

Deuteronomy 17:2-7

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Moses describes the method of administrating justice when Israel enters Canaan, the Promised Land, in the case of someone who has transgressed God's covenant by giving allegiance to other gods.

Having given commands prohibiting the practice of pagan worship in the Promised Land in [Deuteronomy 16:21 – 17:1](#), Moses now turns to the topic of how to administer justice when these commands were violated. To illustrate this, Moses presents a hypothetical case and then the course of action to be taken.

Moses began the hypothetical situation by creating a setting, saying *if there is found in your midst, in any of your towns, which the LORD your God is giving you* (v. 2). The law here was to be enforced in all of the Promised Land. The Promised Land is being granted to Israel, *God is giving* it to them. God granted the land to Abraham some four hundred years earlier, but told Abraham that his descendants would not take possession for another four hundred years ([Genesis 15](#)). Israel would conquer the land, and possess *towns* that already existed. In this hypothetical situation, there *is found in the Israelites' midst* a violation of the law.

He continued to say that if *a man or a woman...does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, by transgressing His covenant*, then action is required. Justice must be dealt. In this case, God makes clear that He, and He alone decides what is and is not just. "Justice" means "line up with a standard." God sets the standard, but He is leaving it up to the people to deal justly with one another.

No one, *man or woman*, was exempt from this law. In the Hebrew text, the word *evil* in this phrase has the definite article attached to it. So, it could be translated as *the evil*, thus referring to a specific sinful act.

Any *man or woman* who does *the evil* must face consequences. In the book of Judges where the same construction occurs, the phrase often refers to the act of idolatry ([Judges 2:11](#), [3:22](#), [4:1](#)). The essence of idolatry is to adopt a standard of justice apart from God's standard. Generally, in the paganism of that day, the pagan standard provided moral justification for the strong to exploit the weak.

The meaning of *transgressing His covenant* has the idea of “overstepping” or “going beyond the boundaries.” Thus, to transgress God’s covenant was to go beyond (or outside) the boundary established by Him. To step over the line of justice that God had established. Thinking of the way we use the term “left justified margin” in writing, *transgressing His covenant* was putting words that exceeded the proper margin. In this case, worshipping pagan gods and goddesses was clearly beyond the boundary of the covenant ([Exodus 20:3 – 6](#)). The people had agreed to serve the LORD, and follow His ways only. To worship a pagan god was to break that agreement.

Transgressing God’s covenant in this passage refers to someone who *has gone and served other gods and worshiped them* (v. 3). To *serve* other gods goes beyond just making offerings to them as a way of paying tribute. It was to accept a completely different system of justice, of right and wrong, and of what is the proper and allowable way to treat one another. Offerings to an idol or pagan deity had several purposes. First, an offering was a way for the worshipper to acknowledge the deity as a power that can grant life and blessing, and second, it was a payment intended to cause the deity to bestow more blessing on the worshipper; in effect, it was a bribe. This gave the illusion of control. Now, because the offering had caused the deity to “give me what I want,” then essentially “I am now a god myself” because “I can control the power.” This in turn gave moral authority for people to exploit one another. As a result, the pagan nations were filled with human exploitation.

To *worship* other gods is to bow down before them as a way of showing reverence, allegiance, and loyalty to them. In ancient times, the act of worship involved placing one’s face to the ground ([Genesis 18:2; 19:1](#), and [Isaiah 49:23](#)). This symbolized submitting to their ways. The LORD had promised the people that if they would treat one another as they wanted to be treated, loving their neighbor, setting aside self and envy, their communities and lives would be richly blessed. In idolatry, the gods offered moral justification to exploit others. In many cases, prostitutes were an integral part of the worship. This helps explain why people would worship a figure they carved themselves. It would be obvious that something they made with their own hands would have no divine power ([Isaiah 44:4-20](#)). But it makes sense to convince yourself it does if that provides moral justification to “do whatever I want.”

