

Deuteronomy 17:8-13

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Moses advises local judges to appeal to the Levitical priests or to the judge in office at the central sanctuary in order to seek guidance when some cases seem too difficult for them to handle.

Although judges and officers were appointed in all the towns which Yahweh was giving to the Israelites ([Deuteronomy 16:18](#)), complex cases were to be referred to higher authorities, when the people were uncertain how to decide something justly. Moses told them that there could be a *case which was too difficult for you to decide, between one kind of homicide or another, between one kind of lawsuit or another, and between one kind of assault or another* (v. 8). These would be *cases of dispute in your courts*. Moses here refers to three categories of cases—a *homicide, a lawsuit, and an assault*. They refer to bloodshed, legal dispute, and affliction (physical harm) respectively. These cases are summarized by the phrase *cases of dispute*, suggesting that they all pertained to matters we would call civil law and criminal law. (However, unlike the American system of justice, note that every offense was seen as harm to a person. In American law, civil matters focus on harm to a person, while crimes are seen as offenses against the government, which puts the American system in conflict with the biblical system of justice).

If any of these cases were complex and difficult, Moses advised the local judges to *arise and go up to the place which the LORD their God chose*. This refers to a future place God will choose to house His presence once Israel enters and conquers the land. God will later choose Shiloh during the period of self-governance, followed by Jerusalem during the period of the kings. There, at the central sanctuary, they would *come to the Levitical priest or the judge in office in those days, and they would inquire of them* (v. 9). The Levitical priest was given the task of assisting the priests (of Aaron) in the administration of the tabernacle (prior to King Solomon) and later the temple (after Solomon). The Levite's responsibility included carrying the ark of the covenant when the Israelites travelled or moving the ark for other purposes ([Deuteronomy 10:9](#); [31:9](#)). He was also responsible for offering sacrifices to God ([2 Chron. 29:11](#)) and pronouncing the priestly benediction on the Israelites ([Numbers 6:24-26](#)).

The term *judge*, as seen earlier in [Deuteronomy 16:18](#), usually refers to those who conduct legal procedures among people in a society. Local judges in Israel were chosen by the people, so they were ordinary folks. When difficult cases arose, they were to consult with either a Levitical priest or a judge in a higher authority in order to know how to deal with such difficult cases. These higher authorities (the priests and judges at the central sanctuary) would then *declare* to the local authorities *the verdict of the case*. That is, they would give their decision about the matter.

Once the priests or judges at the central sanctuary made their judgment, the local judges were to *do according to the terms of the verdict which they declare to you from that place which the LORD chooses*. In fact, the local judges were to *be careful to observe according to all that they teach you*. They were not to “fish” for the verdict they wanted. They were to honor the verdict of any case they referred to the higher authority. This is similar to the American court system, where appellate courts have superior authority to trial courts. However, in this case it is the judge that appeals to a higher court.

The local judges were also to act *according to the terms of the law* which the Levitical priest or the judge *teach you*, and they were to respond *according to the verdict which they told them*. They were not to *turn aside from the word which they* (the officials of the higher courts) *declare to you to the right or the left*. This system was intended to not only ensure justice, but also provide a means of teaching judges, and maintaining consistency in Israel.

The phrase *not to turn aside to the right or the left* means that the local judges were obligated to comply strictly with the verdicts of the priests and higher judges. They were to follow a straight path, as if one were walking straight on a highway. The local judges would do so in order to keep their part of the mutual covenant given by the Suzerain (Ruler) God.

Failure to do exactly what the *Levitical priest* or the *judge* in office commanded them would result in severe punishment. Moses told them that *the man who acts presumptuously by not listening to the priest who stands there to serve the LORD your God, nor to the judge, that man shall die* (v. 12). To act *presumptuously* (Heb. “zādôn”) is to act from willful, rebellious pride and arrogance. The verb *to listen* (Heb. “shāma”) in this context means “to obey.” So, this arrogant person (in this case, a local judge), by not obeying the priest serving the LORD and receiving His word on the matter, would receive a death sentence.

To not obey the priests is to not obey the LORD, implying that the local judge was either above the LORD's law or was a law unto himself. Such arrogance and rebellion deserved to be severely punished. Making oneself above the laws of the LORD is a flagrant breach of the covenant, and this not only must be punished but also the authorities must *purge the evil from Israel*. That means that the arrogant person was to be removed completely from the Israelite community in order not to contaminate the rest of the people with his deadly sin of "pride" ([Proverbs 16:18](#)). This judge took the law into his own hands, therefore he set aside God's law. In this way, such a person would be the same as one worshipping pagan idols.

Another reason to get rid of the arrogant Israelite was so that *all the people would hear and be afraid*, and would *not act presumptuously again* (v. 13). The death of the arrogant judge who abused his authority would then serve to discourage the Israelites from committing the same sin by instilling fear of the consequences in them. In modern terms, this is known as a deterrent.

Although churches in the New Testament are not civil governments, many of the principles still apply. For example, in [1 Timothy 5:19](#), churches are told not to entertain accusations against an elder without two or three witnesses.

Biblical Text:

⁸ If any case is too difficult for you to decide, between one kind of homicide or another, between one kind of lawsuit or another, and between one kind of assault or another, being cases of dispute in your courts, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the Lord your God chooses. ⁹ So you shall come to the Levitical priest or the judge who is *in office* in those days, and you shall inquire of *them* and they will declare to you the verdict in the case. ¹⁰ You shall do according to the terms of the verdict which they declare to you from that place which the Lord chooses; and you shall be careful to observe according to all that they teach you. ¹¹ According to the terms of the law which they teach you, and according to the verdict which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the word which they declare to you, to the right or the left. ¹² The man who acts presumptuously by not listening to the priest who stands there to serve the Lord your God, nor to the judge, that man shall die; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel. ¹³ Then all the people will hear and be afraid, and will not act presumptuously again.