

Numbers 31:46

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And sixteen thousand persons;)

Analysis

And sixteen thousand persons—The Hebrew נַפְשֵׁי אָדָם (nephesh adam, "souls of mankind") refers to Midianite captives, specifically young women who had not known man (v. 18). The congregation's half was 16,000 from 32,000 total. While jarring to modern readers, this reflects ancient warfare customs where unmarried women were integrated into the conquering community.

Critically, these were not slaves but potential covenant members—they would marry into Israelite families, raising children under Torah. The separation from warriors' spoils meant these women were distributed broadly throughout Israel, not concentrated as concubines. Several became ancestors of faithful Israelites, illustrating God's redemptive purposes even in judgment contexts.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern warfare typically killed all captives or enslaved them permanently. Israel's law required different treatment: foreign women could become wives with full legal protections (Deuteronomy 21:10-14). These Midianite women, spared from the sexual idolatry that seduced Israel (Numbers 25), were given opportunity for covenant inclusion. Some likely became mothers in Israel.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does God's law protect even captive women with marriage rights and dignity, contrasting with ancient Near Eastern slavery?
2. What does the integration of former enemies into covenant community teach about the gospel's power to reconcile?
3. How should the church balance remembering difficult biblical texts with understanding their ancient context and redemptive trajectory?

Interlinear Text

וְכָשׁ	אֶדְם	שֵׁשֶׁה	עָשָׂר	אֶלְפִּי:
persons	H120	And sixteen	H6240	thousand
H5315		H8337		H505

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