinful cannot receive forgiveness. I know some wonderful people who in their past life of sin received tattoos on their body. Yahweh will forgive them if they ask Him to do so and repent which means to turn away from it, i.e. to never do it again. The blood of the Messiah will cleanse them of this unrighteousness. Here are a few study notes to help understand what I have stated.

Leviticus 19:28 (Different Bible Versions)

You are not to make gashes on your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves; I am Yahweh. [Holman Christian Standard Bible]

Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am Yahweh. [King James Version]

And on deed men ye schulen not kitte youre fleischis, nether ye schulen make to you ony fyguris, ether markis in youre fleisch; Y am Yahweh. [Wycliffe Old English Bible]

Ye shall not rent youre flesh for any soules sake, nor printe any markes apon you: I am Yahweh. [Tyndale Old English Translation]

You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you. I am Yahweh. [World English Bible]

And a cutting for the soul ye do not put in your flesh; and a writing, a cross-mark, ye do not put on you; I am Yahweh. [Young’s Literal Translation]

And ye shall not make cuttings in your body for a dead body, and ye shall not inscribe on yourselves any marks. I am Yahweh your Mighty One. [LXX – Greek Septuagint]

“Marks” (Gesenius’ Hebrew Chaldee Lexicon)

#7085 qaaqa – “stigma, a mark branded on the skin, Lev. 19:28”

“Stigma” (Websters 1828 Dictionary)

STIGMA, n. *L.*, *Gr.*, *to prick or stick.*

1. A brand; a mark made with a burning iron.

“Print” (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia)

The injunction of Lev. 19:28, which is translated "print," is commonly, and probably rightly, in view of the Hebrew word, supposed to refer to the permanent marks of tattooing which may or may not have been made by this printing process.

Adam Clarke’s Comments

Nor print any marks upon you - It was a very ancient and a very general custom to carry marks on the body in honor of the object of their worship. All the castes of the Hindoos bear on their foreheads or elsewhere what are called the sectarian marks, which distinguish them, not only in a civil but also in a religious point of view, from each other. Most of the barbarous nations lately discovered have their faces, arms, breasts, etc., curiously carved or tattooed, probably for superstitious purposes. Ancient writers abound with accounts of marks made on the face, arms, etc., in honor of different idols; and to this the inspired penman alludes, Re 13:16, Re 13:17; 14:9, Re 14:11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4, where false worshippers are represented as receiving in their hands and in their forehead the marks of the beast. These were called στίγματα stigmata among the Greeks, and to these St. Paul refers when he says, I bear about in my body the Marks (*stigmata*) of the Lord Jesus; Ga 6:17. I have seen several cases where persons have got the figure of the cross, the Virgin Mary, etc., made on their arms, breasts, etc., the skin being first punctured, and then a blue colouring matter rubbed in, which is never afterward effaced. All these were done for superstitious purposes, and to such things probably the prohibition in this verse refers. Calmet, on this verse, gives several examples. See also Mariner's Tonga Islands, vol. i. p. 311-313.

John Gill’s Comments

nor print any marks upon you; Aben Ezra observes, there are some that say this is in connection with the preceding clause, for there were who marked their bodies with a known figure, by burning, for the dead; and he adds, and there are to this day such, who are marked in their youth in their faces, that they may be known; these prints or marks were made with ink or black lead, or, however, the incisions in the flesh were filled up therewith; but this was usually done as an idolatrous practice; so says Ben Gersom, this was the custom of the Gentiles in ancient times, to imprint upon themselves the mark of an idol, to show that they were his servants; and the law cautions from doing this, as he adds, to the exalted name (the name of [the Mighty One]): in the Misnah it is said, a man is not guilty unless he writes the name, as it is said, Le 19:28; which the Talmudists and the commentators interpret of the name of an idol, and not of [the Mighty One].

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary

nor print any marks upon you--by tattooing, imprinting figures of flowers, leaves, stars, and other fanciful devices on various parts of their person. The impression was made sometimes by means of a hot iron, sometimes by ink or paint, as is done by the Arab females of the present day and the different castes of the Hindus. It is probable that a strong propensity to adopt such marks in honor of some idol gave occasion to the prohibition in this verse; and they were wisely forbidden, for they were signs of apostasy; and, when once made, they were insuperable obstacles to a return. (See allusions to the practice, Isa 44:5; Re 13:17; 14:1).