



Deuteronomy - Chapter Seventeen

III Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19 - Moses' Second Speech: Specific Covenant Stipulations (continues)

III.i Deuteronomy 16:18-18:22 - Leaders (continues)

III.i.ii Deuteronomy 16:21-17:7 - Forbidden Forms of Worship (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Seventeen

Moses continues to summarise the forbidden forms of worship. Of particular interest are the facts that anyone committing such offences against God needs to be investigated fairly and only convicted on the evidence of at least two reliable witnesses. If they are found to be guilty they are to be put to death.

Where cases are too complex for a local judge to rule in, then the case is to be taken to the place where the central administration has been set up so that the main judge and the Levitical priests may decide the case. Their judgement will be binding and any punishment they pronounce must be carried out.

The section concludes indicating that God knew the people would one day decide on a king. When they do so then he must be a man from their own people, someone who does not seek power and wealth for himself, and a man who will rule justly according to the statutes of God's law and Word.

¹ You must not sacrifice to the Lord your God an ox or a sheep that has a defect, anything seriously wrong; for that is abhorrent to the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 17:1

You must not. This section, much like Exodus Chapters 21-23, is meant to give instructions to the judges of Israel in how to administrate justice for the nation. It is case law, upon which legal precedents for future cases may be understood.

You must not sacrifice to the Lord your God an ox or a sheep that has a defect. God commanded that no one can bring to him a sacrifice which has any blemish or defect, for that is an abomination to the Lord. God did not recognise the giving of cast-off, worthless items, as a true sacrifice unto him. Throughout history people have had a tendency to always want to give God second best, if not third or fourth best. But God will not receive such a sacrifice. Refer to Leviticus 22:17-25, Malachi 1:6-8, and the comment made on Deuteronomy 15:19-23.

Israel did not always live up to this standard: <<*When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favour? says the Lord of hosts*>> (Malachi 1:8).

David powerfully illustrated the idea behind this commandment when he refused to accept the threshing floor of Araunah as a gift, which David was going to give to the Lord as the place to build the temple. David said: <<*No, but I will buy them from you for a price; I will not offer burnt-offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing*>> (2 Samuel 24:24b). David understood that if it did not cost something, it was not a sacrifice.

For that is abhorrent to the Lord your God. Abhorrent is an important word in Deuteronomy. It denotes a significant sin, often with the sense of social or theological hypocrisy, and God's increased anger against it.

² If there is found among you, in one of your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, a man or woman who does what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, and transgresses his covenant ³ by going to serve other gods and worshipping them – whether the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden – ⁴ and if it is reported to you or you hear of it, and you make a thorough inquiry, and the charge is proved true that such an abhorrent thing has occurred in Israel, ⁵ then you shall bring out to your gates that man or that woman who has committed this crime and you shall stone the man or woman to death.

Deuteronomy 17:2-5

A man or woman who does what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God. This specifically refers to those who commit idolatry.

By going to serve other gods and worshipping them. Judges are also commanded to make sure that any who have gone after idolatry are to be investigated, and if found to be guilty, are to be executed.

Make a thorough inquiry. In Deuteronomy 13:12-18, the city has been enticed to idolatry; here, it is a person. In Deuteronomy 13:15 the city is put to the sword; here the person is stoned. Because idolatry breaks the first commandment, it is a capital offense.

Which I have forbidden. God makes his feelings on idolatry very clear: *<<And they go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire – which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind>>* (Jeremiah 7:31).

Then you shall bring out to your gates that man or that woman. Capital punishment, as in the case of Jesus' crucifixion, was usually conducted outside the walls or camp: *<<Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let all who were within hearing lay their hands on his head, and let the whole congregation stone him>>* (Leviticus 24:14), *<<Then the Lord said to Moses, 'The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him outside the camp'>>* (Numbers 15:35), and: *<<For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured>>* (Hebrews 13:11-13).

⁶ On the evidence of two or three witnesses the death sentence shall be executed; a person must not be put to death on the evidence of only one witness. ⁷ The hands of the witnesses shall be the first raised against the person to execute the death penalty, and afterwards the hands of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Deuteronomy 17:6-7

On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses. The standard biblical requirement to find someone guilty of a capital offense is at least reliable two witnesses: *<<If anyone kills another, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses; but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of a single witness>>* (Numbers 35:30), and: *<<Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy 'on the testimony of two or three witnesses'>>* (Hebrews 10:28). This was certainly not the case in the account when Jezebel had Naboth murdered so that Ahab could claim his land: *<<The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, 'Naboth cursed God and the king.' So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death>>* (1 Kings 21:13); nor

when Jesus was falsely accused before the Sanhedrin: <<*For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, ‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.”’ But even on this point their testimony did not agree*>> (Mark 14:56-59).

In the case of only one witness, the situation becomes one person’s word against another and thus no conviction can be made. Refer to Deuteronomy 19:16-21 for information on the penalties for false witnesses.

People may comfort themselves that they would never judge someone guilty of murder so quickly, without proper evidence. Yet many will murder someone’s reputation in their own mind or in the minds of others with no witnesses, much less one. God is concerned about the murder of reputation, as well as physical murder, and commands that one should not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19), the same standard as for proving murder. Remember 1 Timothy 5:19 does not say ‘except from two or three gossips’; it says except from two or three witnesses. If a matter is false, it does not become true because many people hear it or many people repeat it.

Insisting that the hands of the witnesses shall be the first to stone the guilty helps prevent false witness and adds seriousness to their testimony. This puts the words of Jesus regarding the woman caught in adultery in John Chapter 8 in perspective: <<*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her*>> (John 8:7b). Jesus asked for the official witness to step forward and identify themselves on record as having witnessed this act of adultery, yet was hypocritical enough to bring the woman and not the man.

And afterwards the hands of all the people. The execution was a community event, in the sense that it was supported by the community. The whole village would know the justice of what was being done.

So you shall purge the evil from your midst. The death penalty is implied in these cases. Just as Israel is to destroy all pagans from the land, so are they to purge any apostate Israelites, just as they would a contagious infection.

III.i.iii Deuteronomy 17:8-13 - Legal Decisions by Priests and Judges

Cases that cannot be satisfactorily resolved locally because of their complexity are to be taken to a central court for adjudication. The ruling of the central court is binding on all parties.

⁸ If a judicial decision is too difficult for you to make between one kind of bloodshed and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one

kind of assault and another – any such matters of dispute in your towns – then you shall immediately go up to the place that the Lord your God will choose, ⁹ where you shall consult with the levitical priests and the judge who is in office in those days; they shall announce to you the decision in the case.

Deuteronomy 17:8-9

If a judicial decision is too difficult for you. Straightforward judicial cases are dealt with in local courts. The difficult cases are to be taken to the central sanctuary showing that God allowed for courts of appeal in Israel. These were higher courts where cases were taken beyond the local judges to the priests, Levites who were understood to be wiser judges because of their knowledge of God's Word.

The place that the Lord your God will choose indicates the integration of worship with justice, deriving from the character of God as just and implying that ultimately God himself is the judge: <<*Jerusalem – built as a city that is bound firmly together. To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. For there the thrones for judgement were set up, the thrones of the house of David*>> (Psalm 122:3-5); refer to the comments made on Deuteronomy 12:5-6.

They shall announce to you the decision in the case. There will be no deferment or passing of the case to others. These judges will make a final decision in the case: <<*In a controversy they shall act as judges, and they shall decide it according to my judgements. They shall keep my laws and my statutes regarding all my appointed festivals, and they shall keep my sabbaths holy*>> (Ezekiel 44:24), and: <<*Thus says the Lord of hosts: Ask the priests for a ruling*>> (Haggai 2:11).

¹⁰ Carry out exactly the decision that they announce to you from the place that the Lord will choose, diligently observing everything they instruct you. ¹¹ You must carry out fully the law that they interpret for you or the ruling that they announce to you; do not turn aside from the decision that they announce to you, either to the right or to the left.

Deuteronomy 17:10-11

Carry out exactly the decision that they announce to you. These verses are the emphasis of this section. The decision of the central sanctuary court is final and binding on all parties.

¹² As for anyone who presumes to disobey the priest appointed to minister there to the Lord your God, or the judge, that person shall die. So you shall purge the evil from Israel. ¹³ All the people will hear and be afraid, and will not act presumptuously again.

Deuteronomy 17:12-13

As for anyone who presumes to disobey the priest. The authority of the judges had to be respected, therefore contempt of court was a capital crime: <<*But let no one bring a charge, let no one accuse another, for your people are like those who bring charges against a priest*>> (Hosea 4:4 NIV). God thought it essential that the courts and the judges be respected by all the people of Israel.

