

# Deuteronomy 21:10-14

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*In this section, Moses specified the rules concerning the marriage of an Israelite man to a woman captured in battle*

Moses then turned to the topic of when the Israelites went *out to battle against their enemies* (v. 10). Israel was authorized to do battle, but was not authorized to neglect care for human life. Israel was to do battle within areas of specific authority in terms of taking life. The specific occasion was when *the LORD your God delivers them into your hands and you take them away captive*. The fact that the Israelites were allowed to *take them away captive* meant that non-Canaanite enemies were in view here. The LORD commanded the Israelites to annihilate the Canaanites ([Deuteronomy 7:1 – 3](#)).

So, when an Israelite man went out to battle (presumably an enemy that was not a Canaanite) and saw *among the captives a beautiful woman* (v. 11), he was free to *take her as wife* if he had a *desire for her*. The first use of the Hebrew phrase translated *beautiful* (literally “beautiful of form”) occurs when describing Abraham’s wife Sarah ([Genesis 12:11](#)).

The male attraction to beautiful women has been a constant in the human experience. However, certain things were to be put in place before the marriage with the desired woman could be consummated. The required procedures specified likely created somewhat of a cooling period, as well as an opportunity to discern the willingness of the woman.

First, the Israelite man was to *bring her home to his house* (v. 12), where she was required to *shave her head*. Second, the woman needed to *trim* (Heb. “*āsâh*,” “to do”) *her nails*. Both the shaving of the head and trimming of the nails may have been rituals of purification in the Ancient Near East. It was also a visible indication that the woman had cut off ties with her former life and that she had adopted this new life with an Israelite man.

Third, the woman was to *remove the clothes of her captivity* (v. 13), indicating that she was no longer a captive slave. These actions symbolized her changing status from a captive slave to an Israelite. This action signaled to her that she was changing her culture.

Next, the non-Israelite woman was to *remain in the man's house and mourn her father and mother for a full month*. This was the normal period for mourning in ancient Israel ([Numbers 20:29](#)). This required the Israelites to show respect to the woman in her loss. It allowed her time to grieve what she had lost (such as her parents, either by death or separation) and to deal with her new life in Israelite society.

That the woman was to mourn only for her *father and mother* and not for a husband might imply that she was unmarried. Regardless, after the mourning period was complete, the man was allowed to *go in to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife*.

This law also made a provision in the event that the husband became *not pleased with her* (v. 14). If this was the case, he was to *let her go wherever she wishes*. That means, the husband could terminate the marriage if he wanted to do so. However, he was not free to treat her any way he wanted and dictate what happened to her.

This means that he had no right to *sell her for money*. The phrase *sell her for money* is intense in the Hebrew text and is meant to emphasize the point that the husband could not sell her for any reason at any time. The divorced wife was to remain free to make her own choices.

In addition to not being allowed to sell her into slavery, the husband was not allowed to *mistreat her* either. The word for *mistreat* (Heb. "āmar") has the sense of brutal, tyrannical treatment of a person by another. It could include physical and/or psychological abuse. The divorced wife was not to be mistreated because the husband had already *humbled her* by divorcing her. This would bring dishonor on her, but that did not mean that she could be treated inhumanely.

The husband was to respect human life, including someone captured in battle. The fact that she was not an Israelite and not of the covenant community did not matter; he was to respect her as though she were. We might take from this that the sixth commandment reflects a greater principle, the principle of the sanctity of life. The captive woman was a human made in the image of God and therefore still deserved to be treated with dignity.

To sum up, Moses explained to Israelite males how to treat women captured during times of war if they desired to marry those women. They were to take care of them as if they had married an Israelite woman. They were not allowed to mistreat them or kill them for any reason.

This law only applied to cities that were distant or outside the boundary of the Promised Land ([Deuteronomy 20:10-18](#)). The reason for this is because the Suzerain (Ruler) God commanded His people to utterly destroy all the Canaanite cities along with their inhabitants and were forbidden to intermarry with them ([Deuteronomy 7:2-3; 20:12-16](#)). In doing this, God was protecting Israel from adopting the highly exploitative Canaanite culture ([Leviticus 18; Deuteronomy 8:19-20](#)).

### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>10</sup> When you go out to battle against your enemies, and the Lord your God delivers them into your hands and you take them away captive, <sup>11</sup> and see among the captives a beautiful woman, and have a desire for her and would take her as a wife for yourself, <sup>12</sup> then you shall bring her home to your house, and she shall shave her head and trim her nails. <sup>13</sup> She shall also remove the clothes of her captivity and shall remain in your house, and mourn her father and mother a full month; and after that you may go in to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife. <sup>14</sup> It shall be, if you are not pleased with her, then you shall let her go wherever she wishes; but you shall certainly not sell her for money, you shall not mistreat her, because you have humbled her.**