

119

MINISTRIES

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Planting Mixed Seeds (Leviticus 19:19)

The Scriptures can sometimes be difficult for us to understand. The books of the Bible were written over two thousand years ago—some over three thousand years ago—in languages that most people don’t speak, and in the midst of governments and cultures that no longer exist. We have many tools at our disposal to try to figure out what the Scriptures are saying: we can use archaeology, historical records, religious traditions, linguistic analysis, science, and our own ability to reason to try to figure out what the Scriptures are saying. However, sometimes, in spite of our best efforts, there are some things in the Scriptures that we just don’t have any good answers for. One of those things is this command from Leviticus 19:19:

Leviticus 19:19

...You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed...

At first glance, this doesn’t appear to be that mysterious or complicated. It looks like it’s saying that you shouldn’t plant two kinds of seeds in the same field. What’s so hard to understand about that? The difficulties reveal themselves when we start asking some simple questions. What does it mean by “two kinds of seed”? Is it saying that we can’t plant tomatoes and carrots in the same garden? Or, is it saying that we can’t plant two kinds of seeds that will cross-pollinate with each other? Can we plant different kinds of seed in the same field at different times? How do we determine where one “field” ends and another begins? And, why does any of this matter? This command doesn’t really specify any of these things, so, how can we figure out what it is telling us to do?

In this teaching, we’re going to examine this command, and try to identify the purpose and the nature of the instruction it is giving us. We will examine five popular explanations for it and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of those explanations. Finally, we will explain what we think the most likely explanations are, and what practical implications those explanations may have for us today.

The first thing we should do is put this command in context. Leviticus 19 begins with an admonition to “be holy,” because YHWH is holy.

Leviticus 19:1-2

And the LORD [YHWH] spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD [YHWH] your God am holy.

What follows in this chapter is a list of seemingly unrelated commands: keep the sabbath (v. 3), provide food for the poor and the sojourner (vv. 9-10), render fair judgments in court (v. 15), wait until the fifth year to eat produce from trees (vv. 23-25), do not eat blood (v. 26), honor the elderly (v. 32), and many more. Verse 19 is in the middle of this catch-all list of commands. It’s not really clear if there are any themes or principles that all of these commands have in common, but we do know from verse 2 that they are all part of “being holy.” Also, to complete our discussion of context, we should quote the entire verse. This is what all of Leviticus 19:19 says:

Leviticus 19:19

You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material.

When we read this entire verse in Hebrew, we notice something very interesting. There is a Hebrew word that is used three times in this verse, and the definition of that word is critical to understanding what the verse is saying. That Hebrew word is *Kilayim*. *Kilayim* is the word translated as “two kinds of seed.” However, *Kilayim* is also the word translated as “different kind,” when speaking about cattle, and as “two kinds of material” when speaking about cloth. Obviously, the meaning of this word is very important to the meaning of this command. So, what exactly does this word mean?

This is where this command starts to become very difficult to interpret. This word, *Kilayim*, is only used four times in the entire Bible, and three of those instances are inside of this one verse. We don’t actually know exactly what it means. It comes from a root word which means “to restrict,” and it is related to a word that means a “prison.” These related words don’t really help us understand what this word means though.

What would be helpful is to see the word used in a lot of different situations so that we could get a feel for how it is used. Unfortunately, as I mentioned, the word is only used four times in all of the scriptures, so arriving at a definition for this word is something of a guessing game. Inevitably, we’re going to have to indulge in some speculation to try to figure out what this command is all about.

As we analyze this command, we think there are two reasonable assumptions that can be made. The first assumption is that *Kilayim*, the word translated as “two kinds,” has the same basic definition in all of the places it is used. So, if it means “two different kinds” when it comes to seeds, then it will also have the same basic meaning when it comes to cattle or to fabric. The second assumption is that the prohibition of these mixtures has the same basic purpose as it applies to cattle, seeds, and cloth. In other words, the *reason* that it is prohibited to wear cloth made of two kinds of material is going to be the same *reason* that it is prohibited to sow your field with two kinds of seed.

It’s possible that one or both of these assumptions could be incorrect, but we think it’s much more likely that the Bible is being consistent in both the tone and purpose of the commands of Leviticus 19:19, and that it is using the word *Kilayim* in a consistent way. So, as we analyze the purpose of the law about planting mixed seeds, we will also be considering the purpose for the laws about breeding mixed animals and wearing mixed fabric, and assuming that the purpose for all of these laws is basically the same.