That person shall die. To ignore or pervert justice is a capital offense, for it is a rejection of God's justice and rule.

So you shall purge the evil from Israel. The reason for capital punishment for such crimes is again made clear. It is for the benefit of the whole community that they should learn not to disobey God. This is confirmed by the final statement: all the people will hear and be afraid, and will not act presumptuously again.

III.i.iv Deuteronomy 17:14-20 - Limitations of Royal Authority

God always knew that the people would one day want a human king, essentially rejecting him as their King: <<*and the Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them'*>> (1 Samuel 8:7). Here, restrictions on who can become king and how he should live are summarised, especially stating that he must live and rule according to the Word of God.

¹⁴ When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me', ¹⁵ you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community.

Deuteronomy 17:14-15

I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me. Even though it will be several centuries before Israel has a king, Deuteronomy provides legislation for that eventuality, in language that suggests time elapsing: have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say. Kings descended from Abraham

were anticipated in Genesis 17:6 <<*I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you*>>.

Whom the Lord your God will choose. To counter the people's request to have a king like the nations, God insists that their king will be his choice. Yet God seems to allow the people some role in setting up a king.

It is interesting to consider whether or not God wanted an earthly king over Israel. 1 Samuel 8:6-9, the record of Israel's demand for a king, puts the request for a king in a negative light. One might ask if God really did want Israel to never have an earthly king, and if he wanted them to recognise him alone as their king. It is a debatable issue; but consider that Israel's history without a king, the time of the Book of Judges, was not a period of national glory. Perhaps it could be said that God wanted Israel to have a king, but of his choosing, and at his timing. Saul is a perfect example of a king out of God's will, chosen by the nation and at their timing; David is a perfect example of a king chosen by God and in his timing.

One of your own community. The king must be a fellow Israelite. They are not permitted to put a foreigner over them.

¹⁶ Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You must never return that way again.'¹⁷ And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.

Deuteronomy 17:16-17

The warnings about too many horses and wives and too much wealth, which reflect the standard prerogatives of ancient kings in military, personal, and economic spheres, are precisely the pitfalls of Solomon: <<*Solomon also had forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen*>> (1 Kings 4:26), <<*The weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold*>> (1 Kings 10:14), and: <<*Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David*>> (1 Kings 11:3-4). Here God is warning that governmental leaders will constantly face the temptation to abuse their power for the sake of personal gain, which is contrary to his will.

Since Egypt was the place of slavery from which the Lord had just rescued Israel, it was prohibited for Israel to return to Egypt for help: <<*The Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, by a route that I promised you would never see again;*

and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer>> (Deuteronomy 28:68), and: <<Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!>> (Isaiah 31:1). After the people were taken into Babylonian captivity a remnant left in Judæa decided to live in Egypt against the prophetic advice of Jeremiah. God then spoke again through the prophet: <<I will punish those who live in the land of Egypt, as I have punished Jerusalem, with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, so that none of the remnant of Judah who have come to settle in the land of Egypt shall escape or survive or return to the land of Judah. Although they long to go back to live there, they shall not go back, except some fugitives. Then all the men who were aware that their wives had been making offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah: ‘As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we are not going to listen to you’>> (Jeremiah 44:13-16).

¹⁸ When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. ¹⁹ It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, ²⁰ neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.

Deuteronomy 17:18-20

A copy of this law. This refers probably to Chapters 1-30 <<Then Moses wrote down this law, and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel>> (Deuteronomy 31:9). Even the king is to be under the authority of God’s Word or law: <<Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go>> (Joshua 1:7-9).

It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life. The Word of God was to be constant companion of the king of Israel, and something he read every day. Everyone needs the Word of God; but the greater a person's responsibilities, the greater their need to depend on the truth of God's Word.

Reading and obeying the Word of God trains people **to fear the Lord**. It is striking to consider that reading a book, i.e. the Bible, can keep a person from sin. Christians may not understand all the spiritual work behind the Word of God, but staying in the Word will keep one from sin. It has been well written in many Bibles: "This book will keep you from sin. Sin will keep you from this book." Luther said he would rather live in hell with the Bible than to live in Paradise without it.

Either to the right or to the left. God's ways make for a straight path for all to follow. Those who turn off the path will find trouble and torment, but the path can be found again by those who return to God and his Word.