

Numbers 31:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him.

Analysis

Kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man—this command represents cherem (devoted to destruction) warfare, among Scripture's most difficult passages. The Hebrew taph (little ones) and the specification of sexually mature women indicate judgment on both future threats (male children who would grow to avenge their fathers) and past offenders (women who participated in Baal-Peor seduction).

This must be understood in context:

1. Direct divine command, not human initiative
2. Specific judgment on particular sins (leading God's people to idolatry/immorality), not general genocide
3. Old Covenant theocratic governance where Israel executed God's judgment temporally, foreshadowing eternal judgment
4. Mercy within judgment—virgin girls were spared (verse 18).

While Christians don't execute such judgments today (Romans 12:19), the passage teaches sin's seriousness, God's holiness, and the principle that mercy requires removing evil's continuing influence.

Historical Context

This command reflects ancient Near Eastern herem warfare—complete devotion to deity by destruction of enemies. However, Israel's practice differed crucially: only

at direct divine command for specific offenses (not routine conquest), and motivated by preventing idolatry's spread rather than territorial expansion. The Midianite women's active participation in seducing Israel (verse 16, Revelation 2:14) made their judgment deserved, not arbitrary. Archaeological evidence shows other ancient cultures practiced similar total warfare, but without Israel's specific theological-judicial framework of executing Yahweh's judgment on covenant violators.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How do difficult passages like this drive you to deeper trust in God's perfect justice and wisdom beyond human understanding?
2. What does this severe judgment on those who lead God's people into sin teach about spiritual accountability for false teachers today (Matthew 18:6, James 3:1)?

Interlinear Text

וְעַתָּה ה	הַרְגוּ:	כָּל	זָכָר	בֶּטֶף	וְכָל
H6258	Now therefore kill	H3605	every male	among the little ones	H3605
	H2026		H2145	H2945	
אִשָּׁה	יְדָ עָת	אִישׁ	לְמַשְׁכָּב	זָכָר	הַרְגוּ:
every woman	that hath known	man	by lying	every male	Now therefore kill
H802	H3045	H376	H4904	H2145	H2026

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 7:2 (Parallel theme): And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them:

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