

# Exodus 34:12-17

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*he LORD warns the Israelites against engaging in idolatry when entering the Promised Land. Not only are they not to ally themselves with the idolatry that existed in the land, but they are to eradicate every trace of it from the land.*

In the first command of this section, the LORD tells His people to *watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going*. To ally themselves with *the inhabitants of the land* would necessarily involve compromise. An alliance with the Canaanites was equal to accepting their gods, and this was completely unacceptable for a people who were in a covenant with their LORD alone. God explains His rationale for this command. Any form of compromise would *become a snare in your midst*. The *snare* is a figure of speech, like a rabbit caught by a hunter's trap. The inferred image is that such an event would lead to destruction and/or death (1 Samuel 18:21; Psalms 18:5; Jeremiah 5:26).

To eliminate the threat of this *snare*, the people were *to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim* (v. 13). All of these were involved in idolatrous worship. The *altars* were places where sacrifices were made, including humans. The *sacred pillars* were monoliths honoring one or more pagan gods or goddesses. These *pillars* often were placed near an *altar*.

The *Asherim* were poles dedicated to the goddess Asherah, who was portrayed as the consort of the Canaanite high god El. Stone phallic symbols, shaped in the form of a male penis, have been uncovered in archeological sites from the Canaanite era. This fits with the general nature of pagan worship, which was infused with sexual immorality of all forms (see [Leviticus 18](#) for a list of such perversions and exploitations common to both Canaan and Egypt). Every vestige of Canaanite religion was to be eradicated from the Promised Land. This immorality was a toxic poison that was to be eliminated.

Eliminating the centers of pagan worship was based on the idea that the Israelites were not to *worship any other god* (v. 14). This is a restatement of the first Commandment ([Exodus 20:3](#)). Israel was to worship only the LORD because *the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God*. For God to be *jealous* means that He will take measures to protect those whom He loves,

as well as the relationship between Himself and the one He loves. Like a husband will protect a wife, and his covenant relationship with his wife. In fact, the relationship between God and Israel is often depicted as a marriage, and Israel as an unfaithful wife (see [Ezekiel 16](#) and the book of Hosea for an illustration of this picture). This theme continues in the New Testament, where the church is depicted as the Bride of Christ ([Ephesians 5:22-32](#)). The reasons for destroying all of the pagan places and instruments of worship are given in verses 15 – 17:

The LORD, knowing His people, told them *otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods* (v. 15). Chapter 32 demonstrated that the people were vulnerable to pagan influences, and if they made a *covenant* with the pagan people in the Promised Land, it would have to involve accommodation of their pagan culture. This would inevitably lead to them adopting their gods and goddesses. In effect, they would *play the harlot* with them. This harlotry had both spiritual and physical aspects. Spiritually, to worship another god was to “join” or have a relationship with it. Physically, many, if not most, pagan religions involve “sacred prostitution,” where having sexual relations with a temple prostitute, or animal, was an act of worship.

Next, *someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice*. Eating food sacrificed to idols was an act of devotion to the idol. This was an issue in the Corinthian church that Paul addressed in [1 Corinthians 8](#), roughly 1500 years later. Pagan worship was a way of life, reaching even to eating. There would be no way to segregate their pagan ways sufficiently to avoid being polluted. A complete separation was necessary. Third, worshipping the pagan gods would entice the people to *take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods* (v. 16). In other words, if the inhabitants of the Promised Land were allowed to continue their pagan worship and Israelites intermarried with them, it would cause their faith in the LORD to be polluted with the pagan practices of the Canaanites. This principle is still relevant, which is why Paul encouraged his readers to marry “only in the LORD” ([1 Corinthians 7:39](#)).

God was setting up Israel to be something completely different from what then existed. An exception to the norm. Israel was to be a self-governing nation based on loving and obeying God, whose primary command was for the people to love and care for one another. Rather than a pleasure-seeking tyranny based on human exploitation—which was the system of existing

nations—God sought to create a priestly nation based on mutual cooperation, voluntary social harmony, and equal justice for all. There was no possibility this would ever function well if mixed with existing pagan practice. Mixing a little “human exploitation” with a little “love your neighbor” does not work; it will yield human exploitation every time.

The norm for the existing cultures was the strong kings exploiting the weaker kings for tribute ([Genesis 14:1-12](#)). The norm for the existing cultures was filled with sexual abuse of women and children ([Leviticus 18](#)). The existing cultures included sexual deviations, even sex with animals ([Leviticus 18](#)). Last but not least, the existing cultures included human sacrifice ([Leviticus 18](#)). There is no way to mix “a little bit” of any of these practices in with a self-governing culture focused on loving God and one’s neighbor. Any human exploitation yields exploitation.

Verse 17 is an extension of the second Commandment ([Exodus 20:4](#)). There, it does not mention “molten gods.” But here, in light of the “molten calf” ([Exodus 32:4, 8](#)), the LORD commanded that they *shall make for yourself no molten gods*. They were not to manufacture an idol in any way. This wording makes it clear, lest someone think there was a loophole.

To sum up, these verses warn the Israelites to keep themselves completely away from anything associated with idolatry. Israel had just fallen into idolatry in chapter 32, and the LORD made it abundantly clear that worshipping other gods had no place in the lives of His people with whom He has a covenant. They cannot do “a little” pagan idolatry, with its exploitive practices. Any is too much. Their job as a priestly nation, showing a better way, is to avoid exploitation, and live in obedience to God’s commands, which will lead them to produce mutual benefits, protect the innocent, and seek justice for all based on the rule of law.

### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>12</sup>Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, or it will become a snare in your midst. <sup>13</sup>But *rather*, you are to tear down their altars and smash their *sacred* pillars and cut down their Asherim <sup>14</sup>—for you shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God— <sup>15</sup>otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice, <sup>16</sup>and you might take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters**

might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons *also* to play the harlot with their gods. <sup>17</sup>You shall make for yourself no molten gods.