

Comparing Galatians 5:12 with Deuteronomy 23:1

by Matthew Janzen

Intro

So about three years ago (2016) I had a dear brother of mine share with me his understanding of Deuteronomy 23:1. He coupled it with a few other texts, and then made a remark on a NT text in Galatians. I listened. It made sense. I shook my head, and then kind of stored it away.

I've been teaching on the book of Galatians since May of 2017. I've started studying the epistle back in late 2016. As of today (November 2019) I've taught all the way through Galatians 1:1 to 5:6, and I've recently been studying on 5:7-12. In combing verse 12, I have circled back to what my friend told me back in 2016, and I believe he was on the right thought path. I'm persuaded that Galatians 5:12 is somewhat of a commentary on Deuteronomy 23:1. Let me explain.

Galatians

Long story short on Galatians: Paul is writing to Gentiles who have accepted the Messiah by faith. He is combating a false gospel that is being taught by some influencers (either Jewish Christians or proselyte Jews) that Gentile converts have to also convert to Judaism through circumcision in order to be forgiven, saved, or hold first class status in the Covenant community. My main point here is that Paul is combating a *false teaching*. The influencers hold a *position of authority*, and are going behind Paul with their false *doctrine*.

The Word Under Consideration

In Galatians 5:12 Paul writes this (from the older, literal KJV):

I would they were even cut off which trouble you.

The modern, literal NASB reads:

I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves.

The translation I use predominantly, the HCSB, reads:

I wish those who are disturbing you might also get themselves castrated.

The KJV sounds the mildest of the three, and is not inaccurate, but the HCSB (I believe) brings across the best sense of Paul's words. Paul is calling for the castration of those who are teaching a false gospel.

That sounds extreme because it is extreme, but it only echoes what Paul said in the first chapter, that those teaching this false gospel are under a curse (Gal. 1:8-9). He's also written that the influencers in Galatia should be cast out like the bondwoman and her son

(Gal. 4:28-30). Cursed, castrated, and cast-out is what Paul calls for. I don't think he was trying to appease the masses to join his mega-church.

The Greek word translated cut off (KJV), mutilated (NASB), and castrated (HCSB) is *apokopto* (or a form of that word). It is defined by Thayer's as "to cut off, amputate," and Strongs as "to amputate; reflexively (by irony) to mutilate (the privy parts)." Vines lists Galatians 5:12 as a metaphorical use of the word; they feel Paul was speaking of excommunication rather than castration. Some commentators take this view, but most do not. I do believe Paul had excommunication in mind (to some degree), but I don't believe that means Paul had *less* than castration in view.

When we look at the word in the NT, we find it's used 6 times. It's used twice in Mark 9:43-45, where Yeshua says if your hand or foot cause you to sin, cut them off.¹ In John 18:10, 26 it's used twice of Peter cutting off the right ear of Malchus. In Acts 27:32 it's used of cutting off the ropes on a boat. This use isn't speaking of amputating a body part, but we do see that it still carries the meaning of actually cutting something away. And then of course it's used once in Galatians 5:12, in a letter where Paul has been speaking of circumcision over and over again. It makes sense that Paul would tell the men who were pushing circumcision for salvation to just go ahead and castrate the whole male organ. He was upset.

*Ellicot's Commentary for English Readers*² sums this up nicely:

The Authorised version is undoubtedly wrong here. The words may mean "cut themselves off," *i.e.*, from your communion, but it seems far best to take the words, with all the ancient Greek interpreters and a large majority of modern commentators, including Dr. Lightfoot and Bishop Wordsworth, as referring to an extension of the rite of circumcision, such as the Galatians might see frequently practised by the priests of Cybele, whose worship had one of its most important centres in their country—I *would they would even make themselves eunuchs*. Let them carry their self-mutilation still further, and not stop at circumcision.³

The Cult of Cybele

It is interesting, and I think of note, that the area of Galatia was known for a castration practice in the cult of Cybele. Cybele was said to be the daughter of Zeus and mother earth; born a hermaphrodite, but castrated by the gods.

In the common myth about Cybele, Attis, a boy she loved, castrated himself; Cybele mourned for him. During her seasonal rites, her worshipers joined the mourning and her lower-level priests followed Attis' example. Inspired by wild music, they would enter a

¹ I should mention that I do believe Yeshua is speaking metaphorically here, but the idea of amputating a body part is still apparent in the metaphor.

² Taken from Biblehub.com

³ In a paper dedicated to understanding how to translate Galatians 5:12, D.F. Tolmie states, "In Galatians 5:12, it is clear from the context that Paul has in mind the removal of the private parts of his opponents... In light of the arguments in respect of the context outlined above, and the way in which the word was normally used in Greek literature, one can safely assume that the best interpretation of the word is that it refers to having one's private parts removed." (*The Interpretation and Translation of Galatians 5:12*, 2009 - academia.edu, pages 88, 90)

mad frenzy and would castrate themselves in honor of the Anatolian mother goddess Cybele. This was not the only rite of the mother goddess, but it was the one that easily generated the most interest. G. Walter Hansen suggests that in Gal. 5:12 Paul may have in mind 'a barbaric ritual that actually took place in his day in Galatian pagan temples. The priests of Cybele, the mother goddess of the earth, castrated themselves with ritual pincers and placed their testicles in a box.' Not everyone approved. When Romans adopted the cult of Cybele, they refused to use a eunuch as priest. People regularly ridiculed the Galli, especially with regard to their self-castration. They were counted effeminate, a condition that most Mediterranean men viewed negatively (for men). Although other cultic settings also include some reports of castrations, the Galli were the most visible representatives of this activity.⁴

I think the point that Keener, Hansen, and other commentators are making, is that the Galatian converts to the Messiah would have been familiar with the practices in honor of Cybele; one of which was to castrate one's self. In bringing up castration, the minds of the Galatian converts would immediately go to this pagan practice, and they would see how Paul viewed the influencers in Galatia as committing a serious offense (by comparing them to the cult of Cybele).

We don't get this straight from the text of Galatians, but it's never wise to dismiss the cultural context of the people who are being written to. Words and phrases that aren't familiar to us, and don't mean a whole lot in our culture, could have been recognized right away in the past Galatian culture.

While Paul's words in 5:12 may have been a poke of comparison with the cult of Cybele, I think that there is deeper significance when we compare him to the Septuagint Torah.

A Law Concerning Castration

In Deuteronomy 23:1(or 2) we read (LXX):

He that is fractured or mutilated in his private parts shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord. (Brenton)

A castrated male and one made a eunuch shall not enter the assembly of the Lord. (NETS)

The word mutilated or the phrase "one made a eunuch" is taken from the Greek base word *apokopto*, the same word Paul used in Galatians 5:12.

The KJV (taken from the Hebrew OT) renders this verse as:

He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD.

⁴ *Galatians, a Commentary*; Craig S. Keener, pages 474-475. Keener lists ample footnotes as source material.

My HCSB reads:

No man whose testicles have been crushed or whose penis has been cut off may enter the LORD's assembly.

The Hebrew text and the Septuagint bring across the same idea. A castrated man was not allowed to enter Yahweh's assembly or congregation. Did Paul have this in mind when he wrote Galatians 5:12?

What is a Eunuch?

The NETS used the phrase "one made a eunuch" in Deuteronomy 23:1. The word eunuch is basically a transliteration of the Greek word *eunouchos* meaning "bed-keeper." In the ancient world, men of high rank who had a harem (multiple wives or concubines) would have lesser men in charge of and take care of these women and their belongings. These bed-keepers (or eunuchs) would often be castrated as a way to ensure to the king or official that his harem would not be tainted by his worker(s). The word *eunouchos* came to be used then of a man who was born impotent, or castrated (by another) later on in life. It can also refer to a man who chooses by grace to be celibate, dedicating his entire life to the work of the kingdom. Yeshua speaks of these three types of eunuchs in Matthew 19:12 (HCSB):

For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb, there are eunuchs who were made by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves that way because of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.

What is the Status of a Eunuch?

Based on Deuteronomy 23:1, was a man born impotent, or made a eunuch by someone else, unfit for the kingdom? Does not being allowed to enter the assembly carry with it the idea of a church service or community of believers? Does the physical eunuch have any chance of participation among Yahweh's people? Let's look at a text in the prophet Isaiah (KJV).

Thus saith the LORD, Keep ye judgment, and do justice: for my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man that doeth this, and the son of man that layeth hold on it; that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil. Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the LORD, speak, saying, The LORD hath utterly separated me from his people: neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree. For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off. Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the LORD, to serve him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be his servants, every

one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant; Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people. The Lord GOD which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith, Yet will I gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him. (Isaiah 56:1-8, KJV)

I could write an entire paper on these verses, but here I'd just like to center in on the mention of the eunuch. Yahweh is telling the eunuch to NOT say to himself, "Behold, I am a dry tree." The eunuch would make this declaration because he did not physically possess the semen by which he could sire (pro-create) physical offspring. "Behold I am a dry tree," is a phrase of depression; it's a sentence which depicts the eunuch's disgust with himself. Yahweh is attempting to encourage a discouraged eunuch here.

He tells the eunuchs that if they (1) keep the sabbaths, (2) choose the things that please Yahweh, and (3) take hold of His covenant, that He will give them a name **in his house and within His walls** that would be better than if the man were to have sons and daughters. That's normally how a man's good name carried on, by having children to follow in his righteous footsteps. This couldn't physically happen with a eunuch, but Yahweh would cause a righteous eunuch's name to carry on among the people, and this name is an everlasting name in the House of Yahweh, which I take to mean Yahweh's Temple or Tabernacle.

Does this Violate the Law?

What about Deuteronomy 23:1? We could just throw it out and go with Isaiah, or we could throw Isaiah out and stick with the Torah. Some commentators think that Isaiah 56 is referencing a New Covenant time in which the law of Deuteronomy 23:1 has been rescinded.⁵ I believe that the law of Deuteronomy 23:1 has not been abolished, and I believe that the harmony between it and Isaiah 56 is to recognize that the "congregation or assembly of Yahweh" is a reference to a high ranking official position in the nation of Israel. A eunuch (physical) could worship Yahweh, come to the temple, partake in the sabbaths, etc. but he could not serve in a leadership capacity among the people.

Congregation, in Context

Sometimes, the phrase "congregation" or "congregation of Yahweh" carries with it the meaning of the entire community of the people of Israel. At other times however, it specifies a ruling class within Israel; the elders or judges among the people.

And if the whole congregation (edah) of Israel sin through ignorance, and the thing be hid from the eyes of the assembly (qahal), and they have done somewhat against any of the commandments of the LORD concerning things which should not be done, and are guilty; When the sin, which they have sinned against it, is known, then the congregation (qahal) shall offer a young bullock for the sin, and bring him before the tabernacle

⁵ See the Pulpit Commentary and Albert Barnes' Notes on Deuteronomy 23:1.

of the congregation (moed). (Leviticus 4:13-14, KJV)

We've got three uses of the English word congregation here, and one use of the word assembly, and you'll notice I've placed their respective Hebrew base words in the text.

The point I'd like to bring out is what I see as a difference between the (1) whole congregation of Israel, and (2) the eyes of the assembly. I think the text is speaking of the sin of ignorance by the whole congregation escaping the eyes of the assembly of elders. The elders are to be the ones who govern the people, and look out for the people as a whole (Exodus 18:21-22; Deuteronomy 1:15-17).

In verse 14, where we read of the congregation offering a young bullock for sin, that could either be a reference to the whole congregation bringing an offering to the Tabernacle, or the assembly of Priests who would physically offer the sin offering for the people. It is interesting that the word congregation in verse 14 is *qahal*, matching the "eyes of the assembly (*qahal*)" in verse 13; whereas the "whole congregation of Israel" in this instance is taken from the Hebrew word *edah*.

