

Deuteronomy 20:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the officers shall speak unto the people, saying, What man is there that hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it.

Analysis

What man is there that hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? מִי־בָּאֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר בָּנָה בַּיִת־חָדָשׁ וְלֹא חָנַק (mi-ha-ish asher banah bayit-chadash ve-lo chanakho)—the verb chanak (חָנַק) means to dedicate, inaugurate, initiate into use. This wasn't merely pragmatic exemption but theological: a man should enjoy the firstfruits of his labor before risking death. The same root gives us Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication.

Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it—this compassionate exemption reveals God's care for human flourishing, not just military victory. The tragedy isn't merely death but dying before experiencing the fruit of one's work. This reflects Deuteronomy's this-worldly blessings theology: obedience brings tangible rewards in the present life—enjoying your house, vineyard, wife (vv. 5-7). Later biblical texts echo this value: Ecclesiastes 9:9 urges enjoying life's good gifts; Jesus's parable contrasts the rich fool who built bigger barns but died before enjoying them (Luke 12:16-21).

Historical Context

These military exemptions (vv. 5-8) were unprecedented in ancient warfare, where conscription was typically absolute. Surrounding nations—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon

—pressed all able-bodied men into service regardless of personal circumstances. Israel's exemptions recognized that life consists of more than military glory; domestic flourishing matters to God. These laws also served practical purposes:

1. maintaining agricultural productivity by exempting those with new vineyards
2. preserving morale by excusing those distracted by unfinished business
3. ensuring only committed soldiers fought, not those whose hearts were elsewhere.

The exemptions applied to voluntary wars of expansion, not defensive wars requiring total mobilization (Mishnah Sotah 8:7).

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How do these exemptions reflect God's concern for quality of life, not just preservation of life?
2. What does the priority given to "dedicating your house" and "enjoying your vineyard" teach about enjoying God's blessings before they're taken away?

Interlinear Text

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁלֹטְרִים וְדָבַר
shall speak And the officers H413
H1696 H7860

לֵאמֹר בְּעֵם
unto the people H5971
H559

לִאֵשׁ מְנֻחָה
What man H376
H4310

אָשָׁר בָּנָה לְבִיתׁ
is there that hath built H1129
H834

חֲדֵשׁ וְאֵל
a new and H3808
H2319

לֹא יִחְנַכֵּה
and hath not dedicated H2596

וְאֵשׁ בְּמַלְתָּחָה
What man in the battle H4421
H376

וְיִשְׁבֶּה לְבִיתׁ
lest he die H4191
H6435

וְיִלְחַדֵּה
and return H7725
H1980

אֲחֵר
and another H312
and hath not dedicated H2596

Additional Cross-References

Nehemiah 12:27 (Parallel theme): And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps.