

HEREM

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Herem is a Hebrew word that conveys a very important concept in the Bible, but it is variously translated. The verb has a core meaning of “devote, or place under a ban of destruction.” It is the verb that is used in Leviticus 27 to describe property that has been consecrated to Jehovah. It is also the verb used when discussing the total destruction of Canaanite cities and property. In both the case of Leviticus 27 and in the case of the destruction of the Canaanites, the core concept remains the same—the *herem* is dedicated as God’s possession.

The total destruction required by passages such as Deuteronomy 20:17 suggests that everyone among the Canaanite nations belonged to God. From a modern perspective, this destruction looks a lot like genocide. Even with our limited understanding, we do not need to condone this. We do need to recognize that for the ancient Israelites, the conceptual idea was that those under *herem* were given over to God. Although the Bible says that this destruction was absolute, Joshua 16:10 and especially the beginning of the book of Judges make it very clear that this meaning of *herem* was not universally enacted.

There are places in the King James Version, such as Joshua 7:1 or Isaiah 34:5, where things that have been devoted in this fashion are described as “cursed” or “accursed.” This is an unfortunate translation: these things are not cursed but instead have been dedicated or consecrated and belong to God, and so they are not for ordinary individuals to keep for themselves. They are cursed in the sense that they are forbidden for people to use for their own benefit.

In the prophetic book of Malachi, Jehovah promised to destroy the world with a curse if the hearts of the children are not turned to their fathers. The curse Jehovah promised is to put the world in *herem* (Malachi 4:6).

Related verses

Leviticus 27:1–8

Deuteronomy 20:17

Joshua 6:17–19

Joshua 7:19–21

1 Samuel 15:1–15

Malachi 4:6

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