

Exodus 21:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life,

Analysis

And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life,

Lex talionis principle: 'life for life' (נֶפֶשׁ תַּחַת נֶפֶשׁ, nefesh tachat nefesh)—exact equivalence, not escalation. This LIMITS revenge, preventing blood feuds. If injury is minor, penalty is minor; if death results, death penalty follows. Ancient cultures allowed unlimited vengeance (Lamech: 'seventy-sevenfold,' Genesis 4:24); lex talionis caps punishment at the offense level. Jesus doesn't abolish this civil justice principle but transcends it personally—'turn the other cheek' (Matthew 5:39) governs personal relations, not civil magistrates. God ordains governments to 'bear the sword' (Romans 13:4) in executing justice.

Historical Context

Lex talionis appears in Hammurabi's Code (c. 1750 BC) and Hittite laws. Israel's version is more humane—applying equally regardless of social class (Hammurabi's penalties varied by status). Eye-for-eye limited rather than encouraged revenge.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does lex talionis (eye-for-eye) actually limit rather than promote revenge?
2. What's the difference between Jesus' personal ethic (turn the other cheek) and civil justice (lex talionis)?

Interlinear Text

וְאִם	אִם כִּי	וְהָיָה	וְנָתַתָּה	נַפְשׁוֹ	תְּחַיֶּה
H518	And if any mischief follow	H1961	then thou shalt give	for life	H8478
	H611		H5414	H5315	
נַפְשׁוֹ					
for life					
H5315					

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 19:21 (Parallel theme): And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.