The Suzerain LORD prohibited His people from worshipping or serving *other gods* because His way was the way to life and prosperity: a self-governing community living in mutual service to one another. The pagan way is the path to exploitation and violence. This prohibition against serving *other gods* included the deities that were common to most of the peoples in the area

of Canaan—*the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host*. Worship of objects in the sky (sun, moon, and stars) was a major part of pagan worship in most of the civilizations in the Ancient Near East. These were included as objects *which the LORD* had not *commanded* the Israelites to worship. Worshipping other gods or any heavenly beings was a direct violation of the first commandment ([Exodus 20:3](#); [Deuteronomy 5:7](#)).

Therefore, once the Israelites heard about the matter regarding the fellow Israelite worshipping other gods, the judges were to take the appropriate actions *if it is told you and you have heard of it, then you shall inquire thoroughly* (v. 4). God made the law, but He had delegated to His people to choose judges among themselves to administer the law ([Deuteronomy 16:18](#)). Thus, living in God's self-governing society included consent of the governed. These judges were to *inquire thoroughly* (lit. "investigate best"). That means they needed to do their best to make a careful investigation. The goal of the investigation was to see if the matter was *true and the thing certain that this detestable thing has been done in Israel*. God's purpose was not to weaponize the law. Accusations were not intended to be a way of slandering or punishing others. God's purpose was to discover what was true.

The word translated *detestable thing* occurred earlier in v. 1. It is the Hebrew word "to'evah," a term often translated into English as "abomination" ([Deuteronomy 7:25](#)). As in v. 1, it denotes something (or someone) that is disapproved of in the eyes of the LORD. It can refer to anything that does not meet the standards God has set forth for His people. In this verse, the transgressor has rejected God's standard of justice, and adopted an alternative system of justice validated by his allegiance to other gods. Therefore, he had committed an abomination, a detestable thing. It is a complete rejection of God and His ways, and could be viewed as treason. If a justice system prevails that provides moral cover for the exploitation of others, this overthrows God's design for Israel to be a self-governing nation where people serve one another. Thus, such a violation could be considered a plot to overthrow the nation.

If this accusation was found to be true, the judges were to *bring out that man or that woman who has done this evil deed to their gates, that is, the man or the woman*. The *gates* refer to the *gates* of the city, and were where the judges sat and dispensed judgment. The punishment for committing the *detestable thing* of pagan idolatry was that the Israelites were to *stone* the idolator *to death*. The Israelites were not to allow open treason against God's ways and His covenant to gain a foothold. Self-seeking and exploitation of

others would be like a cancer, and would spread and create death to a culture of self-governance and loving one's neighbor.

In Old Testament times, stoning was one of the most common forms of capital punishment ([Leviticus 24:14](#); [Numbers 15:35](#); [Deuteronomy 21:21](#)) because it allowed the whole community of Israel to actively participate in the process of killing the condemned. In this way, the people took ownership of the decision, and had to look upon the horror of death. This would not only emphasize the responsibility the community had to see justice done, it would also create a deterrent effect. The act of killing the person guilty of worshiping other gods would be a direct application of the Exodus law which states, *He who sacrifices to any god, other than to the LORD alone, shall be utterly destroyed* ([Exodus 22:20](#)).

A guilty verdict was only to be issued *on the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses* (v. 6). This was meant to be a safeguard against false testimony. It was to be that only on the convincing testimony of multiple witnesses that *he who is to die shall be put to death*. The point of the law is to prevent exploitation, by preserving God's covenant and His ways, which lead people to love their neighbors, and avoid envy. Requiring multiple witnesses deters this law from becoming a means of exploitation, through the avenue of false witness. The phrase *on the evidence* is literally "at the mouth of," implying that the testimony was oral.

[Hebrews 10:28](#) quotes this principle, and states matter of factly:

"Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses" ([Hebrews 10:28](#)).

The Hebrews passage continues and asks New Testament believers a serious question:

"How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?"
([Hebrews 10:29](#))

The context of Hebrews makes clear that this is a letter to believers. In fact, in the following verses the author of Hebrews notes that those to whom he is writing have gladly lost their possessions for their faith, knowing they have a "more enduring possession" laid up in heaven—heavenly treasure, eternal

rewards given for their faithfulness on earth ([Hebrews 10:32-35](#)). The “trampling of the Son of God underfoot” refers to the practice of willfully sinning, expecting to cover it up by making a temple sacrifice ([Hebrews 10:26](#)). This is the same basic attitude as idolatry. It is a New Testament believer saying “I know God says this is wrong, but I can do it anyway because I (fill in the blank).” God makes it clear that He will not approve this sort of action. The passage goes on to say:

“For we know Him who said, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY’” ([Hebrews 10:30](#)).

