

Deuteronomy 17:2-7
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If there is found in your midst, in any of your towns [which God ultimately owns; cf. [Lev 25:23](#)], which the LORD your God is giving you [as a blessing; cf. [Deut 4:1, 40; 11:31-32; 13:12; 16:20](#)], a man or a woman who does what is evil [[הָרַע ha ra](#) - lit. *the evil*, referring to idolatry; cf. [Judg 2:11; 3:7; 10:6](#)] in the sight of the LORD your God [implying God's omnipresence; cf., [Psa 139:1-4; Matt 10:30](#)], by transgressing [[עָבַר abar](#) – *to pass over, go one's own way, transgress*] His covenant [[בְּרִית berith](#) – *covenant, agreement, contract*; i.e., the conditional Mosaic Covenant],³ and 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 [cf. [Deut 5:7-9](#)],⁴ and 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,⁵ then you shall bring out that man or that woman who has done this evil deed to your gates [where the city elders and judges met], that is, the man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death [public execution].⁶ On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death [right away]; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.⁷ The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death [demonstrating loyalty to the Lord], and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Summary

This unit of Scripture is part of a larger section in which Moses addresses four leadership offices God would assign in Israel, namely, **judges** ([Deut 16:18-17:8](#)), **priests** ([Deut 17:9-13; 18:1-8](#)), **kings** ([Deut 17:14-20](#)), and **prophets** ([Deut 18:15-22](#)). These four leadership offices were bound by the Mosaic Law, which legitimized their authority and was the guide for their rulership.

In this pericope, Moses continues his message to the judges in Israel ([Deut 16:18-20](#)) and addresses the evil of idolatry that may happen within a community ([Deut 17:2-3](#)). If the judges heard about a case of idolatry, they were to launch a thorough investigation ([Deut 17:4a](#)), and if the report was true, the man or woman guilty of the evil act was to be put to death by stoning ([Deut 17:4b-5](#)). The evidence for the case was based on the eye witness testimony of at least two, or preferably, three persons ([Deut 17:6](#)). The persons who testified as eye witnesses were to be the first to cast a stone against the offender, and then others within the community were to join in and execute the offender ([Deut 17:7a](#)). In this way, God's people purged the evil persons from their community, thus removing the existential danger of idolatry ([Deut 17:7b](#)).

All Israel was to remember and honor God as their Ruler, Lawgiver, and Judge (Isa 33:22). The nation was being blessed with the land of Canaan which God had promised to them (Gen 15:18; 17:7-8; 26:3-4; 28:13-14; Ex 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:2). Though God was giving them the land as a blessing (Deut 4:1, 40; 11:31-32; 13:12; 16:20), He retained ownership at all times (Lev 25:23; cf. Deut 10:14; 2 Ch 20:5-7; Psa 24:1; 89:11; Acts 17:24-26). The land of Canaan was theirs by divine promise, but possessing the land was contingent on their faithful obedience to the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant. If Israel repeatedly turned away from God and pursued idols, the Lord would curse them as He'd promised and eventually remove them from the land (Deut 28:63). Concerning the passage under consideration, Moses said:

If 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,³ and 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,⁴ and if it is told you and you have heard of it, then you shall inquire thoroughly. (Deut 17:2-4a)

God was going to give towns for His people to live in, but it was their responsibility to live righteously and to maintain the covenant relationship they had with Him. Personal responsibility is here in view. If the judges in the local communities became aware of a person—man or woman—who was committing idolatry, it was their responsibility to investigate the matter. The specific offense mentioned here is that of idolatry, which Moses calls *evil* (הַרְעָה *ha ra* - lit. *the evil*, referring to idolatry; cf. Judg 2:11; 3:7; 10:6). Idols were generally manmade objects, but could also include stellar bodies such as “the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host” (Deut 17:3b). Idolatry was a crime of the highest order. Peter Craigie writes:

