

Deuteronomy 19:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

If a false witness rise up against any man to testify against him that which is wrong;

Analysis

If a false witness rise up (כִּי־יָקֻם עַד־חָמָס, ki-yaqum ed-chamas)—the term ed chamas (עַד חָמָס) literally means "witness of violence/wrong," one who weaponizes testimony to harm the innocent. The verb qum (עַמֵּךְ, "rise up") suggests aggressive initiative, not mere passive dishonesty. This addresses perjury with malicious intent.

To **testify against him that which is wrong** (לְעֹנֹת בָּו בְּרָה, la'anot bo sarah) means to answer against him with deviation from truth. The word sarah (ברָה) indicates turning aside, apostasy from truth. The ninth commandment (Exodus 20:16) prohibits false witness, but this passage prescribes the penalty. Proverbs repeatedly warns against false witnesses (6:19, 12:17, 19:5, 25:18), comparing them to deadly weapons. Jesus faced false witnesses at His trial (Matthew 26:59-60), as did Stephen (Acts 6:13).

Historical Context

Ancient judicial systems relied heavily on witness testimony, lacking modern forensic evidence, written contracts, or surveillance. A determined liar could destroy an innocent person through false accusation, especially in capital cases. The Torah required two or three witnesses for conviction (Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15), but this provided limited protection against conspiracy. False witness was thus among the most dangerous crimes, capable of perverting justice completely. Jezebel's false witnesses against Naboth (1 Kings 21:10-13) illustrate how this law

could be violated with devastating results. Moses's judicial reforms aimed to deter such corruption through severe penalties.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How does the seriousness with which Scripture treats false witness inform Christian responsibility to speak truth, even when costly?
2. What parallels exist between ancient false witnesses and modern forms of character assassination or false accusation?

Interlinear Text

רִ H3588	עֲלֵיכֶם H6965	מִ H5707	עַד H2555	סְפִּתְתָּה H376	בְּאֹיְשָׁנָה H6030	לְעַנְתָּה H0
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against him that which is wrong

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Additional Cross-References

Psalms 27:12 (Resurrection): Deliver me not over unto the will of mine enemies: for false witnesses are risen up against me, and such as breathe out cruelty.

Psalms 35:11 (Resurrection): False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not.