There are two more things we should do before we examine the competing explanations. One is to look at the other Scripture where the word *Kilayim* is used. That Scripture is found in Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 22:9

You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, lest the whole yield be forfeited, the crop that you have sown and the yield of the vineyard.

Kilayim here is the word translated as “two kinds.” This command is very similar to the one about planting the field in Leviticus 19, but this verse specifically talks about a vineyard, and it provides a consequence for violating the command. We will be returning to this command several times as we try to evaluate what the command from Leviticus 19 might mean.

The second thing we should point out is that the command that says not to wear a garment made of mixed materials is further clarified by another verse in Deuteronomy. Here’s that verse:

Deuteronomy 22:11

You shall not wear cloth of wool and linen mixed together.

So, when the word *Kilayim* is used to mean “two kinds” of material in Leviticus 19, it is actually talking about the specific materials mentioned in this verse—wool and linen. For more on this topic, see our teaching, [Wool and Linen](#). The reason this command is significant to our conversation is that this shows that *Kilayim* can refer to mixing two specific materials, rather than mixing *any* two materials. This means that it is possible that the commands about mixing cattle and seeds might be prohibiting specific kinds of mixtures of cattle or seeds. This is another point that we will return to as we evaluate some different interpretations.

Now we will take a look at some of the different interpretations of Leviticus 19:19. Again, here is how the verse reads:

Leviticus 19:19

You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material.

The way we are going to categorize these different interpretations is by the reason that the commands are given. We’re going to be looking at five potential purposes behind these prohibitions on mixtures and see if they have any merit. Here is our first option:

Possible Purpose #1: These mixtures of cattle, seeds or fabric are prohibited because they are “holy,” and the common people are not allowed to have them.

This option looks attractive for several reasons. Deuteronomy 22:9 mentions that the produce that is gathered as a result of the *Kilayim* seed mixture is to be forfeited. Here is that verse again:

Deuteronomy 22:9

You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, lest the whole yield be forfeited, the crop that you have sown and the yield of the vineyard.

The word “forfeited” in Hebrew is *tiqdash*, which can also be translated “make holy.” When something is “made holy,” that typically means that it has to be given to the priests (Exodus 29:32-33; Leviticus 2:9-10; 22:7; 24:5-9; 27:30-32; Numbers 5:9-10; 18:8-10). So, right away, it looks like these mixtures are potentially things that are thought to belong to the priests; if you try to make these mixtures for yourself, then the priests are going to take them.

Also, in line with this theory, some argue that the reason for the prohibition of mixing linen and wool is that the priests wore garments that were a mixture of linen and wool. For example, the scholar Jacob Milgrom said this:

...the most plausible explanation, in my estimation, is that mixtures belong to the sacred sphere, namely the sanctuary, as do its officiants, the priests. Thus, the lower cover of the tabernacle and the curtain closing off the adytum are a mixture of linen and wool (Exod 26:1, 31). The high priest’s ephod, breastplate, and belt contain the same mixture (28:6, 15; 39:29)

- Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2004), p. 236

So, just like the anointing oil and incense that were used in the sanctuary was holy, and the common people were not allowed to make it (Exodus 30:31-33), so too the mixture of fabric used in the priestly garments is holy, and the common people are not allowed to wear it.

There are also some historical sources that back up this idea that the priests’ garments were made from a mixture of wool and linen. The first-century historian Josephus, when explaining Leviticus 19:19, said this:

Let not any one of you wear a garment made of woolen and linen, for that is appointed to be for the priests alone.

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 4.8.11 (Translation from William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works* [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library], p. 235)

So, if the wool-linen mixture was prohibited because it was considered “holy,” and belonged to the priests, then perhaps the mixtures of seeds or cattle were also considered to be holy things that belonged to the priests.

This explanation seems to have a lot going for it, but it has two major flaws. First, we don’t know for sure that the priestly garments were actually made of a mixture of wool and linen. While the testimony of a first century Jewish historian certainly carries some weight, second century rabbis did not agree on whether the priestly garments were in fact made of mixed fabrics. Here is one example of their disagreement:

With regard to the belt of the common priest, there is a dispute between Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon. One said: It was a mixture of diverse kinds of wool and linen, like the belt of the High Priest mentioned in the Torah. And one said: It was made of fine linen, like the rest of the garments of the common priest.

