

## **Dr. David Howard, Joshua-Ruth, Session 23, Why Israel Departed from the Lord**

© 2024 David Howard and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. David Howard in his teaching on the books of Joshua through Ruth. This is session 23, Why Israel Departed from the Lord.

Greetings. In this video segment I want to address a question that's not really addressed directly in the Bible. We're not going to look at a specific passage, but it kind of is a question that lies behind much of the historical books, much of the Pentateuch, the book of Numbers, certainly the Book of Joshua, and definitely the Book of Judges, as well as the books of Kings and Chronicles. That is, it has to do with the question, or the problem of Israel constantly turning away from God and pursuing after other gods and goddesses.

Why was it? Why did they do this? I grew up in the church. I grew up reading the Bible myself from an early age. I grew up with godly Bible teaching at home and in the church.

I knew all the Bible stories. I was a good little Pharisee because I would look back and think, how dumb could those Israelites be? Why did they keep turning after these other gods and goddesses? There's no reason for that. They knew what was right.

They knew that they would suffer if they turned away from God. Why did they stubbornly insist on keeping doing that? I thought to myself, boy, if I were there, I would not have done that. I would have followed the straight and narrow.

I would have never succumbed to those temptations. What was it about them? I was blithely uninterested in maybe the motivations or reasons behind that. I just thought of myself as the righteous one that would never do that.

As an adult, looking back, I see it with three different eyes. I begin asking a different question. Namely, thinking about there must have been some payoff.

There must have been some incentives. There must have been some rewards that the Israelites perceived that would be theirs if they continued and persisted in this kind of thing. What were the incentives? Even if they knew they were going to be punished, they still persisted in this kind of sin.

I think their motivation was not masochistic. They were not interested in just doing these things so that God would punish them. I think they felt there was pleasure and reward to be had in doing these things.

So, what was it about the Canaanite religions around them, the Canaanite system of worship, the gods and goddesses? What was it there that attracted them to do this? Looking at it through modern eyes, I would say I can identify three things. There may be more, but I'll identify three.

The first was basically sex. Sex is a powerful incentive at all times, in all cultures, often for great good. In the context of a committed marriage, that's the core of a good marriage and the height of intimacy and so on. But, of course, it's perversion, the other side.

There are lots of attractions of sex that are more in a debased form and fashion. But I think there was that kind of incentive for the Israelites.

Here are a couple of examples. If you want to turn with me to Numbers chapter 25, there's a very revealing story at that point. So, Numbers 25, comes immediately after the stories of Balaam and a king named Balak who hired him to curse the Israelites in the wilderness. Balak was afraid of them.

But Balaam comes and presents, basically, because of God's hand overshadowing him, he basically ends up giving blessings upon Israel, not punishments or curses. And so, Balaam goes home and Balak also goes his way at the end of chapter 24. And now look what it says in Numbers 25 verse 1. While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab.

English Standard Version that I'm reading says whore. Other versions said to play the prostitute, to prostitute themselves. But the word here is basically the word we know about prostitution.

And they invited the people to sacrifice to their gods. They bowed down. So Israel yoked himself, verse 3, to the bale of Peor, and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

So, there is this attraction to mingle with the foreign peoples here, in this case, the Moabite women, and to have sexual relations. And that was a part of the part of the deal. If you would turn to the book of Deuteronomy, we have another passage that is very instructive.

In Deuteronomy chapter 23, we have indications of this. So this is part of God's warnings to God's people. And one thing it says is, none of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute.

My version. Some versions have temple prostitutes, sacred prostitutes, something like this. And none of the sons of Israel shall be a cult prostitute.

So, you have here a picture of prostitution that's very different from the normal form. Let me just finish reading and then we'll kind of bring it together. Verse 18 says you shall not bring the fee of a prostitute, and that's a different word, nor the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord in payment for any vow, because those are abominations to the Lord your God.

So let me explain the words behind this. The terms for prostitution. The normal term for prostitute is zonah.

