

Deuteronomy 24:17-18

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Moses warns Israel against perverting the justice due to the alien and the orphan, and forbids taking a widow's garment in pledge.

Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, Moses expressed his concerns for those who were more vulnerable in the Israelite community—the *alien*, the *orphan*, and the *widow*. It was customary in some ancient Near Eastern societies for judges and lawyers to distort justice, allowing fortunate people to enjoy judicial privileges over those more vulnerable. But this was not to be so in Israel, because it was called by the Suzerain (Ruler) God to be a holy and righteous nation, representing God as a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:4-6; Deuteronomy 16:18-20).

Therefore, Moses told the Israelites not to *pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan nor take a widow's garment in pledge* (v. 17). The *justice* mentioned here was in the context of a court. These were the underprivileged in society and could easily be taken advantage of, but this law was designed to protect them from abuse in the legal system. When God exiled Israel, a major reason He gave for doing so was that *justice* was being withheld from the poor (Amos 5:14-15).

An *alien* (Heb. “gēr”) was someone who was living in Israel but was not an Israelite. However, such an alien could be accorded full participation and acceptance into the Israelite community, provided he agreed to be circumcised and followed the other Israelite rituals (Exodus 12:48-49).

The same treatment was to be accorded to the *orphan* also. In the Bible, an *orphan* (Heb. “yāthōm”) usually refers to a child without a father. Such a person was especially vulnerable because he did not enjoy the protection of the father. Consequently, Moses commanded the Israelites to treat the *orphan* fairly in court.

Just as this law required fair treatment in court for the *alien* and the *orphan*, it also states that no one was allowed to *take a widow's garment in pledge*. A *widow*, a woman who has lost her husband by death and was still

unmarried, did not have the protection of her husband and therefore could be easily victimized and reduced to poverty. It was possible for her to be constantly in debt, but no lender could use her *garment* as collateral for the payment of a loan. Just as in v. 24, the garment refers to a piece of clothing used as a cover against the cold when sleeping. This would put her health and possibly her overall wellbeing in jeopardy.

The basis for telling the people that they needed to treat others in a just and merciful way is that they needed to *remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there* (v. 18). They had spent over 400 years living under Egyptian rule. Then, their sovereign covenant LORD showed them mercy by delivering them from slavery, providing for them in the desert, and protecting them from enemies on their way to the Promised Land. Now every Israelite was to reflect these actions by demonstrating His character and grace to others. It was for this reason that Moses (and the LORD) was *commanding you to do this thing*.

In summary, Moses prescribed fair treatment for the *alien, orphan, and widow*. The LORD (through Moses) commanded the Israelites to show compassion to them because they were among the most underprivileged and vulnerable people in the society and needed protection from being exploited by others. This again underscores the basic principle underlying the last five of the Ten Commandments, which is for Israelites to love others as they love themselves. In this case, Israel was to treat the poor as they would hope to be treated if they themselves were poor.

Biblical Text:

¹⁷You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow's garment in pledge.¹⁸But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.