- *Yoma* 12b

Additionally, the Bible itself does not say that the priestly garments were made of a wool-linen mixture. The Hebrew words *tsemer*, which means wool, and *shaatnez*, which means a mixture of linen and wool, are never used in any of the descriptions of any of the priestly garments. The only fabric that is specified is *shesh*, which is Hebrew for fine linen (Exodus 28:6, 15, 39, 42). So the Bible neither specifies, nor emphasizes, that the priestly garments were made of mixed fabrics.

The second problem with this explanation is that the principle of the mixtures being “holy” and belonging to the priests cannot be reasonably extended in the Bible to include animals and crops. The Torah does not call certain breeds of animals “holy,” or only for priestly use, nor does it say that only priests could grow certain kinds of crops. One might argue that Deuteronomy 22:9 is describing a seed mixture that only priests could use, but the verse itself simply says that the fruit was to be confiscated; it doesn’t give any indication that priests had special exemption from this rule, or that priests planted their own vineyards with mixed seeds. If getting to grow certain kinds of crops and raise certain kinds of animals was a special privilege of being a priest, the Bible is oddly silent about that privilege.

So, in the end, while this explanation appears attractive, it relies on a lot of assumptions. Also, practically speaking, it doesn’t really clarify how the command should be kept. It doesn’t offer us any particular insight on what qualifies as a prohibited mixture and what doesn’t.

Possible Purpose #2: These mixtures are prohibited because they were elements of Canaanite religion or culture.

This is the exact opposite approach from our last explanation. Rather than saying that the mixtures were too holy to be in the hands of the common people, this explanation says that the mixtures were unholy, part of the worship of other gods. This explanation looks promising for a few reasons. The twelfth century Rabbi Maimonides claimed that it was not the Israelite priests who wore mixed fabrics, but in fact the Canaanite priests (Maimonides’ *Guide For The Perplexed* 3.37). He also said that the pagans had a superstitious and lewd ceremony that was performed whenever they would graft a branch onto a tree, because they believed that this ceremony would make the tree more fruitful. Accordingly, he says this:

The Law, therefore, prohibits us to mix different species together, i.e., to graft one tree into another, because we, must keep away from the opinions of idolaters and the abominations of their unnatural sexual intercourse. In order to guard against the grafting of trees, we are forbidden to sow any two kinds of seed together or near each other.

- Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed, Second Edition*, translation by M. Friedlander [New York: E.P. Dutton & Co 1904] p. 338

He also goes on to say this in reference to the command in Deuteronomy 22:9:

...it was the custom of the people in those days to sow barley and stones of grapes together, in the belief that the vineyard could only prosper in this way. Therefore the Law prohibits us to use seed that has grown in a vineyard, and commands us to burn both the barley and the produce of the vineyard.

- Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed, Second Edition*, translation by M. Friedlander [New York: E.P. Dutton & Co 1904] p. 339

The idea that these forbidden mixtures were part of pagan rituals fits some of the other themes of Leviticus chapter 19. Some of the things forbidden in this chapter were clearly part of the idolatrous and superstitious practices of the cultures that surrounded ancient Israel: for example, verse 4 prohibits making “gods of cast metal,” and verse 26 says, “you shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes.” It makes sense that the mixing of fabrics, animals, and seeds might also be part of pagan practices that God did not want his people to participate in.

The biggest flaw in this theory is the lack of historical evidence for it. Maimonides lived in the twelfth century A.D., and he got his information about these supposed ancient pagan practices from a tenth-century Islamic book called *The Nabatean Agriculture*. So, his information comes from a book that was written about 2,500 years after the time of Moses. So far, no sources earlier than this have been found which describe these mixtures as part of a pagan ceremony. The authors of the Talmud didn’t seem to think that there was anything idolatrous about the mixtures, and the Bible never mentions any pagan practices involving these mixtures either. We also don’t have any firsthand records from the Canaanites that mention these kinds of rituals or customs. Without older corroborating evidence, we just don’t know if these ceremonies involving mixtures were really ancient pagan practices that Moses would have known about, or if they were customs that were developed much later. Evidence for these practices being ancient could turn up some day, but until it does, this theory rests on history that is not very reliable.

Possible Purpose #3: These mixtures are prohibited because they produce defective products.

