

Judges 21:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And they said, There must be an inheritance for them that be escaped of Benjamin, that a tribe be not destroyed out of Israel.

Analysis

And they said, There must be an inheritance for them that be escaped of Benjamin, that a tribe be not destroyed out of Israel. This verse articulates the theological concern driving Israel's actions: **that a tribe be not destroyed** (velo yimacheh shevet miYisrael, וְלֹא יִמְחַה שֵׁבֶט מִשְׁرָאֵל). The verb machah (מְחַה, "blotted out") appears in God's warning that disobedient Israel would be blotted out from the land (Deuteronomy 29:20). The elders recognized that allowing Benjamin's extinction would rupture the twelve-tribe structure God established through Jacob's sons.

The phrase **there must be an inheritance** (yerushat peletah, יִרְשַׁת פְּלִטָּה, "inheritance of the escaped") indicates concern for preserving tribal land allotments. Without male heirs, Benjamin's territory would be absorbed by neighboring tribes, destroying the divinely ordained tribal boundaries (Joshua 18:11-28). From a Reformed perspective, this legitimate concern for preserving God's covenant structure was undermined by illegitimate means to achieve it. The end does not justify the means—God's purposes must be pursued through God's methods, not human pragmatism.

However, the elders' concern reveals partial spiritual understanding. They recognized covenant theology—the twelve tribes represented God's chosen people structure. Yet they failed to recognize that pursuing this goal through violence against Jabesh-gilead and Shiloh violated the very covenant principles they sought

to preserve. This teaches that even doctrinally sound goals can be pursued through sinful means when human wisdom replaces dependence on God's guidance.

Historical Context

The twelve-tribe structure was central to Israel's covenant identity, rooted in Jacob's blessing of his sons (Genesis 49) and formalized through Moses's tribal organization (Numbers 1-2). Each tribe received specific territorial inheritance (Joshua 13-21), sacred responsibilities, and prophetic blessings. Benjamin's territory, though small, was strategically located between Judah and Ephraim, later hosting Jerusalem on its southern border.

Benjamin's near-extinction was particularly tragic given the tribe's future significance. Saul, Israel's first king, came from Benjamin (1 Samuel 9:1-2), as did Queen Esther (Esther 2:5-7) and the apostle Paul (Philippians 3:5). During the divided monarchy, Benjamin remained loyal to David's house, forming part of the southern kingdom. The preservation of these 600 men, despite the morally problematic means, demonstrates God's covenant faithfulness—He would not allow human sin to permanently destroy His redemptive purposes.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How do we sometimes justify sinful methods by appealing to righteous goals, forgetting that God's ends require God's means?
2. What does Benjamin's preservation despite human failure teach about God's sovereignty in accomplishing His purposes?
3. How can we distinguish between legitimate concern for biblical structures and legalistic adherence to external forms?

Interlinear Text

וְאָמַר

וְרָשָׁת

פְּלִיטָה

לְבָנִים

And they said There must be an inheritance for them that be escaped of Benjamin

H559

H3425

H6413

H1144

וְלֹא

מִנְחָה

שֶׁבֶת

מִשְׁכָּאָלָן

H3808 be not destroyed

H4229 that a tribe

H7626 out of Israel

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