Chapter 13

The Biblical Prohibition of the Mourning Rites of Shaving and Laceration: Several Proposals

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The biblical proscriptions of shaving and laceration rites have long baffled scholars, and continue to elicit new explanatory proposals. Shaving and laceration rites are prohibited for priests in Lev 21:5, and for all Israelites in both Lev 19:27-28 and Deut 14:1. Of the many mourning rites witnessed

1 E.g., B. B. Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead* (1994; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 166–178 for a recent attempt at a solution. (On Schmidt's proposal, see my discussion in n. 13, ahead.) The most common explanation in the literature for the proscription of these rites associates them with alleged Canaanite practice supposedly abhorrent to Yhwh (e.g., B. Levine, *Leviticus* [JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989] 143 and E. S. Gerstenberger, *Das dritte Buch Mose: Leviticus* [ATD 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993] 252, 285, who cites the Canaanite theory with some hesitation). Yet as Schmidt, C. Carmichael (*The Spirit of Biblical Law* [Athens and London: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996] 129–30) and others have pointed out, these mourning practices are frequently represented as legitimate Israelite rites except in the three texts in question. Yhwh even orders shaving for mourners in certain texts (Isa 22:12; Amos 8:10). Thus, the Canaanite theory fails to explain the evidence cogently.

2 That these are rites associated with mourning can be shown from comparison with other biblical texts representing mourning practices (e.g., Jer 16:6; 41:5) as well as extra-biblical materials (e.g., KTU 1.5 VI 11–25). An association with mourning is also suggested by the mention of the dead in two of the three texts in question (Lev 19:28; Deut 14:1) and the general mourning context of Lev 21:1–6. See further Schmidt's helpful discussion (ibid., 167–171), and the comments of M. Noth, *Das dritte Buch Mose: Leviticus* (ATD 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962) 123,
in the biblical text, only laceration and shaving are banned in any source, and their interdiction is attested only in the Holiness Source and Deuteronomy. In contrast to their treatment in Holiness and Deuteronomistic materials, laceration and shaving are represented as perfectly legitimate mourning rites in non-H and non-D texts, as others have shown convincingly. Therefore, we must ask why they are proscribed in Holiness and Deuteronomistic texts and nowhere else. I will begin this paper by reviewing briefly the three texts in question, and go on to ask what—if anything—distinguishes shaving and laceration from other mourning rites. What, in other words, might have motivated Holiness and Deuteronomistic circles to prohibit these gestures of mourning while tolerating or accepting other mourning markers? After proposing what I believe distinguishes shaving and laceration among rites of mourning, I will go on to consider why they are proscribed for priests in Lev 21:5, and for all Israel in Lev 19:27–28 and Deut 14:1. As others have argued, the priestly ban likely antedates the interdiction for all Israel, and I will propose an explanation for the broadening of the prohibition. I offer this essay as a tribute to Burke O. Long, a colleague, mentor and friend for over a decade now, whose honest daring, consistent rigor, and refreshing insight have long been an inspiration to me.

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((Lev 21:5))

They shall not shave a bald spot on their head(s), nor shall they shave the corner of their beard(s), nor shall they incise an incision in their flesh.

((Lev 19:27-28))

You shall not round off the corner of your head(s), nor shall you destroy the corner of your beard(s). You shall not set an incision for the dead in your flesh, nor shall you impose the writing of a tattoo on yourselves. I am Yhwh. (Lev 19:27–28)

((Deut 14:1))

Children shall you be to Yhwh your god. You shall not lacerate yourselves, nor shall you set a bald spot between your eyes for the dead. (Deut 14:1)

Lev 21:5 prohibits priests from shaving a bald spot on the head, shaving the corner (?) of the beard, and incising an incision in the flesh. Shaving a bald spot on the head is a well-attested mourning rite (e.g., Isa 22:12; 134–35; Gerstenberger, Leviticus, 252; and Levine, Leviticus, 143, among many others. G. J. Botterweck is, however, not convinced that Lev 21:5 describes mourning rites ("’לע,’ o. " TDOT 3.7, 16).

3 See citations in n. 1.
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Jer 16:6; Amos 8:10), as is manipulation (including shaving) of beard hair (e.g., Isa 15:2; Jer 41:5; Ezra 9:3). Incising an incision, a form of laceration, is explicitly associated with the dead elsewhere—Lev 19:28, one of the three texts under consideration here—and another idiom for laceration (Hitpael of דָּרָם) is closely associated with mourning in a variety of biblical texts. In addition to proscribing incisions for the dead in language similar to that of Lev 21:5, Lev 19:27–28 forbids Israelites to “round off” (סֵפִים) the corner of the head (?), “destroy” the corner of the beard, and tattoo the flesh. Rounding off the corner of the head, though obscure to us as a gesture, seems to refer to some form of shaving or hair cutting. Destroying the corner of the beard is probably the same act as shaving the corner of the beard mentioned in Lev 21:5. Tattooing the flesh must differ from incising an incision, though both appear to involve cutting the flesh. Finally, Deut 14:1 forbids Israelites to lacerate themselves (Hitpael דָּרָם) or set a bald spot between the eyes for the dead. The pairing of laceration and shaving as mourning gestures is not restricted to these three texts alone; there are several other texts in which the two acts are represented as legitimate mourning rites (e.g., Jer 16:6, 41:5). But these three texts prohibit them.

What was it about laceration and shaving that led Holiness circles to ban them for priests, and later, Holiness and Deuteronomistic circles to proscribe them for all Israelites? In order to address this question, we must consider laceration and shaving as components of a larger complex of mourning rites that include sitting on the ground, moving back and forth (תָּבֹא), tearing one’s garment, strewing ashes or dirt on one’s head, wearing sackcloth, fasting, weeping, covering the upper lip, singing dirges and avoiding the sanctuary sphere. These mourning rites function to create and mark a distinct ritual status for the mourner, who is polluted through corpse contact and remains separated from quotidian life—including the cult—for a set period of time, generally seven days. The rites that separate

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4 Laceration is most commonly expressed using the Hitpael of the verb דָּרָם, as in Deut 14:1; 1 Kgs 18:28; Jer 16:6; 41:5; 47:5; Mic 4:14. In almost all of these examples, a mourning context for the act of laceration is clear. In contrast, the nouns שָׂרָם and שָׂרָים and verbal forms of the root שָׂרָה occur only in Lev 21:5; 19:28 and Zech 12:3, and only in the former two passages do the noun and its verbal reflexes relate to mourning.


6 The location of the bald spot in Deut 14:1 is unusual. Most texts mentioning the shaving of a bald spot as a mourning rite locate it on the head, presumably where there is normally hair (e.g., Lev 21:5; Isa 15:2; Jer 48:37; Ezek 7:18; 29:18; Amos 8:10). On this, see Botterweck, “הנִל,” 7.

7 Though most biblical texts bear witness to a seven-day mourning period,
the mourner from others and mark the mourner’s distinct ritual status are
often contrasted in biblical texts with a corresponding set of rites that are
associated with a normal, clean ritual state and participation in the cult. We
might call this second set of rites, rites of rejoicing. Some of these rites serve
to move the mourner back to the normal, clean ritual state from the separa-
tion characteristic of mourning. These rites include rising from the ground,
washing, wearing regular or festal clothes, anointing, dancing, eating and
drinking.⁸

A number of biblical texts suggest the possibility of rapid reversal from
a state of rejoicing to a state of mourning, and vice versa. In Amos 8:10, the
Day of Yhwh is described. At that ominous time, Israel’s joyous festivals
will be transformed while in process: “I will turn (רָפָא) your pilgrimage
festivals into mourning, and all your songs into dirges. I will put sackcloth
on every loin, a bald spot on every head . . .” Ps 30:12 is similar in its de-
scription of a rapid transformation, here of mourning to rejoicing: “You
turned (ךָּנָה) my lament into dancing, you removed my sackcloth and
girded me with joy . . .”⁹ David’s mourning for the first son of Bathsheba
ends rapidly through a series of reversals in 2 Sam 12:20: He rises from
the ground, washes, anoints himself, and changes his clothes, before going off
to the sanctuary to worship and home to dine. When one considers most of
the rites that characterize the activity of the mourner, it is clear that they are
easily reversible: The one who sits on the ground rises; the one covered
with ashes or dirt bathes; the one fasting eats. The same observation ap-
plies to the rites that separate the mourner from the rest of the community:
Sackcloth replaces normal attire; the upper lip is covered; dirges replace
joyful songs. Yet shaving and laceration do not fit this pattern.

Unlike other mourning rites that separate and mark the mourner, lacer-
ation and shaving are not easily reversible. Laceration of all types causes
bleeding and scabbing that might last for weeks; it may even leave perma-
nent scars. Shaving is at best only gradually reversible over an extended
period of time.¹⁰ Thus, shaving and laceration stand out as distinct because

⁸ The most interesting study of these contrasting sets of rites is G. A. Anderson,
_A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion_
(University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1991), whose influence on my for-
mulation above is obvious.

