

Deuteronomy 20:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But of the cities of these people, which the LORD thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth:

Analysis

But of the cities of these people, which the LORD thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth—The Canaanite herem demanded total destruction: **nothing that breatheth** (כָּל־נֶשְׁמָה, kol-neshamah, literally 'every breath'). This wasn't ethnic cleansing but spiritual surgery—removing cancer threatening Israel's covenant relationship. God's explicit command (next verse) makes His purpose clear: prevent idolatry contagion.

Israel's incomplete obedience (failing to execute full herem) caused centuries of apostasy. **They did not destroy the nations, concerning whom the LORD commanded them: But were mingled among the heathen, and learned their works...Therefore was the wrath of the LORD kindled against his people** (Psalm 106:34-35, 40). Spiritual compromise never stays contained; it metastasizes. Jesus demands similar ruthlessness with personal sin: **If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out** (Matthew 5:29)—radical amputation prevents spiritual death.

Historical Context

The seven Canaanite nations (Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites) occupied the Promised Land. Archaeological evidence confirms widespread child sacrifice, ritual prostitution, and brutality.

God's 400-year patience (Genesis 15:16) expired; judgment came through Israel's conquest.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. What personal sins require 'herem' (total destruction, no negotiation) rather than moderation or management?
2. How did Israel's incomplete obedience (leaving Canaanites alive) warn about 'small compromises' that grow into major apostasy?
3. What does Jesus's 'pluck it out' command teach about the violence necessary for defeating besetting sins?

Interlinear Text

ב ק	מֵעַר י	הָעַמִּים	הָאֵל לָהּ	אֲשֶׁר	יְהוָה ה
H7535	But of the cities	of these people	H428	H834	which the LORD
	H5892	H5971			H3068
אֱלֹהֵי יְיָ	נָתַן	לָךְ	נַחֲלָה	ל א	תַּחֲיֶה
thy God	doth give	H0	thee for an inheritance	H3808	thou shalt save alive
H430	H5414		H5159		H2421
כָּל	נִשְׁמָה:				
H3605	nothing that breatheth				
	H5397				

Additional Cross-References

Joshua 11:14 (Parallel theme): And all the spoil of these cities, and the cattle, the children of Israel took for a prey unto themselves; but every man they smote with the edge of the sword, until they had destroyed them, neither left they any to breathe.

Numbers 33:52 (Parallel theme): Then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their pictures, and destroy all their molten images, and quite pluck down all their high places:

Deuteronomy 7:16 (References God): And thou shalt consume all the people which the LORD thy God shall deliver thee; thine eye shall have no pity upon them: neither shalt thou serve their gods; for that will be a snare unto thee.

Joshua 10:28 (Parallel theme): And that day Joshua took Makkedah, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and the king thereof he utterly destroyed, them, and all the souls that were therein; he let none remain: and he did to the king of Makkedah as he did unto the king of Jericho.

Joshua 10:40 (References God): So Joshua smote all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings: he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded.

Numbers 21:35 (Parallel theme): So they smote him, and his sons, and all his people, until there was none left him alive: and they possessed his land.