

Cutoff

Punishment

(Being "cut off from their people" – i.e. Lev. 20:18)

PUNISHMENT

7. "Cutting off." The penalty described by the expression "cutting off from the people" has been variously understood, some thinking that it meant death in all cases, others that in some cases only excommunication (which see) must be understood. Jahn (Arch., p. 258) says, "When God is introduced as saying in respect to any person, 'I will cut him off from the people,' the expression means some event in divine providence which shall eventually terminate the life of that person's family" (see 1 Kings 14:10; 21:21; 2 Kings 9:8). Saalschutz explains it to be premature death by God's hand. Knobel, Corn, and Ewald held that the death punishment absolutely was meant. Keil observed (Arch., 2:358): "From Lev 20:2-6, so much only appears, that God himself will cut off the transgressor if the earthly magistrate shuts his eyes to the crime of idolatry and does not cut off the idolater. Certainly in Lev., ch. 20, all the abominations of which it holds in the comprehensive formula (18:29), 'Whosoever shall do any of these abominations, even the souls that do them shall be cut off from among their people,' have not the punishment of death attached to them. For some of the forbidden marriages only childlessness is threatened (20:20, sq.). But from this it merely follows that for certain cases God reserved the cutting off to be otherwise executed; and in these cases the civil magistrate was not to intervene. But in connection with all other offenses, for which the law prescribes cutting off without any such reserve, the civil magistrate was obliged to carry out sentence of death as soon as the guilt was judicially established; even for transgressions of the laws of purification and other matters of ritual, if the sin was proved to have been committed 'with a high hand,' i.e., in presumptuous rebellion against Jehovah, and not merely in thoughtlessness and haste." We may, perhaps, conclude that the primary meaning of "cutting off" is a sentence of death to be executed in some cases without remission, but in others avoidable, either (1) by immediate atonement on the offender's part, or (2) by direct interposition of the Almighty, i.e., a sentence of death always "recorded," but not always executed.

Those Coming from Other Lands. Capital punishments borrowed from other lands were the following:

1. Beheading. The Egyptians knew and practiced beheading (Gen 40:17-19), as did the Hebrews in the time of the early kings (2 Sam 4:8; 20:21-22; 2 Kings 10:6-8). Herod and his descendants ordered decapitation (Matt 14:8-12; cf. Acts 12:2).
2. Dichotomy, cutting in pieces (1 Sam 15:33). Dichotomy was common among the Babylonians, Egyptians, and Persians.
3. Death by torture. Conscious suffering in death was inflicted by burning the offender alive in a furnace (Dan 3:20-26); roasting him in the fire (Jer 29:22; 2 Macc. 7:5); putting him to death in hot ashes (2 Macc. 13:5-8); casting him into the lion's den (Dan 6:7,16-24); beating him to death on the tumpanon (2 Macc. 6:19), probably a circular instrument of torture, on which prisoners were stretched and tortured or beaten to death. In war we find the sawing in pieces of captives (2 Sam 12:31; 1 Chron 20:3; cf. Heb 11:37); the hurling of enemies from precipices (2 Chron 25:12; cf. Ps 141:6; Luke 4:29), the latter a frequent punishment among the Romans; the cutting open of the bodies of pregnant women (2 Kings 8:12; 15:16; etc.), and the dashing of children against walls, when hostile cities were taken (Isa 13:16,18; Hos 13:16; etc.). In the NT are incidentally mentioned drowning (Matt 18:6; Mark 9:42) and fighting with wild beasts (1 Cor 15:32).

Secondary Punishments. Secondary punishments were of a less severe nature.

Retaliation. The law of retaliation, exacting "eye for eye" (Ex 21:24-25) is, probably, the most natural of all kinds of punishment, and would be the most just of all, if it could be instantaneously and universally inflicted; but when delayed, it is apt to degenerate into revenge. To prevent this, the law specified th

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(See CROSS, etc.) Death was the punishment of striking or even reviling a parent (Ex 21:15,17); blasphemy (Lev 24:14,16,23); Sabbath-breaking (Num 15:32-36); witchcraft (Ex 22:18); adultery (Lev 20:10); rape (Deut 22:25); incestuous and unnatural connection (Lev 20:11,14,16); man stealing (Ex 21:16); idolatry (Lev 20:2). "Cutting off from the people" is ipso facto excommunication or outlawry, forfeiture of the privileges of the covenant people (Lev 18:29). The hand of God executed the sentence in some cases (Gen 17:14; Lev 23:30; 20:3,6; Num 4:15,18,20). Capital punishments were stoning (Ex 17:4); burning (Lev 20:14); the sword (Ex 32:27); and strangulation, not in Scripture, but in rabbinical writings. The command (Num 25:4-5) was that the Baal-peor sinners should be slain first, then impaled or nailed to crosses; the Hebrew there (hoqa') means dislocated, and is different from that in Deut 21:22 (thalitha tolwi), Deut 21:23.

The hanged were accounted accursed; so were buried at evening, as the hanging body defiled the land; so Christ (Gal 3:13). The malefactor was to be removed by burial from off the face of the earth speedily, that the curse might be removed off the land (Lev 18:25,28; 2 Sam 21:6,9). Punishments not ordained by law: sawing asunder, and cutting with iron harrows (Isaiah, Heb 11:37; Ammon, in retaliation for their cruelties, 2 Sam 12:31; 1 Sam 11:2); pounding in a mortar (Prov 27:22); precipitation (Luke 4:29; 2 Chron 25:12); stripes, 40 only allowed (Deut 25:3), the Jews therefore gave only 39; the convict received the stripes from a three-thonged whip, stripped to the waist, in a bent position, tied to a pillar; if the executioner exceeded the number he was punished, a minute accuracy observed in 2 Cor 11:24. The Abyssinians use the same number (Wolff, Travels, 2:276). Heaps of stones were flung upon the graves of executed criminals (Josh 15:25-26; 2 Sam 18:17); to this day stones are flung on Absalom's supposed tomb. Outside the city gates (Jer 22:19; Heb 13:12). Punishment in kind (lex talionis) was a common principle (Ex 21:24-25). Also compensation, restitution of the thing or its equivalent (Ex 21:18-36). Slander of a wife's honour was punished by fine and stripes (Deut 22:18-19).

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A large number of offences come under the law of punishment by cutting off from the people, the meaning of which expression has led to some controversy. It may signify excommunication or death, and occurs in connection with the following offences: (1) breach of morals, such as wilful sin in general (Num 15:39,31); incestuous or unclean connections (Lev 18:29; 29:9-21); (2) breach of covenant, brought about through uncircumcision (Gen 17:14; Ex 4:24), neglect of Passover (Num 9:13), Sabbath-breaking (Ex 31:14), neglect of Atonement Day (Lev 23:29), work done on the Atonement Day (Lev 23:30), children offered to Molech (Lev 20:3), witchcraft (Lev 20:6), anointing an alien with holy oil (Ex 30:33); (3) breach of ritual, committed by eating leavened bread during Passover (Ex 12:15,19), eating fat of sacrifices (Lev 7:25), eating blood (Lev 7:27; 17:14), eating sacrifices while unclean (Lev 7:20-21; 22:3-4,9), offering too late (Lev 19:8), making holy ointment for private use (Ex 30:32-33), making perfume for private use (Ex 30:38), general neglect of purification (Num 19:13,20), not bringing offering after slaying a beast for food (Lev 17:9), slaying the animal at a place other than the tabernacle door (Lev 17:4), touching holy things illegally (Num 4:15,18,20).

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