

Deuteronomy 19:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Analysis

Proportional punishment: 'And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.' The lex talionis (law of retaliation) ensures proportionality—punishment matches crime. 'Life for life' means capital punishment for murder. 'Eye for eye' originally meant financial compensation equal to injury's value, not literal mutilation (Exodus 21:26-27; Leviticus 24:19-20). The command 'thine eye shall not pity' demands justice without sentimentality—neither excessive punishment nor inadequate. This limits vengeance (no escalation) while ensuring accountability (no impunity). Jesus later contrasts personal ethics ('turn the other cheek,' Matthew 5:38-42) with civil justice—grace in personal relationships doesn't negate governmental justice.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern law codes (Hammurabi, Hittite) included lex talionis principles, though often with class distinctions (harsher for harming nobles, lighter for harming slaves). Biblical law applies equally regardless of status—covenant equality. Jewish interpretation developed financial compensation rather than literal mutilation. Jesus's 'turn the other cheek' teaching addresses personal offense, not criminal justice—He doesn't instruct judges to ignore crime but individuals to forgo personal revenge. Romans 12:19-13:4 clarifies: believers don't take personal vengeance; government bears sword for justice.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How does proportional punishment (eye for eye) serve both justice and mercy by limiting excessive retaliation?
2. What is the difference between Jesus's 'turn the other cheek' (personal ethics) and government's sword (civil justice)?
3. How do we balance demanding justice for victims while extending grace and forgiveness personally?

Interlinear Text

בְּעֵינֶיךָ לֹא תִּנְאֹכֵל
H3808 shall not pity H2347 And thine eye H5869 but life H5315 but life H5315 And thine eye H5869

בְּעֵינֶיךָ לֹא תִּנְאֹכֵל
And thine eye H5869 for tooth H8127 for tooth H8127 for hand H3027 for hand H3027 foot H7272 foot H7272

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 19:13 (Parallel theme): Thine eye shall not pity him, but thou shalt put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with thee.