

Judges 1:28

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And it came to pass, when Israel was strong, that they put the Canaanites to tribute, and did not utterly drive them out.

Analysis

And it came to pass, when Israel was strong, that they put the Canaanites to tribute, and did not utterly drive them out.

This verse reveals Israel's compromise once gaining military advantage. Rather than completing conquest through herem (חֶרֶם, devoted destruction), they imposed tribute (mas, מֵשֶׁת), making Canaanites forced laborers. The phrase 'when Israel was strong' (vayehi ki-chazaq Yisrael, וַיְהִי קִיַּחֶזְקָה יִשְׂרָאֵל) indicates they eventually gained military superiority, yet chose economic exploitation over obedient elimination. This wasn't compassion but greed—valuing Canaanite labor productivity over covenant faithfulness.

Theologically, this illustrates how strength can breed disobedience. In weakness, Israel might plead inability; in strength, they had no excuse. Yet strength tempted pragmatism—'Why destroy useful workers when we can profit from their labor?' This mirrors Christian temptation when gaining spiritual maturity: tolerating 'useful' sins (anger energizes confrontation, greed motivates hard work, pride fuels achievement) rather than mortifying them completely (Romans 8:13, Colossians 3:5). Apparent utility doesn't justify preserving what God commands destroyed.

The practice of tribute echoes Solomon's later forced labor (1 Kings 5:13-14, 9:15-22), which included Canaanite remnants. However, Solomon's exploitation eventually contributed to kingdom division—northern tribes rebelled against Rehoboam's threat of increased forced labor (1 Kings 12:1-20). Seeds of division

sown here through incomplete obedience bore bitter fruit generations later. God's commands, even when seemingly economically disadvantageous, protect from long-term consequences human wisdom can't foresee.

Historical Context

Forced labor (mas, ḥaṣ, corvée) was standard practice throughout ancient Near East. Egyptian Pharaohs conscripted workers for pyramids, temples, and infrastructure. Mesopotamian kings mobilized populations for canals, ziggurats, and city walls. The Amarna letters describe Canaanite kings demanding corvée labor from vassals. Israel's later kings (Solomon, Rehoboam) employed similar practices, though ideally Israelites performed only temporary service while foreigners provided permanent forced labor (1 Kings 9:20-22).

Archaeological evidence confirms continued Canaanite population presence in areas nominally controlled by Israel. Material culture shows gradual transition from Canaanite to Israelite patterns over generations rather than sudden complete replacement. This supports the biblical picture of incomplete conquest with coexisting populations. However, God's commands anticipated this social arrangement's dangers—intermarriage leading to religious syncretism (Deuteronomy 7:3-4), which precisely occurred (Judges 3:5-6).

Economic motivation for preserving Canaanite populations was substantial. Canaanites possessed advanced agricultural techniques, viticulture, olive cultivation, and urban crafts Israel lacked initially. Their labor built cities, developed infrastructure, and produced agricultural surplus. However, economic benefits came with spiritual costs—exposure to Canaanite religion, intermarriage, and cultural assimilation. God's wisdom in commanding complete separation (which seemed economically foolish) protected Israel from spiritual corruption (which seemed manageable but proved devastating).

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. What 'useful sins' do you tolerate because they seem productive or beneficial despite God commanding their elimination?
2. How does gaining spiritual strength sometimes tempt toward pragmatic compromise rather than complete obedience?
3. What long-term consequences might result from current compromises that seem economically or socially advantageous?

Interlinear Text

אָתָּה	זֶה שְׁמָךְ	וְשִׁבְעָה	לְיִשְׁרָאֵל	וְיִשְׁרָאֵל	כִּי קָרָא	כִּי יִרְאָה	אָתָּה
H853	H7760	H3478	H3478	H3588	H2388	H1961	
that they put	the Canaanites	to tribute	and did not utterly	and did not utter	and did not utter	the Canaanites	to tribute
H3808	H3669	H4522	H3423	H3423			

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