

Deuteronomy 19:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Lest the avenger of the blood pursue the slayer, while his heart is hot, and overtake him, because the way is long, and slay him; whereas he was not worthy of death, inasmuch as he hated him not in time past.

Analysis

Lest the avenger of the blood pursue the slayer, while his heart is hot (פֶּן־יִרְדֹּף גָּאֵל פֶּקַם אֶקְדָּרִי בְּרָצָם פִּירִים לְבָבוֹן, pen-yirdof go'el hadam acharei harotseach ki-yecham levavo)—go'el hadam (kinsman-redeemer of blood) was the nearest male relative responsible for avenging murder. Yecham levavo (his heart is hot) describes burning rage, the emotional heat of fresh grief and anger.

Because the way is long addresses practical geography: if the manslayer must run too far to reach safety, the avenger may overtake and kill him in passion. **Whereas he was not worthy of death** (וְלֹא אִין מִשְׁפָט־מַוֵּת, velo ein mishpat-mavet)—literally 'no judgment of death.' Accidental killing doesn't merit capital punishment. The cities of refuge protect the innocent while grief's first rage cools, allowing rational justice rather than vigilante vengeance. This system balances the sanctity of life, the rights of the victim's family, and protection for the unintentional killer.

Historical Context

The go'el hadam (blood avenger) system reflects ancient Near Eastern tribal justice where the clan, not the state, enforced justice for murder. This was common across ancient cultures—family honor required avenging kinsmen's blood.

Israel's innovation was the cities of refuge, which channeled this ancient custom through covenant law, protecting manslayers while maintaining justice. Numbers 35:9-34 and Joshua 20 detail the implementation. Archaeological evidence suggests these cities were strategically located for accessibility throughout Israel's territory.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 – God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 – Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does God's law balance justice for victims with mercy for those who cause unintentional harm?
2. What does the provision for cities of refuge teach about God's character as both just and merciful?

Interlinear Text

פִּ	רִדְףּ	יְרִדְףּ	גָּאַל	פֶּדֶם	פֶּדֶם	אָמֵן	בָּרָאֵם	כִּי
H6435	pursue	Lest the avenger	of the blood	the slayer		H7523	inasmuch as	
H7291		H1350	H1818	H310		H3588		

פֶּקְדָּה יְרַבֵּה כִּי וְהַשִּׁגְיוֹן לְבָבוֹ יְמִים

is hot his heart and overtake inasmuch as is long him because the way

H2179 H3824 H5381 H3588 H7235 H1870

מִשְׁפָט מִתְּהִלָּה וְהַכְּהֵן כִּי מִתְּהִלָּה וְהַכְּהֵן כִּי
and slay him whereas he was not worthy of death inasmuch as
H5221 H5225 H369 H4021 H194 H5225

Additional Cross-References

Numbers 35:12 (Parallel theme): And they shall be unto you cities for refuge from the avenger; that the manslayer die not, until he stand before the congregation in judgment.

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