



June 13, 2025

A Question about 2 Samuel 10:1-4

Warm hellos once again friends, brethren, fellow laborers, spiritual family, and scattered children of God from here on the Gulf Coast of lower Alabama. My wife and I pray and hope this finds you doing well, and that again your week has been blessed.

Several years ago while pastoring the country of Colombia, I was asked several Bible questions that gave me food for thought. Serving in a different culture always created a challenge, in addition to doing so in another language. Perhaps you will find this week's letter helpful to answer some of the questions that arose and some will benefit.

There are some unusual instructions in the Pentateuch that at times some have taken out of context or have applied literally when there was "figurative language" employed.

Decades ago in college we examined the concepts of "Exegesis and Hermeneutics" for a couple of semesters. Sometimes I still use what I learned from that class, even when preparing sermon messages. They're a couple of fancy words, but the meaning of them is simple.

Exegesis is the arrived at explanation or interpretation of a particular Scripture or section of Scripture. Hermeneutics refers to the tools, principles and methods used to examine and interpret the Bible.

They include analyzing the text historically, grammatically, and contextually. Also in studying, one must determine whether the text is to be taken literally, symbolically, or figuratively. Other related Scriptures must be also examined to gain an accurate view and understanding. The context of the chapter, book, or

author's intent, as well as historical setting, is always good to carefully keep in mind as well.

So, in regards to the question posed, let's examine several Scriptures that have been misunderstood by some. Here's the verse that came up: "*You shall not shave around the sides of your head, nor shall you disfigure the edges of your beard. You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the LORD.*" (Leviticus 19:27-28)

Does this mean that men should allow their sideburns to grow long and not trim them?

Does this mean that men should not trim or shape their beards, but just let them grow out in a long and shaggy fashion?

Does it prohibit any surgical techniques involving cutting the flesh?

Are modern tattoo markings being addressed?

Here are some observations from a couple-three commentaries:

Jamieson-Fausset-Brown: It seems probable that this fashion had been learned by the Israelites in Egypt, for the ancient Egyptians had their dark locks cropped short or shaved with great nicety, so that what remained on the crown appeared in the form of a circle surrounding the head, while the beard was dressed into a square form. This kind of coiffure had a highly idolatrous meaning; and it was adopted, with some slight variations, by almost all idolaters in ancient times.

Adam Clarke: This and the following verse evidently refer to customs which must have existed among the Egyptians when the Israelites sojourned in Egypt; and what they were it is now difficult, even with any probability, to conjecture. Herodotus observes that the Arabs shave or cut their hair round, in honor of Bacchus, who, they say, had his hair cut in this way, lib. iii, cap. 8.

So, I'd suggest that it seems logical that the LORD is giving cautions about not continuing idolatrous customs learned in Egypt, and also not adopting idolatrous customs they will encounter in Canaan. Also, there is an indication that these prohibitions relate to ceremonies involving mourning for the dead.

This instruction is repeated later.

"They shall not make any bald place on their heads, nor shall they shave the edges of their beards nor make any cuttings in their flesh." (Leviticus 21:5)

This appears to be connected to verse 1. *"And the LORD said to Moses, 'Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: 'None shall defile himself for the dead among his people.'"*

There may be several aspects to this. When one, whether a priest or not, came in contact with a dead body, they were declared to be ceremonially unclean and could not come near the tabernacle with the congregation. (Numbers 19:11-14) This would be serious for a priest, because he would be unable to perform his normal duties. Again it appears that the prohibitions are connected with customs associated in particular with mourning for the dead.

Notice the comments of Matthew Henry: "Superstitious, according to the manner of the heathen, who cut off their hair, and let out their blood, in honor of the imaginary deities which presided (as they thought) in the congregation of the dead, that they might engage them to be propitious to their departed friends." The instruction is repeated yet again. *"You are the sons of the LORD your God. You shall not cut yourselves nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead."* (Deuteronomy 14:1) The previous chapter sternly warned about being influenced to serve other gods and engage in idolatrous practices. Again the context involves ceremonies and practices about mourning for the dead. The baldness between the eyes seems to refer to cutting the hair on the forehead in a particular way. There must have been pagan mourning practices that were familiar to that culture that God was warning to avoid.

We recall the priests of Baal (whom Elijah confronted practiced cutting themselves as part of a religious rite). *"So they cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them."* (1 Kings 18:28)

It's worth noting that a person making a Nazirite vow makes a vow to not shave his head or cut his hair. (Numbers 6:5) At the end of the period of abstention, the person shaves his entire head, as we read: *"Then the Nazirite shall shave his consecrated head at the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and shall take the hair from his consecrated head and put it on the fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offering."* (v.18) It seems that the reason the one making the vow is permitted to shave his entire head is because he is not doing it as an act of mourning. So, here we see an example of cutting the hair of one's head all around including the sides.

Another example of one cutting his hair and his beard involves the prophet Ezekiel. *"And you, son of man, take a sharp sword, take it as a barber's razor, and pass it over your head and your beard; then take scales to weigh and divide the hair."* (Ezekiel 5:1)

Ezekiel 44 gives instructions for the priests serving in the Millennial Temple. *"They shall neither shave their heads nor let their hair grow long; but they shall keep their hair well-trimmed."* (v.20) This would be general instructions for their usual and normal appearance. We don't know for sure if there will be again the implementation of taking a Nazirite vow.

The fact that shaving was an act of mourning in various cultures may shed light on a rather obscure and puzzling passage that also arose in my discussion in Colombia.

In 2 Samuel 10:1-4 we read that David sent emissaries to Hanun king of Ammon to comfort him over the death of his father. However, Hanun's advisors became convinced that David's emissaries had not come to comfort him but instead had

come to spy out the land. A rather strange act of retribution by Hanun is described. *"Therefore Hanun took David's servants, shaved off half of their beards, cut off their garments in the middle, at their buttocks, and sent them away."* (v.4)

Why would Hanun and his advisers suspect David's emissaries of being spies?
What was the reason for his reaction of cutting off their beards?

Keeping in mind that the mourning customs of many of these ancient peoples involved shaving off their beards as an act of mourning for the dead, it becomes clearer why Hanun's advisers doubted that David's comforters had come to pay condolences. It is very likely that Hanun and his advisors sat in the royal court with torn clothes, cut skin, hair cut in a special way, and shaven beards. When David's men arrived with full beards, Hanun's advisers assumed they were really not coming to mourn the dead king but instead to spy out the land. For were they really coming to mourn the king they would have shaven their beards. To teach them respect of the dead and humiliate them at the same time, Hanun ordered that half their beards be cut off!

There are other questions regarding the prohibitions we have examined in the Pentateuch that also came up during the discussion.

Exactly how was the hair cut and the beard trimmed that made it offensive?

What were the cuttings and markings (tattoos) that were made on the body?

Why were these actions done by the various cultures in relation to mourning for the dead?

I realize that the exegesis of the passages is the best explanation we can make when putting the passages together, in addition to using the insight of various commentaries. As I get older, and each year that goes by as I study God's Word, I've come to see that with many things in scripture we must be careful to not become dogmatic, and of course we cannot perfectly understand every passage.

There are always additional things to learn as we study more deeply the very living Word of God.

Arms up friends! Our sincere prayers and thoughts are with you daily. Thanks in advance for your heartfelt prayers for us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. S. Hoefker', with a stylized, scribbled end.

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