

Exodus 21:24

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

Analysis

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

The famous formula: exact correspondence between crime and punishment. 'Eye for eye' (עַיִן תַּחַת עַיִן, ayin tachat ayin) means the punishment fits the crime—no more, no less. This prevents both excessive vengeance and inadequate justice. Rabbinic tradition interpreted this as monetary compensation (paying the value of an eye), showing the law's spirit was restitution, not mutilation. Jesus quotes this in Matthew 5:38 to contrast civil justice with personal forgiveness—governments execute justice; individuals extend mercy. Paul echoes: 'Do not avenge yourselves...let God avenge' (Romans 12:19). God's justice is perfect; our vengeance isn't.

Historical Context

Eye-for-eye wasn't literally practiced in most cases—restitution and fines substituted. The principle established proportionality: punishment must match offense. This protected both victim (justice served) and perpetrator (not over-punished).

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does 'eye for eye' establish both justice for victims and protection for perpetrators?
2. Why does Jesus reference 'eye for eye' in the Sermon on the Mount—what's His point about personal relationships?

Interlinear Text

עַיִן	תַּחַת	עַיִן	שֵׁן	תַּחַת	שֵׁן	יָד	תַּחַת	יָד
Eye	H8478	Eye	for tooth	H8478	for tooth	for hand	H8478	for hand
H5869		H5869	H8127		H8127	H3027		H3027
רֶגֶל:	תַּחַת	רֶגֶל:						
foot	H8478	foot						
H7272		H7272						

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.

Matthew 7:2 (Parallel theme): For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

Revelation 16:6 (Parallel theme): For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy.