

Judges 21:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Therefore they commanded the children of Benjamin, saying,
Go and lie in wait in the vineyards;

Analysis

Therefore they commanded the children of Benjamin, saying, Go and lie in wait in the vineyards. The elders **commanded** (vayetzavuu, וַיִּצְוּ) the Benjamites—using the same verb for God's authoritative commands—to **lie in wait** (va'aravtem, וַאֲרַבְתֶּם) in ambush. The Hebrew root arav (אַרַב) means to lurk or ambush, commonly used for military ambushes (Joshua 8:2) but also for predatory violence (Proverbs 1:11, 18). The vineyard location was strategic—harvest festivals included dancing in and around vineyards, providing cover for the ambush.

From a Reformed perspective, this verse demonstrates how far Israel's moral compass had deteriorated. The elders didn't merely permit this scheme—they actively commanded it, giving official sanction to kidnapping. This transforms individual sin into corporate wickedness, with leadership orchestrating violence against the innocent. The contrast with God's law is stark: Deuteronomy 22:25-27 prescribed death for rape, yet here Israel's leaders organize mass abduction of women from a worship festival.

The tragic progression from Judges 19-21 reveals escalating violence: gang rape and murder of the Levite's concubine, civil war, genocide against Benjamin, destruction of Jabesh-gilead, and now sanctioned kidnapping at Shiloh. Each attempted solution to moral crisis produces greater moral chaos. This warns that human schemes apart from genuine repentance and return to God's law only compound wickedness. The book's conclusion—"every man did that which was

right in his own eyes" (21:25)—finds its ultimate illustration in leaders commanding kidnapping during worship.

Historical Context

Ambush tactics (ma'arav, מֵאַרָב) were standard ancient warfare strategy, used successfully by Joshua at Ai (Joshua 8:2-22) and by the Israelites in the Benjamin war itself (Judges 20:29-48). However, deploying military tactics against fellow Israelites during a worship festival represented profound moral perversion. The vineyard setting was significant—vineyards were associated with joy, celebration, and God's blessing (Psalm 104:15, Isaiah 5:1-7).

The elders' command reveals the complete breakdown of moral authority during this period. Rather than providing godly leadership directing people toward righteousness, they orchestrated violence. This foreshadows the problems with human kingship Israel would later demand (1 Samuel 8)—leadership without accountability to God's law becomes tyranny. The tragic irony is that Benjamin's near-extinction stemmed from protecting rapists (Judges 19), yet their "restoration" involved sanctioned kidnapping.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How do leaders sometimes use their authority to sanction morally problematic actions under guise of solving practical problems?
2. What does this verse teach about the danger of pragmatic ethics that justify means by desired ends?
3. When have you seen religious or organizational leaders command actions that clearly violate biblical principles of justice and mercy?

Interlinear Text

וַיֹּצֵא	אֶת	בְּנֵי י	בְּנֵימָן	לֵאמֹר	לְכָו
Therefore they commanded	H853	the children	of Benjamin	saying	H1980
H6680		H1121	H1144	H559	
וַיִּשְׁכְּבוּ	בְּכַרְמֵי:				
and lie in wait	in the vineyards				
H693	H3754				

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