Then ye shall appoint you cities to be cities of refuge for you; that the slayer may flee thither, which killeth any person at unawares. And they shall be unto you cities for refuge from the avenger; that the manslayer die not, until he stand before the congregation (edah) in judgment... Then the congregation (edah) shall judge between the slayer and the revenger of blood according to these judgments: And the congregation (edah) shall deliver the slayer out of the hand of the revenger of blood, and the congregation (edah) shall restore him to the city of his refuge, whither he was fled: and he shall abide in it unto the death of the high priest, which was anointed with the holy oil. (Numbers 35:11-12, 24-25, KJV)

We have four uses of the word congregation here, and all of them are taken from the same Hebrew word, *edah*. *Edah* was the word used in Leviticus 4:13 to refer to "the whole congregation of Israel," but here it is undoubtedly referring to a specific portion out of all Israel; the elders or judges that ruled in court cases. I don't really think the use of a different Hebrew word changes much. It would be like me using the word elder in one text and ruler (or judge) in another text.

The understanding is: a person shall stand before the congregation - **of elders** - in judgment. The congregation - **of elders** - shall judge between the slayer and the revenger of blood. The congregation here is making decisions. This is a congregation of the LORD (Yahweh).⁶

Now therefore in the sight of all Israel the congregation of the LORD, and in the audience of our God, keep and seek for all the commandments of the LORD your God: that ye may possess this good land, and leave it for

⁶ Joshua 20:6-9 echoes this commandment, and uses the word congregation in the sense of leadership or a judicial court.

an inheritance for your children after you for ever. (1Chronicles 28:8, KJV)

Here, one might see the words "all Israel" and "the congregation of the LORD" to be one and the same people. I'm not sure that's the case. Other translations add additional punctuation to the text that sets "the congregation of the LORD" as separate in some way from "all Israel."⁷

So now in the sight of all Israel, the assembly of the Lord, and in the hearing of our God, observe and seek after all the commandments of the Lord your God so that you may possess this good land and leave it as an inheritance to your descendants forever. (1 Chronicles 28:8, HCSB)

The placing of the comma after Israel implies that the assembly of the Lord here is the assembly of ruling elders or judges. The sequence is then the (1) Israelite people, (2) the rulers in Israel, and (3) the Almighty. David is the speaker and he is going through a progression of people he is speaking in the sight of. I think this is the best way to understand the congregation or assembly of Yahweh here.

Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds! when the morning is light, they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand. And they covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away: so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage. Therefore thus saith the LORD; Behold, against this family do I devise an evil, from which ye shall not remove your necks; neither shall ye go haughtily: for this time is evil. In that day shall one take up a parable against you, and lament with a doleful lamentation, and say, We be utterly spoiled: he hath changed the portion of my people: how hath he removed it from me! turning away he hath divided our fields. Therefore thou shalt have none that shall cast a cord by lot in the congregation of the LORD. (Micah 2:1-5, KJV)

It appears that Yahweh is condemning people in powerful positions, abusing their power by taking a man's belongings by force.

Notice verse 5 where it says "thou shalt have none that shall cast a cord by lot in the congregation of the LORD." The LXX reads "Therefore you will have no one to cast the line by lot in the assembly of the Lord." The HCSB reads, "Therefore, there will be no one in the assembly of the LORD to divide the land by casting lots." I think it's best here to understand "the assembly of the LORD" as the judicial court to apply the land in a just and equal division. The judgment was passed here upon those who were taking the people's land by force.⁸

⁷ The NIV says, "So now I charge you in the sight of all Israel and of the assembly of the LORD, and in the hearing of our God." The NASB, NKJV, and the JPS Tanak place a comma after Israel (like the HCSB).