The crime undermined the very basis on which the covenant community existed and therefore it was to be dealt with very severely, for it threatened the security and life of all Israelites. Thus, the crime, though religious in form, was political in significance. It is analogous to the modern crime of espionage or treason in time of war, for the net effect of both would be to weaken the security of the homeland.¹

That this crime was done “in the sight of the LORD your God” implies God’s omniscience (cf., Psa 139:1-4; Matt 10:30). And Moses uses the proper name of God (יהוה) which was the name He used when establishing His covenant with Israel. The word *transgressing* translates the Hebrew verb עָבַר *abar*, which means to *pass over*, *go one’s own way*, or

¹ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 250.

transgress. Here, the term refers to unfaithful individuals who are walking away from the Lord, going their own way, breaking the contract, and worshipping blocks of wood or stone instead of the One who had liberated them from slavery (Deut 5:6), given them the land of Canaan (Deut 4:1; 9:6), cities, houses, wells and vineyards (Deut 6:10-11), enabled them to produce wealth (Deut 8:18), and promised to bless their labor (Deut 7:13; 11:13-15). The word *covenant* translates the Hebrew word בְּרִית *berith*, which means *covenant, agreement, or contract*. Israel was in a binding relationship with God—a contract—that promised blessing if they obeyed (Deut 28:1-14) and cursing if they disobeyed (Deut 28:15-68; cf. Deut 11:26-28). God was giving His people land and towns, and also written laws which were intended to guide the leadership concerning the formation and practice of good government. It was the leadership’s responsibility—as theocratic administrators in God’s kingdom—to apply His laws within their towns. If a judge heard about someone practicing idolatry, he was to take action and investigate the matter thoroughly (Deut 17:4a). It would be unjust to convict someone on the basis of mere hearsay. A careful investigation would be necessary in order to establish beyond all doubt that this crime had been committed.

Moses continued, saying, “Behold, if it is true and the thing certain that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, then 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” (Deut 17:4b-5). If the offense of idolatry was true, the offender—whether man or woman—was to be executed. The reason was idolatry was tantamount to treason because it subverted God’s authority by influencing the Israelites to devote themselves to a manmade idol. If left unaddressed, idolatry would destroy Israel from the inside out. An idol, being only a block of wood or stone, cannot provide, protect, or guide those who worship them. However, part of the attraction of idols is that they make no demands contrary to the proclivity of the fallen human heart. And when there is no check on the human heart to restrain its sinful inclinations, the result is a breakdown in morality that weakens society and leads to harmful behavior, especially toward the righteous, vulnerable, and innocent within a community. The punishment for idolatry was death (Deut 17:5; cf., Deut 13:10), and the participation of others in the community to execute the idolaters showed their understanding of the seriousness of the crime and its potential harm on them all.

When the judges investigated a case to determine guilt, it was to be “On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses” (Deut 17:6a). This set a high bar for trials which was intended to protect the innocent and judge the guilty. Moses continued, saying, “he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness” (Deut 17:6b). Moses had previously stated that capital punishment could not occur on the basis of a single witness, saying, “no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness” (Num 35:30b). For emphasis, he repeats this policy later, saying, “A single

witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed” (Deut 19:15).² In Israel, as in any society, there was always the possibility that a wicked person would present a false charge against another, thus corrupting and weaponizing the judicial system for evil ends. The Lord had clearly forbidden this, saying, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Deut 5:20). The two or three witness policy would mitigate against this sort of corruption. In fact, there was a statute that condemned the false witness to bear the punishment he sought to bring upon another. Moses said, “If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing...[and] if the witness is a false witness *and* he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother” (Deut 19:16, 19). These laws, if properly followed, would allow the judicial system to function properly and for Israel to administer justice against idolaters.