God never changes, He is the same yesterday, today, and forever ([Hebrews 13:8](#)). God has made the world with cause-effect, and disobedience to His ways will always have a consequence. This is true for believers. However, just as in the Old Testament, although God disciplines His people, He will never reject them. As [Hebrews 10:31](#) notes:

“And again, ‘THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE.’ It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” ([Hebrews 10:31](#)).

This verse quotes the first part of [Deuteronomy 32:36](#), which deals with national sin. God makes it clear that when Israel’s sins rise to a certain level, He will judge them by bringing pestilence and the sword ([Deuteronomy 32:23-25](#)). However, God will redeem His people. The complete verse of [Deuteronomy 32:36](#) makes this clear, stating:

“For the LORD will vindicate His people,
And will have compassion on His servants,
When He sees that their strength is gone,
And there is none remaining, bond or free.”
([Deuteronomy 32:36](#))

This makes clear that God’s acceptance of His people is always through His grace. It is a gift that is granted and received through faith. But God does not approve behavior that is self-destructive. He desires His children to prosper by serving one another, and when they exploit and mistreat one another, God judges them. However, that judgement is always redemptive. In the case of these provision in [Deuteronomy 17](#), the nation is being preserved from the cancer of self-seeking exploitation.

Having established the principle requiring multiple witnesses against a person, it follows that *he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness*. An

oral testimony of one person is insufficient to convict. Someone may testify falsely against another person because of personal hatred. Or someone might have seen wrongly, and been mistaken. This preventive measure would add an element of credibility to the matter and would prevent the accused person from being falsely or erroneously convicted.

Another safeguard against false testimony was the principle that the *hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death* (v. 7).

Psychologically, this provision would cause the accusers to think twice about their actions for at least two reasons. First, if the accusers killed the innocent person, the law would qualify them as murderers. Second, once the false witness was discovered to be a liar, the accusers would suffer the same punishment they intended for their brother ([Deuteronomy 19:18-19](#)).

When Jesus was confronted with the episode of the woman caught in adultery, He referenced this provision, saying “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” ([John 8:7](#)). Of course Jesus prefaced the provision with “he who is without sin among you.” But the deterrent effect is evident in this passage, because the older people gathered there left first, followed by the younger. They knew that if they cast the first stone, they would bear guilt.

Nevertheless, when the matter is confirmed, the accusers could cast the first stones *and afterward the hand of all the people*. All the people of Israel were to participate in the stoning because it was a corporate legitimate activity. If one member sinned, the whole community suffered its impact. Consequently, the people of God were to participate in the stoning to eradicate the evil and show their renunciation of the evil act. Thus, Moses commanded them to stone the guilty person in order to *purge the evil from their midst*. It was to be a vivid reminder that the LORD would not tolerate any pagan worship and its attendant exploitative culture among His people.

The verb *purge* is literally “to burn.” It connotes the idea of burning something to remove it completely from a surface. In modern terms, we might think of a laser burning away a cancerous tumor. To *purge* or burn has the idea of purification. Burning away impurities refines gold. In this context, stoning the individual who transgressed against God’s covenant would encourage the people of Israel to continue to worship faithfully their Suzerain God and Him only, and follow His ways. In doing so, they would serve one another, and create a self-governing culture founded upon “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The participation of the Israelite community also

served to prevent them from committing the same sin by instilling proper fear in them.

Biblical Text:

²If there is found in your midst, in any of your towns, which the Lord your God is giving you, a man or a woman who does what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, by transgressing His covenant, ³and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host, which I have not commanded, ⁴and if it is told you and you have heard of it, then you shall inquire thoroughly. Behold, if it is true and the thing certain that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, ⁵then you shall bring out that man or that woman who has done this evil deed to your gates, *that is*, the man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death. ⁶On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. ⁷The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.