

Wool And Linen

by Mike Ford

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“You shall not wear a garment of different sorts, such as wool and linen mixed together.”

—*Deuteronomy 22:11*

What is the strangest law in the Bible? For many, it is Deuteronomy 22:11, “You shall not wear a garment of different sorts, such as wool and linen mixed together.” This directive is repeated in Leviticus 19:19. The phrase “garment of different sorts” is from the Hebrew *sha’atnez*, literally “mixed stuff,” which Orthodox Jews define as specifically wool and linen together, not any other mixture.

The Law of Sha’atnez, they feel, is a *chok*, a decree that the King has passed for His subjects, for which we do not know the reason. Rabbinic commentators believe that many of God’s statutes are of that sort. He provides no reason and expects us to accept them on faith. One rabbi has said, “Why ask why?” Their point has validity, certainly, but is there really no reason for this edict? Can we discern God’s original point here, and does this mandate have any significance for Christians today?

We will consider several possibilities for God stating that we should not wear wool and linen together.

Possible Reasons

The great medieval Jewish scholar, Maimonides, wrote that ancient pagan priests used to wear wool and linen together while practicing the occult and idol worship. Therefore, he reasoned, we should stay away from *sha’atnez*. In contrast, a more recent, non-Jewish writer said the reason for this law was that both the priestly garments of the Old Testament and the Tabernacle weavings were a combination of wool and linen, so laypersons were prohibited from dressing the same way.

Both comments could be legitimate, but the second has a problem. That the priest’s white undergarment was made of linen and his vestment was made of wool is true, but they are two different articles of clothing, not one item of mixed fabrics. Deuteronomy 22:11 reads, “You shall not wear *a* [singular] garment of . . . wool and linen mixed together” (emphasis ours).

Another option offered by some is that mixing wool and linen upsets the environmental and/or metaphysical fabric of the universe. *The Jamison, Faucett and Brown Bible Commentary* asserts that

the observations and researches of modern science have proved that wool, when combined with linen, increases its power of passing off electricity from the body. In hot climates, it brings on malignant fevers and exhausts the strength; and when passing off from the body, it meets with the heated air, inflames and excoriates like a blister.

This was written in 1871, so when the authors refer to “researches of modern science,” they are speaking of not-so-modern research. Lest we make light of the seeming absurdity of this statement, other sources support this view. Articles, easily found on the Internet, tout the healing properties of

linen and, to a lesser extent, wool, not to mention scientific studies that have measured the respective electronic frequencies of the human body and different fabrics. The most beneficial was linen, while silk had none at all. Wool did well, but its benefits were not nearly as good as linen.

Another possibility for God giving this command involves the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. According to Jewish tradition, for what it is worth, the offering they were to give was for Passover. These same traditions have Cain bringing flax (from which linen is made) and Abel, a sheep (and thus wool). After Cain killed Abel, it was decreed, the thinking goes, that never again should the two substances mix.

Moreover, Abel's lamb resembles the paschal lamb, but Cain's offering recalls Egypt, which is identified by its production and use of linen. One rabbi went so far as to write that linen is unrighteousness and wool is righteous. He clarifies that wearing linen by itself is not forbidden, just that it represents Egypt. Yet, Revelation 19:8 tells us that the resurrected saints will be clothed in fine linen, clean and white, which would seem to demolish the "linen equals Egypt" theory.

A "Christian" website reasoned along similar but exactly opposite lines when it opined that wool is Old Covenant or "works," and linen is New Covenant and "grace." It went on to state that the two can *never* mix!

Our own website features a short article on the wearing of mixed fibers. Based on answers to questions sent in to the Worldwide Church of God many years ago, it explains Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:11 as a kind of "consumer protection law." Clothing is made from two basic kinds of natural fibers. One kind is from plant cellulose fiber, such as linen and cotton. The other is from animal protein fiber, such as wool and silk. Since they differ markedly in strength, washability, absorption, and so forth, they should not be mixed. The article goes on to say that combining wool and linen produces a cheaper garment.

What we generally know about clothing agrees with this. A 100% wool suit is of higher quality than one of mixed types. A 100% silk tie is preferred over a blend, and so on. This short piece on our website ends by pointing out that wearing such materials is not a sin in itself. Rather, God does not want manufacturers producing shoddy materials in order to take advantage of their customers. A wise principle to follow in selecting either a pure or mixed garment is to purchase the best quality one can afford—it will last longer and fit better than inferior, less expensive clothes.

Which of these possible reasons for this law is correct? Are all of them right? Is this a *chok*, a law whose logic is not evident? Each of these options has some merit.

Note the Context

Before coming to a conclusion, we need to look at the context in which God gave this statute. A quick scan of Leviticus 19, which the *New King James Bible* heads as "Moral and Ceremonial Laws," will be helpful.

Verse 1 informs us that God spoke directly to Moses and that he was to share all of this with the children of Israel. In the next verse, God says, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." *Holy* means "sacred" and "set apart." The points that follow are designed to set Israel apart, and if observed, these statutes and judgments would keep Israel undefiled.

Verses 3 and 4 cover the first, second, fourth, and fifth commandments, and the following four verses deal with sacrificing. Verses 9-10 handle harvesting procedures and leaving something for the poor. Verse 11 covers the eighth and ninth commandments, while verse 12 rephrases the third commandment. Verse 13 gives counsel on dealing with neighbors and employees, and verse 14, with the handicapped. Verse 15 encourages us to judge righteously. Verse 16 condemns gossip, and verses 17-18 concern familial relationships.

