

Judges 21:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And this is the thing that ye shall do, Ye shall utterly destroy every male, and every woman that hath lain by man.

Analysis

And this is the thing that ye shall do, Ye shall utterly destroy every male, and every woman that hath lain by man. The command "utterly destroy" (tacharim, תְּחִרֵם, from charam, חָרָם, the herem or "ban" meaning total consecration to destruction) applies standard Canaanite conquest language to fellow Israelites. The specification to kill "every male" (kol zachar, כל-זָכָר) regardless of age, and "every woman that hath lain by man" (literally "known lying with a male," yodeah mishkav zachar, יְדַעַת מִשְׁקָב זָכָר), meant only virgin girls would survive. This echoes the Midianite war (Numbers 31:17-18) but now targets covenant Israelites.

The clinical precision of the command reveals chilling moral calculus: Israel needed exactly enough virgin women to provide wives for Benjamin's 600 survivors while maintaining their oath not to give their own daughters. From a Reformed perspective, this illustrates how corrupted moral reasoning produces increasingly specific evil when people are more committed to their own honor (keeping oaths) than to God's character (mercy and justice). The command treats human beings as commodities—sorting them by categories (male/non-virgin/virgin) for destruction or distribution. This dehumanization is the endpoint of Israel's moral descent in Judges: they began fighting righteous causes (Othniel, Deborah, Gideon) but ended massacring fellow Israelites and trafficking women to solve problems created by their own rash vows, all while maintaining religious language and procedural correctness. The verse shows how far God's people can fall when wisdom, mercy, and dependence on God are abandoned.

Historical Context

The herem or "ban" was Israel's most extreme warfare mode, reserved for Canaanite conquest to eliminate idolatry (Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 20:16-18). Total destruction prevented intermarriage and religious syncretism. The ban's only other use against Israelites was Achan's family for covenant violation (Joshua 7) and later against apostate Israelite cities (Deuteronomy 13:12-18), both for religious crimes threatening the entire community. Here, Israel applies herem for assembly non-attendance, a massive escalation that reveals moral confusion.

The specification about virgin women echoes Numbers 31:17-18, where Moses commanded killing all Midianite males and non-virgin women after the Baal-Peor incident. However, that context involved punishing those who seduced Israel into idolatry and sexual immorality. Jabesh-gilead's only crime was failing to attend an assembly—hardly equivalent. The parallel reveals Israel had internalized warfare procedures but lost the wisdom to apply them appropriately. They treated fellow Israelites as enemy nations, covenant brothers as Canaanites, and civil violations as capital religious crimes. The entire episode demonstrates the Judges era's central problem: not mere lawlessness but law and procedure divorced from wisdom, mercy, and God's heart, producing outcomes that violate everything God's law was meant to protect.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How does treating human beings as commodities to solve our problems reveal the dehumanizing endpoint of corrupted moral reasoning?
2. What does Israel's application of extreme warfare procedures to inappropriate contexts reveal about zeal divorced from wisdom?

3. When have you seen good principles (loyalty, promise-keeping) pursued in ways that violated the very values they were meant to uphold?

Interlinear Text

וְאֵת הַזֶּה	וְאֵת הַזֶּה	פְּתַעַשׂ וְאַשְׁר	כִּל	יְכַרְבֵּן	וְאֵל
H2088	And this is the thing	H834	that ye shall do	H3605	every male
	H1697		H6213		H2145

וְאֵשׂ הַ	מִשְׁכָּב	יְכַרְבֵּן	פְּתַרְיָמָן
and every woman	by man	every male	Ye shall utterly destroy

H802 H3045 H4904 H2145 H2763

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