

Judges 21:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the children of Israel said, Who is there among all the tribes of Israel that came not up with the congregation unto the LORD? For they had made a great oath concerning him that came not up to the LORD to Mizpeh, saying, He shall surely be put to death.

Analysis

And the children of Israel said, Who is there among all the tribes of Israel that came not up with the congregation unto the LORD? The question reveals a second rash oath beyond the marriage prohibition: Israel had sworn that anyone not joining the assembly at Mizpeh "**shall surely be put to death**" (mot yumat, מות יומת, the emphatic Hebrew death formula). The phrase "came not up with the congregation unto the LORD" (alah el-YHWH, אֶל־יְהוָה) treats assembly participation as a sacred obligation, with absence constituting rebellion against God, not merely civil disobedience.

The tragic irony deepens: having made one rash oath (no marriages to Benjamin), they now invoke a second rash oath (death for non-participants) to solve the first problem. They will destroy Jabesh-gilead's entire population except virgin women, providing wives for Benjamin while technically keeping both oaths. From a Reformed perspective, this illustrates the compounding nature of sin and foolish vows. Jesus later forbade oath-taking for this reason: "Let your yea be yea and your nay be nay" (Matthew 5:34-37, James 5:12). Israel's situation demonstrates how binding ourselves with absolute vows creates ethical tangles requiring increasingly unethical solutions. Rather than humbly seeking release from

imprudent oaths, they chose to keep both oaths through violence, showing more concern for their honor and word than for justice or mercy.

Historical Context

The assembly at Mizpeh had been a sacred convocation where all tribes were summoned to address Benjamin's protection of the Gibeah rapists-murderers (20:1-11). In ancient Israel, such assemblies were considered binding on all tribes—failure to participate indicated rejection of tribal unity and God's authority. Similar oaths about mandatory participation appear elsewhere: Israel assembled at Mizpeh against the Ammonites, and Saul later summoned Israel with threats against non-participants (1 Samuel 11:7).

Jabesh-gilead, located east of the Jordan in Gilead, may have been geographically distant or politically semi-independent, explaining their absence. However, their failure to join the assembly provided Israel a legalistic solution: destroy Jabesh-gilead under the participation oath, take virgin women for Benjamin, and claim to have kept both oaths. The destruction of Jabesh-gilead foreshadows a later connection: when Saul (a Benjamite) is crowned king, Jabesh-gilead remains grateful and loyal, even rescuing his body after death (1 Samuel 11:1-11, 31:11-13), suggesting survivors or relatives remembered both the tragedy and perhaps Benjamin's later protection of Jabesh-gilead refugees. The entire episode shows the moral chaos of solving oath-created problems with more violence rather than seeking wise, merciful solutions.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How do we sometimes use legal technicalities or loopholes to justify actions we know violate God's heart for justice and mercy?

2. What does Israel's invocation of a second rash oath to solve the first oath's problem reveal about the compounding nature of imprudent commitments?
3. Why did Jesus forbid oath-taking, and how does this passage illustrate His wisdom about avoiding absolute vows?

Interlinear Text

לָאמַר	בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל	מִי יֵשֶׁבֶת לִי	לֹא, אֲשֶׁר	לֹא	עָלָה
said	And the children	of Israel	that		came
H559	H1121	H3478	H4310 H834	H3808	H5927
	בְּקֶה לֹ	מִכָּל	שְׁבֵט יִשְׂרָאֵל		
	not up with the congregation		Who is there among all the tribes		of Israel
	H6951	H3605	H7626		H3478
אֶל	יְהוָה	כִּי	הַגְּדוֹלָה	הַיְּתֵה	
	to the LORD		oath	For they had made a great	
H413	H3068	H3588	H7621	H1419	H1961
לֹא, אֲשֶׁר	לֹא	עָלָה	אֶל	יְהוָה	הַמִּצְפָּה
that		came	to the LORD	to Mizpeh	said
H834	H3808	H5927	H413 H3068	H4709	H559
	יִמָּת:	יִמָּת:			
	He shall surely	He shall surely			
	H4191	H4191			

Additional Cross-References

Judges 5:23 (References Lord): Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the LORD, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the mighty.