Because sin is contagious, an egregious sin such as idolatry could spread from one family to another, to communities, and eventually infect the whole nation. Failure to follow this instruction would allow the spiritual disease to spread throughout the community, which could bring about the death of the nation.³ Concerning the execution of the idolater who was determined to be guilty, Moses said, “The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people” (Deut 17:7a). Concerning the involvement of the witnesses in the execution of the offender, Eugene Merrill writes:

The purpose for this contingency was to preclude personal or private vindictiveness and to assure that what was observed had actually occurred and was not the product of poor sensory perception or an overactive imagination. To forestall a conspiratorial process in which witnesses would collaborate in misrepresenting the truth, the witnesses would themselves be forced to hurl the first stones of execution (v. 7). The gravity of what they were called upon to do would be so great that it was likely that the collusion would unravel either in the judicial process itself or subsequent to the miscarriage of justice.⁴

² In the New Testament, the apostle Paul uses this same rule in church policy concerning charges brought against Church leaders, saying, “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses” (1 Tim 5:19).

³ Unfortunately, this is what happened, as idolatry was permitted. A terrible example is seen in Solomon who allowed his wives to influence him to worship foreign gods (1 Ki 11:1-10), and this had a negative impact on the nation of Israel, as it encouraged others to worship idols. Because Israel pursued idols, this brought God’s judgment, which ultimately led to the nation’s destruction (2 Ki 17:6-23).

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 261.

The public execution was not to be administered by the leadership, but by the residents of the town. Those who personally witnessed fellow Israelites practicing idolatry were directed to be the first to cast a stone. Then, other Israelites were to participate in putting the offender to death, and in this way, Moses said, “So you shall purge the evil from your midst” (Deut 17:7b). Here, the purging consisted of the person who practiced idolatry and thus influenced others to evil. Daniel Block states, “Moses’ concern for communal health leaves no room for sentimentality or prejudice. Yahweh’s agenda requires a people united in its devotion to him and rigorous in its preservation of its own character as a holy people (cf. 7:1–6). Eliminating those guilty of capital crimes eradicates the evil from the land and the people.”⁵

If this law had been faithfully executed by the judges and citizens in Israel, it would have kept idolatry at bay and helped preserve the spiritual and moral purity of the nation. However, the record of Israel’s history—with the exception of a few generations that were faithful to God—is a record of their worship of pagan idols, which at times included human sacrifice (Deut 12:31; 18:10-11; 2 Ki 17:6-23; 21:6; Psa 106:37-38; Jer 7:30-31; 19:4-5; 32:35; Ezek 16:20-21). Because of a breakdown in leadership and jurisprudence, God eventually judged His people because they failed to judge themselves. After hundreds of years of idolatry, God destroyed the ten northern tribes of Israel in 722 B.C. (2 Ki 17:7-23), and the two southern tribes of Judah in 586 B.C. (Jer 25:8-11).

Present Application:

Idolatry, at its core, it is the selfish sin of substitution in which a person dedicates himself to something or someone lesser than God to direct his life and to meet his wants and needs. God states, “You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth” (Ex 20:3-4). Biblically, there is only one God (Isa 45:5-6), and to worship someone or something in His place is to steal the glory due Him (Isa 42:8). Idolatry is thievery of the highest order. An idol is merely the work of a craftsman (see Isa 44:9-20). There is no life in it (Psa 115:1-8; Jer 51:17; Hab 2:18-20), nor can it deliver in times of trouble (Isa 46:5-7). And, as stated previously, an idol cannot provide, protect, or guide those who worship it. However, part of the attraction of idols is that they make no demands contrary to the proclivity of the fallen human heart. And there’s the problem. For when God and His Word do not hold the place of preeminence so as to govern the life of a person (concerning personal choices, family, finances, business, etc.), the heart is then free to follow its sinful inclinations. The result is a lifestyle that ultimately

⁵ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 407.

frustrates the worshipper, weakens his/her morals, and eventuates in the harm of others for the sake of self-interest.