After this, verse 19 begins: “You shall keep my statutes . . .” The Hebrew word underlying “statutes” is *shamar*, “to hedge about, guard, protect, attend to, preserve, observe, and to treasure up in your memory.” God covers a great deal of ground in the first 18 verses, so at the chapter’s half way mark, He inserts a reminder that these laws and life principles, this huge amount of wisdom, is to be guarded, protected, attended to, preserved, and observed. He closes the chapter in verse 37 with the same reminder.

Notice the three matters listed in verse 19: “You shall not let your livestock breed with another kind. You shall not sow your field with mixed seed. Nor shall a garment of mixed linen and wool come upon you.” Sandwiched between His admonition to bear no grudges and love your neighbor (verse 18) and the penalty for adultery (verse 20), we have these three directives.

Are they on a par with some of these others? No, of course not. Nor is idol worship (verse 4) comparable with gleaning the fields (verse 9). The chapter ends with God commanding us to observe “all My statutes and all My judgments.” We have to discern what this means.

Not Done Away

Some of these verses deal with the Ten Commandments. Do any of us doubt that these are still in force and to be kept? Even so, few of us farm the land anymore, so what does mixing livestock or seed have to do with us? For that matter, how many tailors do we have today? What do we know of mixing fabrics? It is possible that pagan priests wore this mix; that one fabric signifies the Old Covenant, and the other, the New; that it was simply a consumer protection law; or that all of the above are true, which is likely. But what does it mean for us today?

Verse 27 admonishes us not to shave around the sides of our heads or “disfigure” the edges of our beards. These were things Egyptians did, and perhaps some of the Israelites had adopted those practices. From this distance in time, we do not really know what they were doing with their beards and hair, but God tells them, “No, don’t do that. You are a special people. Come out of Egypt.” So, although we do not have to worry about our beards or hair as much in this regard, we still have to be aware of the “Egypt” around us and come out of her.

This same principle applies to mixing wool and linen. Note that this prohibition does not stand alone because in the same verse, God also forbids mixing cattle and seed. It is the principle of clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous, Christian or pagan, Egypt or God.

In Matthew 5:17-18, Christ says:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.

Even the smallest point in the Old Testament is not “done away” until “all is fulfilled,” until “heaven and earth pass away.” Has that happened yet? Of course not. Some of the physical rituals—such as circumcision, the various washings, sacrifices and offerings—may not have to be performed anymore, but the spiritual intent lives on.

The Old Covenant emphasized physical things as a means of righteousness, but the emphasis under the New Covenant is on spiritual elements in our relationship with God and each other. Under the New Covenant, we become a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1), and that sacrifice begins in our mind. This change from the Old to the New forces us to make spiritual use of the laws already written. They are not done away; we just have to figure out how they apply to us now.

A Principle of Separation

So as to not mixing wool and linen, there could well be health benefits, just as there are health benefits to circumcising baby boys on their eighth day. But if mixing these fabrics is not a sin, what is the point for us?

The point is that a spiritual principle is involved, and it is nothing more than the principle of separation. Just as God wanted the physical nation of Israel to be kept separate from the nations around it, we are to maintain spiritual separation from the sin that surrounds us.

Deuteronomy 14:2 says essentially the same thing to the children of Israel: “For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (see Exodus 19:5). For this reason, Israelites were not to mix wool and linen, nor mix physically with those around them.

With this understanding, we can bring the principle to the New Testament and apply it under the New Covenant:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” (II Corinthians 6:14-16)

The part that Paul quotes at the end—“I will be their God, and they shall be My people”—is found in at least a half-dozen Old Testament verses (Jeremiah 24:7; 31:33; 32:38; Ezekiel 11:20; 37:23, 27; Zechariah 8:8). More importantly, the apostle clearly indicates that the principle still applies! Except now it is God’s church that is separated out.

Further, Paul writes in Titus 2:14, speaking of Christ, “Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed, and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.” Recall the “Christian” website mentioned earlier that asserted that wool stands for works and linen represents grace, and the two can *never* be mixed. But does not the apostle Paul do just that in this verse? Christ gave Himself for us, to redeem us from sin, which is grace. Then he goes on to say that Jesus did this to purify us, to set us apart, to make us a people “zealous for good works.” He

redeemed us by grace so we could strive to live a sinless life, which we fail at repeatedly. But we try. The laws of God give us our borders, our limits. Without them, there would be no sin (Romans 3:20).

I Peter 2:9, describing the church, the apostle Peter writes, “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

Where does this leave us in terms of Deuteronomy 22:11 and Leviticus 19:19? Just as not circumcising one’s baby boy would not be a sin, since it is not a sign under the New Covenant, so with mixing wool and linen. However, there are proven health benefits to circumcision. God is not capricious that way; there is great good in following His instructions, even if they are no longer binding under the New Covenant. It would not be surprising if there are health benefits to not mixing these fabrics as well. Certainly, all of one or the other produces a better quality garment.

For us today, however, the takeaway is to keep *ourselves* spiritually pure, to concentrate on not mixing with the sin of this world, for we are “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood a holy nation, His own special people.”