This is the word used for Rahab in Joshua chapter 2. This is the kind of prostitute we think of today, people prostituting themselves, kind of the normal garden variety. Prostitutes, although sex slavery and sex prostitution, slavery prostitution is a little different thing than we have today. So this is the term used in the second verse here, in verse 18.

Don't bring the fee of a prostitute. That's that one. But the first one in verse 16, verse 17, the female cult prostitute is a kedasha.

And the male cult prostitute is a kadesh. And both of these terms are related to the word kadosh in Hebrew, and kadosh is the word for holy. That's the word used over and over again in Leviticus about holiness, being separate away from sin and from corruption, and so on.

So, this is itself a perversion and a corruption of what it means to be holy. But these are prostitutes who are somehow associated with some shrine that has a religious veneer around it, where they are practicing prostitution, but in with some sort of religious sanction. We think of the Canaanite religion, and the Canaanite religion is highly sexualized.

The wife of El, the high god of the Canaanites, was named Asherah. And we have survived, we have discovered, archaeologically, figurines of Asherah have survived, and little carvings also of her, where she's highly sexualized with breasts and hips and so on. So, she is an object, a sex object in essence.

Part of this cultic prostitution, the idea behind it appears to be that, as we've said a number of times, Baal was the great high god of the Canaanites who sent the rain, and he was the god of fertility. And Asherah was also, his mother was also a goddess. And if you came, brought your sacrifices, brought your offerings to the sanctuary, and by doing so you're hoping to appease Baal or to please Baal or Asherah, and Baal would then send the rain to water your crops, and you would have a prosperous, prosperous year.

If you did this, then, there were these cult prostitutes, both male and female. They would be available so that you could spend time with them, and that would be part

of the reward of bringing your offerings, to the sanctuary. So, sex itself, prostitution itself, was embedded in the very culture, the very fabric of Canaanite religion, and it was given a religious overlay to, in a sense, make it kind of legitimate.

In my whimsical moments, I think of the Israelites maybe going out into the neighborhood and knocking on doors, and maybe there was Tuesday night witnessing night in the neighborhood, knocking on doors and saying, come follow Yahweh, follow the Lord with us. And the Canaanites responded, you're kidding, look what we do in church, and we can have a lot more fun than you do. So, there was that incentive, there was that pull, where there was, sex was part and parcel of the religious dynamic in the cultures around Israel, and certainly was not in Israel itself.

A second attraction, I think, for Israel in leading it away from the worship of the true God was money and materialism, and you remember that Israel coming out of the wilderness, out of Egypt, they were, had been slaves for 400 years, they had very little to their name except flocks, and they were given some of the Egyptians' possessions as they came out, but when they were in the wilderness, they really did not know how to survive, they couldn't find water, they couldn't find food, they wandered for 40 years, they were nomadic people, they did not have great permanent dwellings or possessions, and when they sent the spies into the land in Numbers 13-14, they were overwhelmed with what they saw in Canaan. This would have been in the time of the Middle Bronze Age, around the 1400s, and in that period, archaeologically, it's been seen, this is a time of great public works, public buildings, great personal wealth, and the homes have been uncovered archaeologically, and so the Israelites, we see that picture confirmed in the Bible, where the Israelites went in and saw the Canaanites, and they said, we're like grasshoppers to them, and there are these great walled cities, and we're not going to be able to prevail there, we're terrified of them. And we see that in the Bible as well, where God is speaking to them about when they come into the land, and I think it would be helpful to look at this passage in Deuteronomy chapter 6, we've been watching all these lectures on Joshua and Judges, we've come to this passage a couple of times, but we'll look at it one more time.

