

Deuteronomy 12:29-32

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Moses warns the Israelites against behaving like the native Canaanites who burned their children in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.

Moses opened the next section with a statement of fact about something that was certain to occur in the future, as indicated by the first word *When*: *When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land.* This means that what was said here about Israel taking the land was guaranteed to occur.

It would come to pass that the *LORD* was going to cut off *the nations before* the Israelites. The verb *cut off* in this context means “to destroy.” The Suzerain God was the One who would destroy the Canaanites in order to make room for His vassals (Israel). This destruction would also accomplish the LORD’s judgement upon the wickedness of these nations ([Deuteronomy 9:4-5](#)). God had waited numerous generations, allowing opportunity for these peoples to repent, but their iniquity was now complete ([Genesis 15:15-16](#)). God warned Israel that if they followed the same path of wickedness, He would dispossess them as well, which is what did indeed happen eventually ([Deuteronomy 4:25-26](#); [1 Chronicles 9:1](#)).

These nations that the LORD was going to destroy would be the ones that the Israelites would *dispossess*, meaning they would claim the land of Canaan as their own. Once dispossessed, the Israelites would *dwell in their land*.

It would take time for the possession to occur; the LORD had told the people they would not conquer the land all at once, but a little at a time ([Deuteronomy 7:22](#)). During the time of conquest, they could have a corrupting influence on the LORD’s people. Here the emphasis is upon ensuring that the Canaanite influence does not remain even after the conquest is over.

Moses urged the Israelites to *beware that you are not ensnared to follow them*. The word for *beware* (Heb. “shāmar”) literally means “watch” or “keep guard over.” Moses was exhorting the people to examine everything they do so as to not allow any pagan influence to seep into their worship of the LORD and their treatment of one another, or *ensnare* (lit. “trap”) them into breaking the LORD’s commandment to love and serve Him, as well as loving one

another as they loved themselves ([Leviticus 19:18](#)). There are aspects of pagan worship that would be attractive, but they needed to be avoided. If the people were to *follow* these pagan practices, they would be *ensnared* by them, like a bird caught in a trap. Sin ultimately leads to slavery ([Romans 6:19-20](#)).

The Canaanites, Moses stated, could leave great temptations *after they are destroyed before you*. Presumably, the Canaanites would leave behind a way of life that the Israelites would inherit. There would be altars, idols, etc. They might also have the memory of what they had seen and learned from the Canaanites. Some of it would likely have been quite memorable, such as the sexually-laced ceremonies of worship ([Leviticus 18](#)). But the LORD said that they were not to *inquire after their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?'* The LORD's covenant people were not to waste their time looking into pagan beliefs or practices for any reason.

People of that era (and still today in many eastern cultures) sought spiritual causes for physical effects. The normal way of thinking was to ascribe physical events to spiritual causes. This is common throughout the Bible. It was also common to believe a particular deity held sway over a particular land. This has a basis in truth, as seen in the book of Daniel, where Michael, one of the "chief princes" of God fights an enemy, a spiritual being called the "prince of the kingdom of Persia" ([Daniel 10:13](#)). What was not true is the idea that gods of wood or stone were real, or that the evil spirits behind these gods had sovereignty over the land. That sovereignty belonged to the One True God alone. The people were warned not to seek after the *gods* of that land, seeking to gain the promised transactional benefits. This mirrors the admonition in Proverbs to avoid evil by never taking the first step toward it ([Proverbs 5:8](#)).

It would also be tempting to bring in pagan practices and rituals into the worship of the LORD. Instead, Moses told the people that they could *not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods*. These pagan practices have no place in the worship of the true God. God's command to love your neighbor as yourself can't be mixed with a "little bit" of abuse, or lying, or stealing of property. The choice is binary. It is one or the other.

The adjective *abominable* comes from the word "abomination" (Heb. "tō'ēbâ"). The term "abomination" refers to a repugnant or detestable act, ranging from defective sacrifices ([Deuteronomy 17:1](#)) to the practice of magic and divination ([Deuteronomy 18:12](#)) or idolatrous practices ([2 Kings 16:3](#)). It

also includes sexual perversion, as in [Leviticus 18:22-26](#). That which is abominable is repulsive to the holiness of God and can destroy the purity of the people in their worship of God. Each of these *abominable* acts are self-seeking. They are rooted either in seeking power to control life, or in exploiting others for sensual pleasure. These *abominable* acts are the exact opposite of loving God and loving others. It is claiming godship and exploiting others. God finds these acts *abominable*. They observably lead to human misery and suffering.

Perhaps the most extreme pagan practice among the Canaanites was when they would *even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods*. The Canaanites would sacrifice their children in order to appease the gods and get their way. The ultimate exploitation is to sacrifice the life of another in order to get your own way. The saying, “There is no amount of other people’s suffering I cannot endure,” is humorous because we know it is a sick way to live. Human sacrifice is, however, an extreme, and sick extension of this adage. The practice of child sacrifice was common in the ancient Near East, especially in Canaan. There, the people would sacrifice one of their children (usually, by fire) when they wanted to appeal to the gods to make them do something, such as avert a calamity or give them victory in battle or provide rain for a good harvest. In the book of Leviticus, the LORD warned the Israelites not to practice all they saw in Egypt, or what they will see in Canaan, which included child sacrifice ([Leviticus 18:3, 21](#)).

Finally, Moses summed up these commands from the LORD that *whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it*. This was because these commands fulfill the first commandment—“You shall have no other gods before Me” ([Exodus 20:3](#); [Deuteronomy 5:7](#)).

Unfortunately, the history of the Israelites is filled with blatant violations of this commandment. For example, in the book of 2 Kings, we learn that King Ahaz “walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and even made his son pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had driven out from before the sons of Israel” ([2 Kings 16:3](#); [17:17](#)). God judged Israel for this disobedience when they were defeated by Assyria ([2 Kings 17:5-6](#)).

It is interesting that Moses begins and ends this chapter with strong warnings against allowing any vestige of paganism to remain in the land where the Suzerain LORD would dwell. This is in harmony with the first of the Ten Commandments. The LORD did not (and still does not) want anything

associated with pagan practices to be identified with Him or the worship of Him.

Biblical Text:

²⁹ “When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land,³⁰ beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?’³¹ You shall not behave thus toward the Lord your God, for every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.

³² Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it.