

Judges 21:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Howbeit we may not give them wives of our daughters: for the children of Israel have sworn, saying, Cursed be he that giveth a wife to Benjamin.

Analysis

Howbeit we may not give them wives of our daughters: for the children of Israel have sworn, saying, Cursed be he that giveth a wife to Benjamin. The phrase **we may not give them wives** (lo nukhal latet lahem nashim, לא נוכל לחתת נשים) expresses their perceived impossibility—not God's command, but their own rash oath now binding them. The curse (arur, אָרָור) pronounced against anyone giving daughters to Benjamin was the same strong covenant curse formula used against violating God's law (Deuteronomy 27:15-26). They had invested a human decision with the weight of divine sanction.

From a Reformed perspective, this verse illustrates the danger of extra-biblical vows that bind the conscience beyond Scripture's requirements. Jesus warned against elaborate oath-taking: "Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil" (Matthew 5:37). The Westminster Confession (22.7) states that "no man may vow to do any thing forbidden in the Word of God... or what would hinder any duty therein commanded." Israel's oath hindered the duty of covenant reconciliation and restoration.

The tragic irony is that they treated this human oath as inviolable while finding loopholes to circumvent it—they wouldn't "give" daughters but would condone kidnapping them. This casuistry reveals the Pharisaical mindset Jesus condemned: straining at gnats while swallowing camels (Matthew 23:24). True obedience requires recognizing when commitments contradict God's revealed will and

humbly confessing error rather than seeking technical compliance through greater sin.

Historical Context

Oath-taking in ancient Israel carried profound significance, invoking God's name as witness and guarantor (Leviticus 19:12). Breaking oaths was considered serious sin, yet the Torah provided procedures for dealing with rash or sinful vows. Numbers 30 outlines authority to annul vows under certain conditions, and Leviticus 5:4-6 addresses unwise oaths, requiring confession and sacrifice. The elders could have sought the high priest's counsel about this oath, but instead pursued schemes to keep it technically while violating its spirit.

The "cursed be" (arur) formula was used in covenant renewal ceremonies where Israel affirmed allegiance to God's law (Deuteronomy 27:15-26, Joshua 8:34). Applying this solemn formula to refusing reconciliation with Benjamin perverted its purpose. The oath revealed Israel's excessive zeal and self-righteousness—they presumed to pronounce covenant curses on matters God's law didn't address. This foreshadows the Pharisees' tradition of Corban, where religious vows excused breaking the fifth commandment (Mark 7:9-13).

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What extra-biblical commitments or traditions have you treated as binding on conscience beyond Scripture's requirements?

2. How does seeking loopholes to avoid breaking foolish vows actually compound sin rather than demonstrating faithfulness?
3. When have you confused your own convictions or decisions with God's authoritative commands, binding yourself or others unnecessarily?

Interlinear Text

ל א יְאַגֵּן חַנּוֹן	H587	Howbeit we may	be he that giveth	נָתַת	לְקָם	אֲשֶׁר ה
	H3808			H3201		H0
מִבְנֹות יִנוֹם		בַּיִת	נְשָׁבָע וְ	בְּנֵי	יִשְׂרָאֵל	לִאמְרָה וּרְ
of our daughters	H3588	have sworn	for the children	H1121	of Israel	saying
H1323		H7650		H1121	H3478	H559
לְבָנָימָן: אֲשֶׁר ה						
be he that giveth	H5414	a wife	to Benjamin	H1144	H802	H779

Additional Cross-References

Judges 21:1 (References Israel): Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpeh, saying, There shall not any of us give his daughter unto Benjamin to wife.

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