In Deuteronomy chapter 6, God looks ahead, and Moses speaking for God in verses 10 and 11, says, When the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to you, with great and good cities you did not build, houses full of all good things you did not fill, cisterns you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees you did not plant, and then it goes on. So what God is saying is you're coming into a great land flowing with milk and honey, as we read elsewhere, and with these great cities and this great wealth, you don't have that stuff, but the Canaanites do. And so, I imagine, again, the Israelites may be knocking on the doors of the Canaanites and saying, come worship our God, and we're these poor outsiders, but we think you should follow the God we worship, and the Canaanites are responding, you're kidding, look what Baal has done for us.

We have all this wealth, you have nothing. So, follow Baal and you'll get stuff. The attraction of materialism was part of what's going on, I think, here in these books.

A third thing I think we can identify would be peer pressure, and we see several manifestations of this. One thing we see, if you remember, when Israel asked for a king years later, they said we want a king like all the nations. We don't want to be the outsiders, we don't want to be the only ones without a king of a certain type.

The king was our great warrior. We want to be like everybody else, so this pressure to be like others is certainly there. And even in the way that Israel's God was portrayed or not portrayed, I remember that in Canaanite culture, Egyptian culture, Babylonian, Assyrian, and everywhere else, there were impressive statues and figurines, from small ones to large towering ones, pictures and statues of the gods and the goddesses that these cultures worshipped.

And for Israel, nothing. They had the tabernacle, they had the holy of holies, they had the ark, the mercy seat, but the mercy seat was empty. There was no figure of their god.

They couldn't picture him, and so they felt maybe a little out of sync with their neighbors in this way. There was not that focal point that they could say, here's the picture of our God. Along this line, there was a very interesting discovery made in the mid-1970s, around 1975, an archaeological dig.

Can you see over here? In the northeastern Sinai desert, there was a place called Quintillet Ajrud, and archaeologists were digging at Quintillet Ajrud. It was far enough north that it was seen to be part of the southern territory of Judah. As archaeologists dug through it, they discovered, because of pottery similarities with other places and other factors, they were able to date this to the 8th century BC, the 700s.

And that's right smack in the middle of the period of the Israelite monarchies. This is the time of Amos, Isaiah and Hosea, and this is in southern Judah. So, this is an Israelite site, for lots of different reasons, and the evidence pointed to that.

And they discovered houses, and they discovered pottery and trinkets and possessions, and so on. They also discovered what appeared to be a place of worship, and they discovered, painted on some of the broken pieces of pottery, certain pictures and inscriptions, and sometimes even on a wall areas. And there were several inscriptions that were found that were very interesting because they mentioned Yahweh, the true God, the God of Israel.

But they mentioned Yahweh in a way that's a little different than we read about him in the Bible. And also, there was one fascinating picture, drawing, that looks somewhat like this. This is my terrible drawing.

You can look it up on the internet and find the real drawing. It's just look up Quntillit Ajrud, and you'll find it. But basically it's three figures here, two standing over here, and one sitting over here.

These look, they're stronger, they're more powerful. These are, archaeologists have concluded that these are probably figures of bulls standing here. And this is a feminine figure, a cow sitting over here.

And the cow is strumming a harp. So that's the picture. This bull has a headdress, kind of a hat, of a certain type, and decoration that is very common in Egypt for a god named Bes.

So, it shouldn't surprise us in a site in southern Judah, northeastern Sinai, that there would be Egyptian influences in this area. And so, they would have honored one of the gods of the Egyptians by doing this. But there was also an inscription above this drawing.

The inscription reads from right to left in Hebrew. It's good Hebrew of that time period. It sounds like biblical Hebrew.

I will write the inscription in English, and here's what it says. It said I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his Asherah. That's a breathtaking discovery.

On several different levels, one is, that it mentions Yahweh of Samaria, and that kind of reflects a way of looking at the religious systems in the ancient Near East, where there were maybe four different levels of gods and goddesses, where you'd have at the highest level the Egyptian pantheon, the Babylonian pantheon in Canaan and elsewhere. One or two, usually two or three or four of the highest gods. In Assyrian Babylon, the highest god was Marduk.

In Canaan, it was usually Baal. His father, El, was kind of a remote figure. In Egypt, it was Re, R-E, or Osiris.

