

Judges 21:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead four hundred young virgins, that had known no man by lying with any male: and they brought them unto the camp to Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

Analysis

And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead four hundred young virgins, that had known no man by lying with any male: and they brought them unto the camp to Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan. The phrase "found... four hundred young virgins" (betulot, בְּתוּלוֹת, "virgins") who "had known no man" (the verb yada, יָדָע, "to know," used biblically for sexual relations) indicates Israel sorted survivors by sexual history, preserving only those suitable as wives for Benjamin. The emphatic "by lying with any male" (mishkav zachar, מִשְׁכַּב זָכָר) shows thoroughness in verification—these were genuinely unmarried virgins, not widows or divorcees.

The location "Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan" is geographically strange—the narrator identifies Shiloh's location as if to foreign readers, possibly indicating the text's compilation during later Babylonian exile when geographical markers were needed. Shiloh housed the tabernacle (Joshua 18:1), making it central to Israelite worship, yet this sacred location became the staging ground for distributing war spoils (virgin women) taken from fellow Israelites. From a Reformed perspective, this juxtaposition of sacred space and profane action illustrates how religious infrastructure can exist alongside moral bankruptcy. Israel brought enslaved women to God's tabernacle to solve problems created by their own rash vows, showing complete disconnect between religious form and righteousness. The 400 virgins left 200 Benjamites still needing wives, requiring

yet another violent solution (verses 19-23), demonstrating how sin compounds when pursued through human wisdom rather than godly repentance and humble dependence on divine guidance.

Historical Context

Shiloh was located in Ephraim's territory, north of Bethel, and served as Israel's religious center during the Judges period. The tabernacle remained at Shiloh until the ark's capture by Philistines (1 Samuel 4), after which the city was apparently destroyed (Jeremiah 7:12-14, 26:6 refer to Shiloh's ruins as warning to Jerusalem). The mention of "land of Canaan" suggests the text's final form dates from exile when such geographical markers were necessary for readers unfamiliar with the land.

The treatment of the 400 virgins as war spoils parallels ancient Near Eastern practices where victorious armies took women from conquered cities as slaves, concubines, or wives. However, this was fellow Israelites, not foreign enemies. Deuteronomy 21:10-14 provided regulations for marrying female captives from actual warfare, requiring a month's mourning and prohibiting slave treatment. Here, women torn from families massacred before their eyes were immediately distributed to men from the tribe that had been nearly destroyed through civil war. The psychological and spiritual trauma is unimaginable. The entire episode reveals how far Israel fell from God's standards for treatment of women, covenant community, and justice. That this occurred at Shiloh, God's dwelling place, shows complete moral dissonance between religious practice and righteous living.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does the juxtaposition of God's tabernacle at Shiloh with the distribution of enslaved women reveal the disconnect between religious form and righteousness?
2. What does the treatment of these 400 women as commodities to solve Israel's oath-created problem reveal about their failure to see people as God sees them?
3. How might we sometimes maintain religious practices and infrastructure while tolerating or perpetuating injustice that fundamentally contradicts God's character?

Interlinear Text

וַיִּמְצְאוּ	מִיּוֹשֵׁב יוֹ	יַב־שִׁגְלֵי	גִלְעָד	אַרְבַּע		
And they found	among the inhabitants	of Jabeshgilead	H1568	four		
H4672	H3427	H3003		H702		
מֵאוֹת	נְעָרִים	בְּתוּלוֹת	אֲשֶׁר	לֹא	יָדְעוּ	אִישׁ
hundred	young	virgins	H834	H3808	that had known	no man
H3967	H5291	H1330			H3045	H376
לְמִשְׁכָּב	זָכָר	וַיְבִיאוּ	אוֹתָם	אֶל	הַמַּחֲנֶה	
by lying	with any male	and they brought	H853	H413	them unto the camp	
H4904	H2145	H935			H4264	
שֶׁל הַ	אֲשֶׁר	בְּאֶרֶץ	כְּנָעַן:			
to Shiloh	H834	which is in the land	of Canaan			
H7887		H776	H3667			

Additional Cross-References

Joshua 18:1 (Parallel theme): And the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled together at Shiloh, and set up the tabernacle of the congregation there. And the land was subdued before them.