⁹ The verb יָנָה is sometimes used in other contexts to express rapid change or
transformation. See, e.g., Exod 7:17, 20; Ps 78:44; 105:29 (the Nile’s waters are
turned into blood); Ps 66:6 (Yhwh turned the Sea of Reeds into dry ground); Ps
114:8 (Yhwh brought forth water from the rock).

¹⁰ We see this in 2 Sam 10:5, the case of David’s humiliated emissaries to the
Ammonite court. The men, beards half-shaven and genitals exposed in a mockery
they are not easily or rapidly reversible. But there is more to say about the distinct character of laceration and shaving as mourning gestures. Unlike mourning rites that can be reversed at will, which last only as long as the mourner remains separated from the community, the physical evidence of laceration and shaving outlast the standard, seven-day mourning period. At the end of seven days, sackcloth is removed and normal, quotidian clothing is donned; fasting ceases and eating and drinking begins. But the shaved head or the head with a bald spot remains after seven days, a conspicuous marker of mourning among non-mourners, as are lacerated arms or other body parts. Thus, the carefully constructed boundaries that separate the mourner from others are obscured by the continued presence of shaved head or lacerated body parts; these blur the social and ritual distinction between the mourner and others, a distinction made and marked by mourning rites.

Now that the distinct character of shaving and laceration as rites of mourning has been established, I shall go on to consider what might have motivated their proscription for priests in Lev 21:5, and for all Israelites in Lev 19:27–29 and Deut 14:1. Priests find their primary locus in the sanctuary, where they present Yhwh’s offerings at the altar and attend to other, specialized tasks. According to Lev 21:16–23 (H), priests with physical defects (דומע) such as blindness and lameness may not appear before Yhwh with offerings, nor may a blemished high priest approach the curtain at the entry of the holy of holies; to do so, says the text, would profane Yhwh’s holy sanctuaries which Yhwh sanctifies (ל א יהוה מקדשים מכבר יהוה).

of mourning rites, are ordered not to return immediately to Jerusalem, but to wait at Jericho until their beards have sprouted. The exposure of their nakedness was without doubt quickly remedied, but nothing could be done immediately about their half-shaven beards.

In a footnote, Schmidt anticipates me by noting in passing the irreversibility of laceration and shaving’s long-lasting effects, but he does not develop these observations (Beneficent Dead, 178).

I am not the first to make this observation. See Schmidt, ibid., 178 and n. 178.

Though he notes in passing the long-lasting effects of laceration and shaving, and observes that they outlast the mourning period, Schmidt, ibid., 178, argues that shaving and laceration are distinct because they “offer an unparalleled identification of the living with the dead and an unprecedented reminder of death’s intrusion upon the world of the living. Moreover, the irreversibility of the markings embodies death’s inevitability and its ever-present threat.” I prefer to argue that their distinction resides not in any special kind of identification they might foster, but in their lack of easy reversibility and in the fact that they outlast the mourning period. We cannot know that shaving or laceration fostered any greater identification with the dead in this culture than did strewing ashes on the head or sitting on the ground weeping. Yet we can establish that the effects of laceration and shaving go beyond seven days.
Blemished priests may remain in the sanctuary and continue to eat holy foods as long as they do not approach Yhwh's primary loci (altar and holy of holies). It is clear from Lev 21:16-23 that Yhwh does not want to see physical defects on those who approach him directly, though he tolerates blemishes on those who do not (e.g., priests who do not serve at the altar). Yhwh's rejection of blemished priests who approach him directly helps us to understand the prohibition of shaving and laceration for priests in mourning in Lev 21:5. Just as Yhwh does not wish to see blemishes on the priests who approach him, so he does not wish to see permanent or long-lasting mourning markers such as a bald spot or lacerated arms on them.\(^{14}\) The justification for the proscription of shaving and laceration in Lev 21:5 is remarkably similar to that offered in Lev 21:23 regarding blemished priests. Lev 21:23 states that the blemished priest shall not approach the altar or curtain because of his defect, that he not profane (תֹעַר) Yhwh’s holy sanctuaries which Yhwh sanctifies. Lev 21:6 exhorts the priests to be holy and not profane (נֵס) the name of their god, “for the offerings of Yhwh, the food of their god, they bring near…” Thus, each passage justifies its particular restriction based on holiness, and the danger of its profanation, either by a blemished priest approaching the altar or by a priest with a permanent or long-lasting mourning marker doing so.\(^{15}\)

But why is Yhwh offended by the presence of a priest at his altar with a permanent or long-lasting mourning marker? I believe that these tokens of mourning on priests at the altar offend Yhwh because they bring the symbolism of death and mourning directly into his presence. Yhwh, the holy god, has an aversion to death, the polluter and threat to holiness par excellence.\(^{16}\) He cannot tolerate its presence in his sanctuary. Yet the lacerated or shaved priest brings death to Yhwh's altar. The distinction between mour-

\(^{14}\) These, however, might be permitted to non-priests who enter the sanctuary and perhaps even to priests who do not approach Yhwh directly. Lev 21:6, which justifies the restrictions of 21:5, speaks specifically of priests who present Yhwh's offerings; it says nothing of the status of other priests who might not approach Yhwh directly, and nothing of worshipers.


\(^{16}\) Death is a most threatening polluter that must be carefully circumscribed, and all who have had contact with a corpse, a tomb, or bones must undertake elaborate purification procedures to become clean. According to Num 19:13, 20, whoever does not undertake the proper purification rites pollutes Yhwh's sanctuary even without entering it. A polluted sanctuary would result in Yhwh’s departure from his earthly abode (Deut 23:15; Ezek 43:9). Some scholars have argued that all sources of pollution are related to death in some way, though this thesis remains unproven. For this, see, e.g., J. Milgrom, Leviticus 1–16 (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 46 and E. Feldman, Biblical and Post-Biblical Defilement and Mourning: Law as Theology (New York: KTAV /Yeshiva Univ. Press, 1977) passim.
ner and non-mourner, between the realm of death and that of cult, so carefully maintained under normal circumstances, is challenged by the presence of a priest at the altar marked as a mourner. The priest who returns to the sanctuary from a period of mourning is certainly no longer a polluter, and does not threaten the sanctuary with defilement per se. But if he continues to bear the markings of the mourner, he confronts Yhwh nonetheless with death's distinct tokens, which threaten to profane Yhwh's holy name according to Lev 21:6. Like the blemished priest who confronts Yhwh with unwanted physical imperfection, the shaved or lacerated priest who brings death to the altar, even without the pollution normally associated with it, is unwelcome before Yhwh the holy god. Thus, it is the distinct *symbolic* association of laceration and shaving with death that explains their proscription for priests who approach the deity directly. They signal death and its associated pollution, and also function to create the distinct ritual state of mourning, and these have no place in the cultic sphere.

Not surprisingly, other mourning rites that are easily reversible and do not outlast the mourning period do not offend Yhwh. Several texts, including Lev 21:1-5, speak of priestly mourning both directly and indirectly. Though Lev 21:1-4 forbids the priest to have corpse contact with all but the closest of kin and 21:5 prohibits two types of shaving and incising an incision, they say nothing of other mourning rites. Yet other texts provide some insight into the mourning rites performed by priests. Ezek 24:16-17 suggests that for a priest such as Ezekiel, expected mourning behavior would include actions such as weeping, the unbinding of the hair, the removal of shoes and the covering of the upper lip. Lev 10:6 may be read to

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17 Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 136, argues that the mourning markers in question are “comparable” to blemishes (גָּם עַרְע), and therefore profaning to holiness. I am not certain what he means by “comparable” (i.e., that they are indeed blemishes, or that they have blemish-like associations). Though it is possible that these mourning markers were constructed as blemishes by the ancients, it is not clear that this was so, nor is it clear that they were even associated with blemishes. Blemishes are offensive to Yhwh; they are imperfections revolting to him (e.g., the sacrificial animal with a blemish is called an “abomination” [בַּעֲרֵב] in Deut 14:3). They are, however, not death-related, at least not in any clear and convincing way. Because the mourning rites in question are death-related and not obviously associated with blemishes in any text (e.g., they do not appear in any list of blemishes), I prefer to categorize them differently from blemishes, though the presence of either in the priest appearing before Yhwh would result in profanation.

18 The text describes a symbolic act of the prophet, Ezekiel's refraining from performing these actions at the death of his wife. The perplexed reaction of his audience suggests that they expected Ezekiel to perform these acts of mourning. On this, see further the discussion of M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37* (AB 22a; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 509-510. Greenberg claims, incorrectly in my view, that “self-
suggest that the unbinding of hair and the tearing of garments are normally permitted for priests.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, several texts suggest that priests may perform mourning rites that are easily reversible, and leave no physical trace beyond the mourning period. These would not offend the deity or threaten the holiness of his name because they would no longer be in evidence when a priest leaves his mourning state to resume his normal cultic duties. The boundaries between the realm of death and the cult would therefore be unchallenged; there would be no erosion of the social and ritual distinction between mourner and non-mourner, no death markers where they do not belong.

It remains to explain the prohibition of laceration and shaving for all Israelites in Lev 19:27–28 and Deut 14:1. If the proscription originally applied to priests approaching Yhwh’s altar, how did it come to be generalized for all Israel in the Holiness Source and Deuteronomy?\textsuperscript{20} The first thing to be noted is the parallel generalization of holiness to all Israel in both H and D. In the Holiness Source and in Deuteronomy, in contrast to other biblical materials such as the Priestly Writing, holiness is a quality shared by Israelites. Lev 19:2 addresses Israel as follows: “You shall be holy, for I, Yhwh, your god, am holy.” Similarly, Deut 14:2 describes Israel as “a holy people to Yhwh” their god.\textsuperscript{21} Lev 19:2 heads a series of laws in Leviticus 19, including the ban on shaving and laceration in 19:27–28; though it does not say so explicitly, the text gives the impression that obedience to these laws

wounding” mourning rites (i.e., laceration and shaving) were illegitimate in Israel (citing Lev 19:27–28; Deut 14:1–2), though texts such as Jer 16:6; 41:5 suggest otherwise. The evidence for their illegitimacy is restricted to H and D.\textsuperscript{19} Lev 21:10 prohibits the high priest from all corpse contact, and the mourning rites of unbinding hair and tearing garments. Given the restrictions on priests in Lev 21:1–5, 21:10 implies that the mourning actions forbidden to the high priest are permitted to priests, since 21:5 says nothing about mourning rites other than shaving and laceration, and explicitly permits corpse contact for next of kin, in contrast to 21:10 on the high priest. In contrast to these texts, Ezek 44:20 states that priests may neither shave their heads nor unbind their hair.

\textsuperscript{20} As others have argued, it seems very likely that a restriction imposed on a single group (the priesthood) has been generalized to all Israelites. To argue the opposite thesis would, as Schmidt has pointed out, produce “unnecessary redundancy” (Beneficent Dead, 171). See also K. Elliger, Leviticus (HAT 4; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1966) 289, who believes that Lev 19:27–28 may represent a “democratization” of what was originally a rule restricting priests alone, and M. Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 122.

\textsuperscript{21} Note also Exod 19:6 (D), where Israel is said to have the potential to become a “holy people” (сан כָּלָי). It is clear that H texts both call upon Israel to be holy (e.g., Lev 19:2) and assume Israel’s holy state (e.g., Lev 20:8). On this, see further my argument in Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000) 121, 174 n. 3.
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is a component part of being holy. Deut 14:2 makes the connection between holiness and the avoidance of laceration and shaving for the dead more explicitly: Israelites should not shave a bald spot between the eyes for the dead or lacerate themselves because they are a holy people to Yhwh their god (לַעַל צְרִיכָם לְמִלָּחָם אֲלֵהֶם). Deut 14:2 and, less explicitly, Lev 19:2 may suggest that shaving and laceration as mourning rites are a threat to holiness. They are markers of death, and death's presence, even symbolically, can profane holiness, as Lev 21:6 suggests. Therefore, the ban on the mourning rites of shaving and laceration for all Israel may find its explanation in the generalization of holiness to the people as a whole.22 Once the people are conceived as holy, their holiness must be protected from profanation caused by participation in mourning rites that outlast the circumscribed mourning period. Only these, apparently, are constructed as profaning to the people’s holiness, and are therefore proscribed. Other mourning rites, easily reversible, are not prohibited to the holy people even though they have death associations. It is not easy to explain this, but it could be that even for the holy people, confronting and processing death is permitted as long as death remains restricted to its bounded realm. And restricting death to its circumscribed bailiwick means prohibiting mourning gestures that outlast the mourning period. This would be similar to the allowance to priests in Lev 21:1–5 to mourn within strict limits and even pollute themselves for close kin. Upon emerging from their mourning period, they bring no evidence of death with them when they reenter the realm of non-mourners and that of the cult.

22 Similarly, Tigay, Deuteronomy, 136–37.