

Deuteronomy 12:1-3

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Moses commands the Israelites to utterly destroy all the religious sites where the Canaanites serve their gods. He commands them to cut down the engraved images of the Canaanite gods in order to erase them from memory.

In this section, Moses commanded the Israelites to destroy all aspects of pagan worship, both where the Canaanite nations served their gods and the things they used in their worship. This would remove temptation from God's people (Israel) to adopt the wicked cultic practices of the Canaanites, and help them follow the self-governing path of loving their neighbor demanded by their worship of the True God.

The first verse introduces the discourse contained in chapters 12 – 26. Moses stated that *these are the statutes and the judgments which you shall carefully observe*. The term *statutes* (Hebrew “*huqqîm*”) refers to something prescribed by an authority. As such, it could be translated as “prescriptions,” or “decrees.” The second term translated as *judgments* (Heb. “*mišpâṭîm*”) refers to legal procedures or commands issued by a judge. When used together, these two terms emphasize the totality of God’s authority and the importance of obeying the whole decree of God. They were also used to introduce the previous two sections of the book (4:1; 5:1).

To obey the LORD (Yahweh, the Suzerain God), the Israelites (being His vassals) needed to submit themselves to His authority by obeying all His ordinances. That is why it was important for Moses to emphasize God’s supreme authority as Israel’s Suzerain (Ruler). It was all of these precepts that the Israelites were to *carefully observe in the land which the LORD, the God of their fathers, has given them to possess as long as they live on the earth*. Moses made it clear to the Israelites that the Giver of the land was in fact the God of their ancestors.

The Bible tells us that Israel’s forefathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), who knew the LORD, each built an altar and worshiped the LORD in the Promised Land (see respectively [Genesis 13:4](#); [26:25](#); and [35:7](#)). Thus, the Israelites were commanded to observe God’s commandments, just like their forefathers did.

The grant of the land was made without condition, as a reward for Abraham's faithful service ([Genesis 15:7-18](#)). However, God also told them explicitly that their continued possession of the Promised Land was conditioned on their continued obedience to His word. This principle echoes throughout scripture. God gives many gifts, but whether we experience the gift as a blessing, possess the possession, depends on our choices.

Now that they are changing seasons, and will move from living in the wilderness to possessing the fertile land, they needed to be reminded anew that the covenant still stands, with its blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

It is appropriate that the first item to be discussed in this large section concerns the destruction of everything having to do with Canaanite religion. The foundation of the covenant and all resulting life in Israel was the exclusive worship of the LORD. The LORD's covenant demanded people serve one another in love, while pagan religions focused on controlling circumstances and satisfying pleasures. There could be no mixture between the two. Verses 2 – 3 describe what must be eradicated from the Promised Land.

Moses tells the Israelites that all of the sites of pagan worship must be erased, that they must *utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods*. The phrase *utterly destroy* is emphatic in the Hebrew text, literally “destroying you must destroy.” The Israelites were to completely destroy all Canaanite centers of worship, leaving no trace.

Each of the Canaanite nations had its own religious system with its own set of gods and goddesses. They, of course, were wholly incompatible with exclusive worship of the God of Israel. Their worship included all types of sins and abominations, including incest, bestiality, temple prostitution, and child sacrifice ([Leviticus 18:1-27](#)). For this reason, Moses commanded the Israelites to *utterly destroy* all the worship centers in Canaan in order not to emulate such practices. The Israelites seemed to be vulnerable to paganism ([Exodus 32](#) is an example), so to prevent them from relapsing, they needed to remove all remnants of pagan worship from the Promised Land.

In the context of the holy war, the verb translated here as *utterly destroy* refers to an act of obedience, which dedicates the enemies and their objects of worship to God ([Numbers 21:2](#); [Deuteronomy 13:17](#)). In this case, the Israelites were responsible to obey God's command to *utterly destroy* all the religious sites where the Canaanites served their gods in order not to emulate their wicked patterns of worship. Part of this was God's judgement upon the

immoral and dehumanizing practices of the pagan peoples. God made clear in [Genesis 15](#) that He was giving the Canaanites time to repent before their judgement, and now their time was full ([Genesis 15:16](#)).

The Canaanites worshiped their many gods in many places. They worshiped *on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree*. In fact, it was a common cultic practice in Canaan to place the shrines (religious objects) on *high mountains* and on *hills* and under leafy *trees*, a practice the Israelites copied later during their times of apostasy ([1 Kings 14:23](#); [2 Kings 16:4](#)). This was common in many pagan religions, such as seen with Mt. Olympus in Greek mythology.

Moses then outlined the specific pagan objects to be destroyed by Israel. Not only were they to destroy the places of pagan worship, they also were to *tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and burn their Asherim with fire*. This means that they needed to eliminate the items used in pagan worship as well as the places they were used.

The terms *altars*, *sacred pillars*, and *Asherim* speak of the nations' articles of worship. The *altars* were structures such as tables plated with precious metal on which people offered food and drink to their gods. The *sacred pillars* refer to stones (either cut or uncut) that represented a male deity ([2 Kings 3:2](#)) and were perhaps male fertility symbols (phallic symbols). The *Asherim* were wooden objects which stood at the worship places. They symbolized the fertility goddess Asherah, goddess of fertility and wife (or sister) of El, the highest god in the Canaanite pantheon.

Moses further told Israel to *cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place*. The *engraved images* were the idols made by the Canaanites to represent their gods (see [Deuteronomy 7:5, 25](#)). The verb *obliterate* (Heb. ābad) means “to ruin, destroy.” Thus, to *obliterate* the name of the gods means to completely erase their names from memory. This was intended to remove any temptation to worship pagan gods or include them in the worship of their LORD. There was not to be anything that resembled paganism in the worship of the LORD.

Unfortunately, the Israelites were in constant violation of this command. Shortly after Joshua's death, the Israelites “served the Baals” ([Judges 2:11](#)) and continued this practice throughout the 300-year period of the Judges ([Judges 3:7, 6:25 – 32, 8:33, 10:6, 10](#)). After that, several kings tolerated and even promoted the worship of Canaanite deities (see [1 Kings 14, 15.13, 16:33, 18:19; 2 Kings 13:6, 17;10ff, 21:1 – 7, 23:4ff](#)).

Finally, after several hundred years of disobedience to these commands, the LORD tolerated it no longer. The Bible reveals to us that the Fall of Samaria and Israel's captivity by the Assyrians around 722 BC occurred because of the exact things God told them not to do:

"They had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD had driven out before the sons of Israel, and in the customs of the kings of Israel which they had introduced. The sons of Israel did things secretly which were not right against the LORD their God. Moreover, they built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. They set for themselves sacred pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there they burned incense on all the high places as the nations did which the LORD had carried away to exile before them; and they did evil things provoking the LORD."

([2 Kings 17:7-11](#))

Obedience to the Suzerain LORD always brings blessings to the vassals. Conversely, disobedience to the Suzerain always brings various forms of curses on the vassals. This point is emphasized again and again throughout the book of Deuteronomy. The Suzerain God made provisions for His vassals (Israel) through His covenant stipulations. He gave specific obligations to the Israelites to follow so that He might be blameless in His judgment when they disobeyed Him ([Psalms 51:4](#)).

Biblical Text:

"These are the statutes and the judgments which you shall carefully observe in the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess as long as you live on the earth.² You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree.³ You shall tear down their altars and smash their *sacred* pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place.