

Judges 21:7

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

How shall we do for wives for them that remain, seeing we have sworn by the LORD that we will not give them of our daughters to wives?

Analysis

How shall we do for wives for them that remain, seeing we have sworn by the LORD that we will not give them of our daughters to wives? The question "How shall we do" (mah-naaseh, מַה-נָּאשֶׁה) reveals Israel's dilemma: they recognize Benjamin's survival requires wives but feel bound by their oath. The phrase "sworn by the LORD" (nishbanu ba-YHWH, נִשְׁבָּעֲנוּ בְּיַהְוָה) emphasizes the oath's sacred nature—it was taken in God's name, making it seemingly irrevocable. Their question reveals they seek a solution that technically preserves the oath while achieving the opposite outcome (providing wives for Benjamin).

This verse exposes the folly of rash vows: Israel painted themselves into a moral corner where keeping their word requires perpetuating injustice (Benjamin's extinction), but finding "workarounds" requires more injustice (destroying Jabesh-gilead, condoning kidnapping). From a Reformed perspective, this demonstrates why the law made provision for releasing vows under certain circumstances (Leviticus 27, Numbers 30) and why Jesus later forbade oath-taking (Matthew 5:33-37). Absolute vows made in human emotion inevitably create situations where keeping the letter violates the spirit. Rather than humbly admitting their oath was sinful and seeking legitimate release, Israel pursued legalistic solutions that compounded violence. The proper response would be confession that the oath was rash, seeking priestly or prophetic guidance for release, and reconciliation through genuine repentance rather than technicalities.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern cultures took oaths with extreme seriousness—invoking a deity's name created binding obligation with severe consequences for violation. In Israel, oaths taken "by the LORD" were considered inviolable (Numbers 30:2, Deuteronomy 23:21-23). Breaking such oaths could bring divine curse on the individual or community. This explains Israel's desperate search for solutions that technically preserve the oath while achieving opposite results.

However, Mosaic law provided mechanisms for releasing certain vows (Leviticus 27:1-13 for redemption of vowed persons, Numbers 30:3-16 for women's vows nullified by fathers or husbands). While these specific provisions might not directly apply, they reveal God's wisdom that absolute vows can create untenable situations requiring release. Israel could have sought prophetic or priestly guidance for releasing their rash oath—Phinehas the high priest was present (20:28). Instead, they chose legalistic workarounds that caused more suffering: destroying Jabesh-gilead produced 400 wives, then condoning kidnapping at Shiloh provided 200 more. Their approach shows more concern for their honor and reputation than for righteousness, illustrating how religious scrupulosity can mask moral bankruptcy when divorced from wisdom and mercy.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. When have you found yourself trapped by commitments made hastily, needing to choose between breaking your word or pursuing unethical "workarounds"?
2. Why might Israel have been more willing to destroy a city than to humbly admit their oath was rash and seek legitimate release?
3. How does this verse illustrate Jesus's wisdom in forbidding oath-taking and advocating simple yes-or-no commitments we can keep with integrity?

Interlinear Text

מִתְּהִלָּה	לְנֶשֶׁים:	לְנֶשֶׁים:	לְנֶשֶׁים:	לְנֶשֶׁים:
H4100	How shall we do	H0	for them that remain	for wives
H6213			H3498	H802
נִשְׁבַּעֲנוּ	בֵּיתִינוּ	לְבָלָתִי	תַּתְּהִלָּה	לְבָלָתִי
seeing we have sworn	by the LORD	H1115	that we will not give	H0
H7650	H3068		H5414	
מִבְּנֹותֵינוּ	לְנֶשֶׁים:			
them of our daughters	for wives			
H1323	H802			

Additional Cross-References

Judges 21:1 (Parallel theme): 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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