

Judges 21:10

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the congregation sent thither twelve thousand men of the valiantest, and commanded them, saying, Go and smite the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead with the edge of the sword, with the women and the children.

Analysis

And the congregation sent thither twelve thousand men of the valiantest, and commanded them, saying, Go and smite the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead with the edge of the sword, with the women and the children. The phrase "twelve thousand men of the valiantest" (ish gibbor chayil, אִישׁ גָּבָור חַיִל, "mighty men of valor") indicates elite warriors—the same term used of Gideon (6:12) and David's warriors (2 Samuel 23). The command "smite... with the edge of the sword" (hakkot... l'fi-charev, הַקְרֹב ... לְפִי-חָרֵב) is standard herem warfare language used against Canaanite cities (Joshua 6:21, 8:24). Shockingly, the targets include "the women and the children" (nashim v'taf, נָשִׁים וְתָף), showing Israel applied total warfare against fellow Israelites over assembly non-attendance.

The moral horror is staggering: Israel sent elite troops to massacre an entire Israelite city—men, women, children—to obtain virgin wives for Benjamin while technically keeping their rash oaths. From a Reformed perspective, this demonstrates how zeal without wisdom, legalism without mercy, and procedure without justice produce compounding evil. They were willing to destroy one city to prevent one tribe's extinction, solving oath-created problems through violence rather than humility, confession, and seeking legitimate release from imprudent vows. The passage illustrates Paul's warning that the letter kills but the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6)—Israel kept the letter of their oaths through actions that utterly violated God's character and law. Their actions reveal hearts hardened

by repeated violence, moral reasoning corrupted by pride, and religion divorced from righteousness.

Historical Context

The dispatch of 12,000 warriors (1,000 per participating tribe) indicates this was a coordinated intertribal military operation with official sanction. The number parallels later military expeditions (Numbers 31:4-5 sent 12,000 against Midian). The use of herem warfare language—total destruction except for specified exceptions—was designed for Canaanite conquest to prevent idolatry from corrupting Israel (Deuteronomy 20:16-18). Applying such warfare to fellow Israelites over civil violations demonstrates profound moral confusion.

Jabesh-gilead would have been a walled city with typical ancient Near Eastern population of several thousand. The massacre of entire families except virgin women meant hundreds or thousands killed. The survivors—400 virgins—were taken as spoils of war and given to Benjamin's 600 survivors, leaving 200 Benjamites still needing wives (verse 12, 14). The brutality seems incomprehensible until we remember the entire Judges period is bracketed by the refrain "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6, 21:25). Without godly leadership, prophetic voice, or humble wisdom-seeking, Israel descended into tribal violence justified by religious language and procedural correctness, showing how far God's people can fall when abandoning dependence on His wisdom and mercy.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does applying procedures designed for one context (Canaanite conquest) to inappropriate situations (punishing Israelite non-attendance) produce moral horror?
2. What does Israel's willingness to massacre an entire city rather than admit their oaths were rash reveal about pride and legalism?
3. How can religious language and procedural correctness mask actions that fundamentally violate God's character and values?

Interlinear Text

א	וְשָׁ	א	לְפָ	עָשָׂ	ר	שְׁנִים	קָעַד	ה	שְׁ	מִ	וְשַׁלְחוּ	שְׁ
sent	H8033	And the congregation		thither twelve	H6240	thousand		men				
	H7971			H8147		H505						H376
ל	כִּ	לְאָמֵן	ר	אָוָתָ	ם	מִבְנֵ	קָרְבָּן	וְ	מִלְכָה	וְ	מִבְנֵ	וְ
of the valiantest	H2428	and commanded		H853		H559	them saying		H1980			
	H1121			H6680								
לְפִ	גָּלְעָד											
and smite	H853	the inhabitants		of Jabeshgilead	H1568	with the edge						
	H5221			H3427		H6310						
רַבָּ	וְ	יָמִ	וְ	יָמִ								
of the sword		with the women		and the children								
	H2719			H2945								

Additional Cross-References

1 Samuel 11:7 (Parallel theme): And he took a yoke of oxen, and hewed them in pieces, and sent them throughout all the coasts of Israel by the hands of messengers, saying, Whosoever cometh not forth after Saul and after Samuel, so shall it be done unto his oxen. And the fear of the LORD fell on the people, and they came out with one consent.

Judges 5:23 (Parallel theme): Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the LORD, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the mighty.

Judges 21:5 (Parallel theme): And the children of Israel said, Who is there among all the tribes of Israel that came not up with the congregation unto the LORD? For they had made a great oath concerning him that came not up to the LORD to Mizpeh, saying, He shall surely be put to death.

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