

Bite Size Bible Study

Rebellious Son #150 By Pastor Lee

One of the laws in the Torah that makes Western readers shudder is that of the punishment of the rebellious son:

“If a man has a stubborn, rebellious son who will not obey what his father or mother says, and even after they discipline him he still refuses to pay attention to them; then his father and mother are to take hold of him and bring him out to the leaders of his town, at the gate of that place, and say to the leaders of his town, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he doesn’t pay attention to us, lives wildly, gets drunk. Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death; in this way you will put an end to such wickedness among you, and all Isra’el will hear about it and be afraid.

Deut. 21:18-21 CJB

Even though this law sounds extreme to our Western ears, in a family-centered tribal culture respect for parents and elders is the cornerstone of order. Insubordination to authority threatened the stability of society. Therefore it had to be taken very seriously by the community.

Jewish scholars have traditionally interpreted this law as a hypothetical punishment to strengthen the parental authority. They taught that the law wasn’t actually meant to be applied. In a move to ensure this, rabbinic law added an extremely long list of conditions to be met, so that it was impossible to enforce.

A Bible professor from Uganda commented about this law; saying that it sounds shockingly progressive where she comes from. In traditional African society, the father sets the rules for his house and punishes with absolute authority. He has life-or-death power over his children. A wife cannot protest. In these very patriarchal societies, women have no say in the discipline of children by their father.

Yet this law in the Torah stipulates that the mother was one of the ones to be obeyed, and that she also should have a say in deciding the guilt of a child. In some parts of Africa this law would seem shockingly liberal and nearly impossible to implement.

Other scholarly commentaries agree that while this law supports parental authority, it does so by *taking it away* from the patriarch. Look again at the passage in Deuteronomy 21. Notice that the father doesn’t get to make the decision regarding a son. First, the wife must agree to press charges. Then, the elders of the city are the ones who finally make the decision. All of these restrictions sought to limit the otherwise cruel punishment of a hot-headed father.

The instruction mitigates punishment by bringing it to the village elders, and away from the emotions of the moment. Yet it doesn’t excuse a defiant teenager who has brought great frustration to his parents. It allows the community to enforce parental authority when behavior is truly out of line.

Bible readers often are told to assume that the harsh social realities of the Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman world applied to Israel. But here the Torah was protesting against the absolute authority given to the father and putting the mother on an equal level with him. This is very surprising in that in many patriarchal cultures the women have little to no authority. Additionally if the son’s behavior is a threat to the stability of the community it should be the community that decides what actions should be taken.

Scripture has many references indicating that children should revere and obey both father and mother, not just the father alone.

My son, obey your father’s command, and don’t abandon your mother’s teaching. (Literally, “the *torah* of the mother”) Prov. 6:20 CJB

“Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land which Adonai your God is giving you. Ex. 20:12 CJB

If Israel had followed even a minority of the teaching that God gave them in the Torah, the nation would have been a model of wisdom and justice to the surrounding peoples.

Most Christians find it surprising to look at the Law of the Rebellious Son as progressive, not realizing that that God was likely speaking into the harsh authority of a patriarchal society to put limits on it.

You might think that this was a live issue only in ancient times, but the African scholar pointed out that this situation still exists in traditional cultures even today.

The Torah has great wisdom, and its message is intended for everyone to follow the intent of the instructions. When we open the Bible’s pages and wring our hands at it’s teaching, we should remember that there are realities in cultures that need to be addressed and modified. *We are not the only intended readers of Scripture.* God teaches His beloved children thru many different times and places, not just us.

Reference: Was the Law of the Rebellious Son Actually Progressive?
By Lois Tverberg; November 7, 2021

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