

Deuteronomy 21:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them:

Analysis

If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son—The Hebrew ben sorer u-moreh ("stubborn and rebellious son") describes persistent, incorrigible defiance, not childhood disobedience. Sorer derives from sur (to turn aside, rebel), while moreh means contentious, rebellious. This is covenant-breaking within the family structure.

Which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother—Both parents must agree, preventing unilateral parental tyranny. The phrase lo yishma ("will not obey," literally "will not hear") indicates deliberate rejection of parental authority. **When they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them**—Yisru (chastened/disciplined) shows corrective measures have been attempted and failed. This isn't impulsive punishment but a last resort after exhausted remediation.

This severe law (verses 18-21) protected the covenant community from corruption by removing unrepentant rebels. Rabbinic tradition notes no historical record of this sentence being carried out—its existence as law deterred the behavior. Hebrews 12:9 references respect for earthly fathers who discipline, contrasting earthly and heavenly fatherhood.

Historical Context

Ancient Israelite society was structured around the family unit as the basic covenant community. A son who utterly rejected parental authority threatened not just his family but the entire social and religious order. The requirement that both parents agree and bring the case to the elders (verse 19) created multiple safeguards against abuse. The public nature of the trial and execution served as a powerful deterrent. This law presumes a son old enough for moral accountability yet still under parental authority—likely a young adult, as the accusations in verse 20 (gluttony, drunkenness) suggest independent behavior that impacts the community.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does the requirement for both parents to agree and for community elders to judge reflect God's wisdom in balancing parental authority with protection against abuse of power?
2. What does this severe law reveal about the seriousness of rebellion against God-ordained authority, and how does it magnify the grace of the gospel that transforms rebels into sons?

Interlinear Text

אִיָּן	כִּי	וּמֹרֶךְ	הַ	אִיָּן	כִּי
H3588	H1961	If a man	son	have a stubborn	and rebellious
H376	H1121	H5637	H4784	H369	
וְשָׁמַעַת	עַל	וְבָקָר	אֶל	וְבָקָר	אֶל
him	will not hearken	or the voice	of his father	or the voice	of his mother
H8085	H6963	H1	H6963	H517	
וְיִסְרָר	וְ	אַתְּ	וְ	וְשָׁמַעַת	אַלְיָם:
and that	when they have chastened	H853	H3808	him	will not hearken
H3256				H8085	H413

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 20:12 (Parallel theme): Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

Leviticus 19:3 (Parallel theme): Ye shall fear every man his mother, and his father, and keep my sabbaths: I am the LORD your God.

Isaiah 1:5 (Parallel theme): Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.

Isaiah 1:2 (Parallel theme): Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.

Proverbs 19:18 (Parallel theme): Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying.

Proverbs 20:20 (Parallel theme): Whoso curseth his father or his mother, his lamp shall be put out in obscure darkness.

Proverbs 30:17 (Parallel theme): The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it.

Proverbs 29:17 (Parallel theme): Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul.

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