This is a popular explanation of these commands. Remember when we mentioned that *Kilayim* could be referring to specific kinds of mixtures? This explanation takes advantage of that possibility, and says that the problem isn’t the mixture itself, but whether the mixture produces something good or something bad. Linen and wool shrink at different rates, so combining them would potentially produce a garment that doesn’t fit right, or will wear out faster. Perhaps this is the reason that they should not be mixed. Also, some combinations of plants or animals produce offspring that are sterile—for example, mating a horse and a donkey will produce a mule, which cannot reproduce, and some kinds of hybrid crops produce seeds that are fertile, but don’t produce more of the hybrid plant. These traits are undesirable, and arguably even unnatural. This explanation also fits the theme of some of the commands in Leviticus 19 that forbid unnecessary destruction, like the commands against cutting or printing marks on yourself (v. 28).

While this theory seems to provide a solid underlying reason for the command, it has issues too. One issue is that wool and linen can be combined in a way that does not cause problems with stretching or wear, and historically those two fabrics were frequently mixed together in that way by many different cultures. That combination of fabrics is not necessarily “defective,” at least, not in a practical sense. The same can be said about animal and plant breeding; there are plenty of hybrids that are not “defective” by any practical standards. A second problem is, if the products made by these mixtures are defective, then why are they “made holy” in Deuteronomy 22:9? Why would the priests take an inferior product for themselves?

Still a third problem is, what makes a product qualify as “defective” in the first place? What if two things are combined in a way that is bad for some purposes, but good for other purposes? How do we determine which things are OK to combine, and which things aren’t? The usual answer that’s given for this is that interbreeding is forbidden when it makes plants or animals that cannot reproduce (The Karaite Jews, who reject the Talmud, hold this position; e.g., see the Karaite text *Mikdash Me’at* 22.2c). However, if we are assuming that there is one underlying purpose behind prohibiting mixtures of cattle,

seeds, and fabrics, then this explanation doesn't work. Wool and linen cannot reproduce no matter how pure or mixed the fabrics are. This explanation requires us to make rather arbitrary judgments about what is permissible to mix and what isn't. So, while this explanation seems logical at first, it presents a number of unanswered questions.

Possible Purpose #4: These mixtures are prohibited simply because they are mixtures.

This explanation seems to solve one of the problems with the previous explanation: that being the problem of how to draw the line that separates a “defective” product from an acceptable one. This explanation simply erases that line completely, and says that all mixtures of animal, seed, and cloth are forbidden. It also has the advantage of explaining Deuteronomy 22:9—the mixed-seed items are “made holy,” that is, confiscated by the priests, because they are forbidden. The priests take these items away in order to remove them from society. Another advantage to this theory is its simplicity; we don't have to assume any underlying motive to the command. Mixtures are prohibited, and, well, that's all there is to it. Also, this explanation is upheld by tradition, because it is the explanation provided by the Talmud (*Yoma* 67b:10). As the Rabbi Rashi stated:

Do not cross-breed your animals with different species, etc. These statutes are royal decrees without [a humanly understandable] reason for them.

- *Rashi Chumash* (Metsudah Publications 2009), Vayikra 19:19

One more advantage to this explanation is that it is very direct and literal. It just takes the text at face value, and makes very few assumptions about it.

Unfortunately, there are many disadvantages to this explanation. First, if the mixed produce in Deuteronomy 22:9 is forbidden to exist, then we would assume that the priests would destroy the produce after they confiscate it, but the text does not actually say that they destroy the produce. Second, for each arbitrary line that this explanation erases, it makes drawing two more arbitrary lines necessary. Rather than asking how defective a plant has to be before it is prohibited to be grown, we now have to ask how different two plants must be before they are prohibited from being combined. For example, is it OK to cross a yellow tomato with a red tomato, as long as they are both tomatoes? What about a dog with a wolf? How can we tell which things are “different kinds,” and which things aren't? Under this explanation, these are questions that we're left to answer on our own, and we don't have any underlying purpose to the command that can help guide our answers.

We also have the issue of how to determine what constitutes a “field.” Remember, Leviticus 19:19 says, “**You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed.**” So, then, is it OK to plant two different kinds of plants in two different “fields” that are side-by-side? How far away does a plant have to be from another plant before it is considered to be in a different field? Also, if these standards apply to fields and vineyards, do they also apply to vegetable gardens and orchards? As you can see, this explanation produces many more questions than it answers (e.g., see Mishnah *Kilayim*).

Possible Purpose #5: Mixtures are prohibited when they are fraudulently presented as being pure.

This explanation basically states that Leviticus 19:19 is not actually prohibiting mixtures, but is prohibiting mixtures that can be passed off as unmixed products. For example, it would be wrong to sell a mixed-breed dog to a customer who believed he was getting a purebred poodle, or to advertise seed as being wheat seed when it actually has rye seed mixed with it. This kind of fraud would usually take the

form of combining something less expensive with something more expensive and trying to pass off the mixture as containing only the more expensive product. According to this explanation, the problem that these commands are trying to solve is that farmers, animal breeders, and tailors are lying to their customers about what is really in their products.

This explanation has some solid advantages. First, it aligns well with other commands in Leviticus 19 that prohibit fraud, including the commands not to steal or lie (v. 11), to be impartial in court judgments (v. 15), and to have honest weights and measures (vv. 35-36). Second, it makes good sense of Deuteronomy 22:9. Under this explanation, the mixed-seed produce in that verse is confiscated as a punishment for the fraud. It's not that there is anything unnatural or wrong about the product that is being grown; it's that the product is being used for unjust gain. Third, this explanation minimizes the number of arbitrary lines we have to draw to figure out how to apply this command. All you have to do is tell the truth about the things that you're selling, and don't try to cut corners behind your customers' backs.

While this explanation has some good points, it too is not without its drawbacks. First, Leviticus 19:19 doesn't say anything about selling the products that are made as a result of these mixtures. It is possible that advertising or selling could be part of the definition of the word *Kilayim*, but there is no evidence for that at all; that's pure speculation. It seems strange that there would be no explicit reference to buying or selling in the verse if avoiding fraud were the purpose of this command. In fact, in the command about mixed fabrics, it says you shall not "wear" a garment of *Kilayim*; it doesn't say anything about selling it. Second, this explanation suffers from the same problem as every explanation of this command: there just isn't any evidence for it. There simply aren't any Scriptures or other ancient texts that provide any definitive explanations for the term *Kilayim*.

Let's review the five explanations for why mixtures are prohibited that we have covered in this teaching:

- 1) Mixtures are "holy," and belong to the priests.
- 2) Mixtures were part of pagan worship or customs.
- 3) Mixtures produce inferior or unnatural products.
- 4) God just doesn't like mixtures, and his reasoning won't necessarily make sense to us.
- 5) Mixtures are used for fraud.

These five possibilities aren't the only possible explanations for this command, but they are the most popular ones, and in our opinion the most likely ones. So, which one is the best? What can we conclude after all of this analysis? Unfortunately, with the information we have, it's difficult to conclude anything. All of these explanations have a certain logic to them, and certain pieces of evidence that seem to support them. However, the bottom line is that the Scriptures don't specify the reason that these commands exist. Without knowing that reason, it is difficult to determine what counts as a violation of the command to avoid mixing seeds and what doesn't.

However, there are some things that we can say. No matter what this specific command means, we know from other Scriptures that we shouldn't participate in pagan religious ceremonies (Deuteronomy 12:2-4), and that we should be honest in our business dealings (Leviticus 19:11). It's possible that just by doing those two things, that we are already obeying this command.

Also, it is unlikely that this command is saying that we cannot plant, say, carrots and tomatoes next to each other. That would not violate most of the likely purposes for why this command exists. Tomatoes and carrots cannot cross-pollinate, so they won't even produce a hybrid species, let alone a sterile or

defective plant. There is certainly no ancient Canaanite practice involving carrots and tomatoes—tomatoes were not grown in Canaan—so one couldn't even accidentally engage in a pagan ceremony by planting them together. Also, putting these plants close together would not make it any easier to fraudulently advertise a carrot as being a tomato, or vice versa. The only way that planting two such things together would be prohibited would be if explanation #4 is true, and the command's intent is to prohibit planting any two different things next to each other. However, even if that's the case, we still have the issue of defining what a "field" is. For what it's worth, the Talmud, which does interpret the command in this way, gives great leniency in its definition of a "field," and so in practice it allows the sowing of many different kinds of seeds in a relatively small space (see Mishnah *Kilayim* 3).

In the end, the exact purpose of this command, as well as the correct way to keep it, remains unclear. Maybe someday more historical information will be discovered that will shed some light on exactly what this command means and why it exists. Until then, we just have to do the best we can to be obedient to the parts of God's word that we do understand.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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