⁸ Notice Joshua 18:1-8 where Joshua speaks of three appointed men to survey land, and then says that he himself will cast lots to see whom the land would be allotted to. In the Jewish Study Bible, Oxford, 2004, page 1208, Ehud Ben Zvi states: "Elite people within society design (or, 'work') evil; the LORD plans

What this Means

In light of these uses of "the congregation (assembly) of Yahweh" in Scripture, I suggest that Deuteronomy 23:1 forbids a physical eunuch from serving in an official role in Israel. This would bring harmony to 23:1 and the Isaiah text (56), which mentions the eunuchs having a place in Yahweh's House (the Tabernacle/Temple), and even offering burnt offerings and sacrifices on the altar (56:7). Some commentators agree.

Shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; which is to be understood not of the sanctuary of the Lord, or of being refused admittance into the church of God, and to join in religious rites, and partake of sacred ordinances, which all Israelites, and strangers that were proselytes, had a right unto; such might bring their offerings, keep the passover, &c. Exo 12:48 nor of the commonwealth of Israel, as if unfit to be members of civil society; it cannot be thought that such defects should abridge them of their civil rights and privileges: but by the congregation is to be understood the elders, judges, and representatives of the people, that met together in some one place to execute judgment; see Num 35:12, into which such persons were not to be admitted; either because disgraceful and dishonourable, or because of the influence such defects have on their minds, they thereby becoming effeminate, irresolute, and wanting courage, as well as in opposition to the customs and usages of the Heathens, with whom it was common to admit such persons to civil offices; hence the word eunuch is sometimes used for an officer, Gen 37:36 and elsewhere; the Jews restrain this law to marriage, but unnecessarily. (Gill on Deuteronomy 23:1)

Shall not enter into the congregation, etc. - If by entering the congregation be meant the bearing a civil office among the people, such as magistrate, judge, etc.. then the reason of the law is very plain; no man with any such personal defect as might render him contemptible in the sight of others should bear rule among the people, lest the contempt felt for his personal defects might be transferred to his important office, and thus his authority be disregarded. The general meaning of these words is, simply, that the persons here designated should not be so incorporated with the Jews as to partake of their civil privileges. (Clarke on Deuteronomy 23:1)

Shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord — The meaning is, not that they should be debarred from the public worship of the true God, as the phrase sometimes signifies, for that privilege was granted to all nations indiscriminately, provided they renounced idolatry, Exodus 12:48; Leviticus 22:18; Numbers 9:14. But the sense seems to be, that such a one should not be deemed an Israelite, nor have his name entered in the public register; and especially that he should not be admitted to honours or offices, either in the church or commonwealth of Israel, or be allowed to be one of the society of elders, or rulers of the people, or to sit in council with them. (Benson on Deuteronomy 23:1)

To go along with this, we have laws concerning the priesthood that forbid even a son of Aaron offering a sacrifice if he has a crushed testicle ("stones broken" KJV, Leviticus 21:20). The same can be said for what sacrifices a priest would bring. Animals with severed testicles were not allowed to be brought as a sacrifice, for they were blemished (Leviticus 22:23-24).

(Heb) 'evil' (misfortune) against them. Moreover, members of this group are able to do so because they have the power; the LORD certainly has the power to carry 'evil' (misfortune), and God's might is infinitely superior to these people (cf. Prov 22.23)."

Conclusion

I began with Galatians 5:12 and I will end with it. If my understanding of Deuteronomy 23:1 is correct, then Paul makes all the sense in the world. The reason Paul wished that those who disturbed or upset the Christian Galatians be castrated, was so that they **wouldn't be in a teaching or leadership position in the first place**. Paul may have been speaking somewhat hyperbolically, but he most likely had in mind the desire for the teaching privileges of the influencers to be revoked by the mandate in Torah, namely Deuteronomy 23:1.⁹

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November, 2019

⁹ The phrase "congregation of the LORD" continues to be used in Deuteronomy 23:2-8. For now, I do believe this understanding of verse 1 carries weight on the interpretation of the phrase in these following verses, but I have yet to study verses 2-8 out to the same degree as this verse so as to be able to write an exegesis. I plan on doing this sometime next year.