So that was the top level. Then there was a level of, next level of gods, where there were multiple gods, usually of the different parts of nature. There were gods of the sea, and the Nile River, and the desert, and the mountains, and the streams, and all different, the cattle, and all the different parts of nature.

The third level seems to be the gods and goddesses of certain locations, and so we've looked at earlier the Israelites linked themselves to the Baal of Peor in Numbers

chapter 23. So, the Baal is the high god, but there would be localized manifestations of them. We know about Baal of Zaphon, the mountain in the north.

And so, this one mentions Yahweh of Samaria. There's another reference in another inscription from Kuntil Adashu to Yahweh of Temoan, T-E-M-O-A-N. And so, this conception that Yahweh is not just one God, but he is of different places, is kind of importing some pagan kind of perspectives here.

But the second thing that's amazing about this is that it mentions Yahweh and his Asherah, Asherah being the wife of El in the Canaanite mythology. Baal had a wife, Astarte or Ashtaroth. And now we have here that.

And then as archaeologists have looked at this, and begin analyzing the text with the drawing, the conclusion is usually drawn that what we have here is the god Best from Egypt, but Asherah is the goddess from Canaan. So, we have an Egyptian influence here, but we have Canaanite influence here in this Israelite site. And the chances are that what we have here is the picture of a bull.

And this is Yahweh. Bull is a strong figure, the figure of might and power. So why not give Yahweh a representation like this? And the female cow would be his Asherah, his wife.

So, if we ask the people who lived at Quntil at Ashrud at this time, are you worshippers of Yahweh? Do you follow Yahweh? I think the answer would be, of course. Look, we have blessings for him. Look, we have his picture on the wall.

But we want to sort of be user-friendly, seeker-friendly, and reach out to our neighbors, and so we've given him a wife. And that makes it more palatable to the culture in which we find ourselves in Canaan. So, this is a breathtaking example, I think, of what we read in the Prophets over and over again of syncretism.

Syncretism is the mixing and merging of different religious traditions, practices and beliefs. Sometimes those are relatively innocuous and not really that big a deal. Sometimes they are a fundamental merging of things that are fundamentally opposite each other.

But the Prophets over and over again are denouncing Israel, turning away to the other gods and goddesses. The Book of Judges shows that as well. We've known about this secondhand through the lens of the Prophets and the biblical writers.

With the discovery of Quntil at Ashrud, we've seen for the first-time syncretism through the lens of the eyes of people who were practicing it. They would be proud to say, yes, this is our god, here's his wife, he's a powerful god, he's Yahweh of Samaria. So, peer pressure.

The people at Quntil at Ashrud were yielding to peer pressure. Undoubtedly, that same impulse was found elsewhere throughout Israel and Judah over the centuries, but we've just archaeologically discovered this dramatic find at Quntil at Ashrud in the mid-70s that kind of shows us firsthand this. There may be others that will be found in the future, but this is certainly one that stands out.

So, what were the attractions for following after the other gods and goddesses in the face of God's displeasure with that? Sex. A lot more fun than no sex for many people. Money, materialism.

Canaanites were much wealthier. Peer pressure. Let's be like the nations around us.

So, those are some of the things that I think did incentivize, did draw people away from the true God, and that is the backdrop as we launch into the next lectures and discussions of the Book of Judges. Keep these things in mind, because I think those are there. I like to tell my classes with my whimsical hat on that this was happening 3,000-plus years ago.

So, we're fortunate we have no problem with these temptations today. It was all their problem back then. But seriously, of course, we see that human nature really doesn't change.

And human nature at any time, in any place, is attracted by these kinds of things. And sadly, I think we are facing it in many parts of the world today, in the West certainly, and sometimes other parts of the world. Great temptations along all three of these lines.

And it's part of our job to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and not these other things.

This is Dr. David Howard in his teaching on the books of Joshua through Ruth. This is session 23, Why Israel Departed from the Lord.