

Deuteronomy 17:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death.

Analysis

Judicial requirement: 'At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death.' Capital cases require multiple witnesses—minimum two, ideally three. One witness is insufficient regardless of credibility. This protects against false accusation and rushed judgment. The phrase 'at the mouth of' emphasizes testimony's spoken nature—witnesses must publicly testify, not merely provide written statements. This accountability guards justice. New Testament applies this to church discipline (Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19). Truth established by multiple witnesses prevents both injustice and abuse.

Historical Context

This principle pervades Scripture: Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 19:15; 1 Kings 21:10, 13 (Naboth's false accusation required two lying witnesses). Jesus's trial violated this—conflicting witnesses, no proper testimony (Matthew 26:60-61). Early church applied it to doctrinal disputes and discipline. The principle protects innocent while requiring sufficient evidence to convict. Modern jurisprudence assumes innocence until proven guilty, parallel to this protection. False testimony merited the punishment the accused would have received (Deuteronomy 19:16-19), deterring perjury.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does requiring multiple witnesses balance protecting innocent while pursuing justice?
2. What does this teach about presumption of innocence versus presumption of guilt in addressing accusations?
3. How should churches apply the 'two or three witnesses' principle in handling allegations of sin or abuse?

Interlinear Text

עַל	פִּי	שְׁנַיִם	עֵד	אֶחָד	שְׁלֹשָׁה	עֵד	יֻמָּת
H5921	At the mouth	of two	witness	H176	or three	witness	be put to death
	H6310	H8147	H5707		H7969	H5707	H4191
יֻמָּת	לֹא	יֻמָּת	עַל	פִּי	עֵד	אֶחָד:	
be put to death	H3808	be put to death	H5921	At the mouth	witness	of one	
H4191		H4191		H6310	H5707	H259	

Additional Cross-References

Numbers 35:30 (Witness): Whoso killeth any person, the murderer shall be put to death by the mouth of witnesses: but one witness shall not testify against any person to cause him to die.

Hebrews 10:28 (Witness): He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses:

Matthew 18:16 (Witness): But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

1 Timothy 5:19 (Witness): Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.

Deuteronomy 19:15 (Witness): One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.

2 Corinthians 13:1 (Witness): This is the third time I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.

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