

Herem

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1 Chron 2:7

(BHS)

וּבְנֵי כַרְמִי
עָכָר עֹזֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֲשֶׁר מָעַל בְּחֵרֶם: ס

(KJV)

And the sons of Carmi;
Achar, the **troublers** of Israel,
who transgressed in the **thing accursed**.

The noun *herem* is in red, “thing accursed.” The dotted *h* is pronounced something like a drawn out English *ch* in “chaos.” You may readily discern “Israel” in line 2. Take a look at *‘akar* the *‘akar-er*. Compare with the Valley of Achor in Josh 7:24, the Valley of Trouble. Historically, his name probably was Achan, which is what he is called in the book of Joshua. But the Chronicler here renames him “Trouble.” (Note for biblical studies: although names are the stuff of genealogies, some were changed for theological or rhetorical purposes. I wonder what other historical details were stylized to make a point?)

Here we have a verse from one of the genealogies of 1 Chronicles. It invokes the concept of the *herem*. When I prepared to teach this subject, I struggled with what English word best represents *herem*. It doesn’t really mean “accursed,” per King James. After all, what is *herem* is given to God, and thus can hardly be cursed (Lev 27:21). ESV glosses “devoted to destruction” or just “devoted.” But you can be devoted to your spouse. Not everything *herem* is destroyed (see Lev 27:21 again). Also, an Arabic cognate is *harem*, a house of women set apart for the king. They are not harmed in any way. NASB reads, “under the ban.” But today cigarettes or table salt can be banned, that is, not allowed. This doesn’t seem to be the sense here (read Joshua 7).

I decided on the word “condemn.” A condemned man pays a penalty—this implies a moral and ethical dimension to the concept. A condemned building requires total destruction. But if a municipality extends a highway into land with no clear ownership, they first “condemn” it, and then possess it. Thus “condemning” is acquisition. In Ezra 10:8, anyone who did not participate in national repentance suffered *herem*; this involved being banished from the assembly of the faithful. Some might call this excommunication.

The Old Greek translates *herem* with *anathema* and *olethros*. (Olethreutid moths are crop destroyers.) If we were to gloss *herem* where the New Testament uses these two words, it would read as follows:

An unrepentant sinner, cast from the church, is delivered to Satan for the *herem* of the flesh (1 Cor 5:3 – 5). Let one with no love for Christ be *herem* (1 Cor 16:22). Some have been plunged into *herem* by coveting money (1 Tim 6:9).

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be *herem*. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be *herem*. (Gal 1:8 – 9)

This is what *herem* means today. Those outside the church are *herem*. The great mercy and grace of the present age is that all are invited to leave their *herem* condition and be made holy. And this offer of salvation will continue until the end of the age. Then, “When people say peace and security, then sudden *herem* will come upon them” (1 Thess 5:3).

They shall suffer the punishment of eternal *herem* and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thess 1:9 – 10)

The last word of the Old Testament is in Mal 4:6, “Lest I come and strike the land with *herem*.” A judgment is in store for the entire world. Although many are presently consigned to *herem*, they needn’t be, since Jesus became *herem* for us all. He was condemned so that we may be glorious saints. There is no more condemnation for those in Jesus. So turn and believe!

But our verse also has continuing relevance for Christians. There are *herem* temptations that would distract us from wholeheartedly following Jesus. In the New Testament, some of these are explicitly warned against, such as the love of money or some counterfeit gospel. It is a disciplined, daily exercise of faith to recognize these for what they are and turn from them—to live as glorious saints until he returns.

And when he does return, our struggle against the *herem* pitfalls of this world will be over. We press on in faith, motivated by that single, great hope. Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!