Like Israel, Christians are susceptible to idolatry. Writing to Christians in Corinth, Paul said, “Do not be idolaters” (1 Cor 10:7), instructing them to “flee from idolatry” (1 Cor 10:14), revealing that a sacrifice to an idol is really a “sacrifice to demons and not to God” (1 Cor 10:20a). The reason for Paul’s instruction was he did not want the Christians at Corinth “to become sharers in demons” (1 Cor 10:20b). The apostle John, who twice bowed to worship an angel and was rebuked for it (Rev 19:10; 22:8-9), wrote to Christians, saying, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

Modern forms of idolatry can include: 1) **The actual worship of physical idols** in one’s home or pagan temple (Ex 20:3-5; cf. Ex 32:1-4). This form of idolatry is straightforward in its form and function, as one worships the physical representation of pagan deity. Various forms today can include Hinduism, New Age, ancestor worship, astrology, and the occult. 2) **Money**, the aggressive pursuit and acquisition of which makes us feel secure and powerful (Matt 6:24; 1 Tim 6:6-10). Money can be a blessing, but only when it does not take the place of God. A good test of whether money has taken the place of God is whether we hoard it or use it wisely for God’s purposes and glory (1 Tim 6:17-19), the advancement of Christian ministries, and helping the less fortunate in society (Jam 2:15-16). 3) **Humanism**, which places mankind at the center of everything and makes us look only to ourselves or others for purpose, meaning, and the solution to our own problems. Atheism, big government (socialism and communism), naturalism (which teaches evolution), and environmentalism are all manifestations of humanism, as we become our own lords to find meaning in life and to solve our own problems without God’s help. Humanism is what predominates in our universities, government, businesses, and social institutions. 4) **Pleasure**, which elevates physical stimulation above all else. Manifestations of this can include a commitment to drugs, alcohol, sex, food, and entertainment such as music and television with the result that God has no place in the life of that person. When all of life is under God’s control, we will have eliminated our personal idols.

Idolatry in the Church should be dealt with as a most serious offense. However, the Church is not Israel and we are not under the Mosaic Law as the rule of life (Rom 6:14; Heb 8:13), but under the Law of Christ (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2); therefore, how we handle idolaters is different. Israel was required to execute those guilty of idolatry (Deut 17:2-5), but no such command is given to the Church. God’s directive for the Church is to disassociate from the rebellious person who refuses to turn from idolatry in order that we might preserve our walk with God. As Christians, we are to live holy lives, as Peter wrote, “like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘you shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15-16). To be holy means we are

set apart from the sinful ways of the world and living in conformity with God's character and commands. God directs us to manage our relationships with others, for though we live in a fallen world and interact with sinful people, we must be careful who we let into our inner circle of friends, for "bad company corrupt good morals" (1 Cor 15:33; cf. Prov 13:20; 22:24-25). Israel, as a nation, failed to manage their relationships with the surrounding pagan nations, and as a result, they "mingled with the nations and learned their practices, and served their idols, which became a snare to them. They even sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons" (Psa 106:35-37). The very wise King Solomon failed to manage his relationships and "his wives turned his heart away after other gods" (1 Ki 11:4). The result was, "Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not follow the LORD fully, as David his father had done" (1 Ki 11:5-6). Writing to Christians at Corinth, Paul stated, "I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one" (1 Cor 5:11; cf., Rom 16:17; 2 Th 3:6). Disassociation was for the purpose of maintaining holiness with the Lord and avoiding a snare that will trap us in sin. Disassociation is never easy, for we love fellow believers and desire friendship with them, praying and reminding them of Scripture when we have opportunity, hoping they will come to their senses and come back into fellowship. However, our walk with God must always take priority, for He is our greatest Friend, and allegiance to Him secures for us all that is strong and good and meaningful in life. And if/when the erring believer turns back to the Lord and resumes his/her walk-in-the-Word, then all will be as it should, and we should extend forgiveness and grace and welcome him/her back into fellowship.