

# As It Is Written

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As it is written, Exodus 20:16 reads

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor* (NRS).

This translation is not without its controversy. For example, some scholars narrow its meaning to govern testimony before a court (a religious court in biblical days). Others argue that the word translated as neighbor ought to be read as applying only to other Israelites. On the other hand, many (most?) lay people and clergy seem to get the gist of this commandment as a prohibition against telling lies about one's neighbor. So, let's see what the Bible really says?



Let's begin with a mechanical translation of each word in the verse. However, I've left two Hebrew words untranslated, replacing them with their transcription – *ta`aneh* and *re`ia* – you'll see why shortly.

Table 1 Read both rows from right-to-left

שָׁקֵר	עַד	בְּרֵעֶךָ	לֹא־תֵעָנֶה
deception	a-witness-of	against-your- <i>re`ia</i>	Not-will-you- <i>ta`aneh</i>

Putting this into conventional English (with the exception of the two transcribed Hebrew words), we have

*Do not ta`aneh against your re`ia [as] a witness of deception*

The most common and accepted translation of the Hebrew *reia* is 'neighbor'. However, a survey of its use in the broader biblical text is illuminating because it sheds light on exactly what is meant by 'neighbor'. In Genesis 15:10 in which God prepares the Covenant sacrifice, the divine author uses *re`ia* to describe the adjacent pieces of the dismembered sacrifice. In Exodus 2:13, *re`ia* describes two men fighting with each other. Finally, in Exodus 21:14 the victim of a cold-blooded murder and his murderer are described as *re`ia*. In fact, nowhere in the Bible is *re`ia* limited to the Israelites. Indeed, *re`ia* occurs most frequently in the Psalms and Proverbs where it applies to anyone and everyone.

In this context, let's rewrite the verse and render *re`ia* as "any person".

*Do not ta`aneh as a deceiver against any person.*

So far so good. Now, what about the word *ta`aneh*?

Many English Bibles translate *ta`aneh* as *bear* as in "*bear a burden*". However,

elsewhere in the Bible (some 274 occurrences) it is translated as '*answered*', '*replied*' and less frequently as '*testified*' largely because *ta`aneh* is used to describe reactions or responses to events, not just questions. A better translation of *ta`aneh*, then, ought to be one that connotes speech elicited in response to something. By using *ta`aneh*, the divine author was likely attempting to convey the idea that when the subject of any person arises, whether known or unknown, our comments about that person must be truthful and without guile.

Now, go and study,