

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־יִרְדּוֹף גּוֹ'עַל הַדָּם אַחֲרָיו הָרֹצֵחַ כִּי־יָחַם לִבּוֹ 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־עֵין מִשְׁפָּט־מָוֶת, 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

פֶּן	יִרְדֹּף	גֵּאִי ל	הַדָּם	אֲחֵרִי	הָרֹצֵחַ	כִּי
H6435	pursue	Lest the avenger	of the blood	the slayer	H7523	inasmuch as
	H7291	H1350	H1818	H310		H3588
יָחַם	לִבּוֹ	וְהִשִּׁיג וְ	כִּי	יָרַךְ ה	הַדָּרֶךְ	
is hot	his heart	and overtake	inasmuch as	is long	him because the way	
H3179	H3824	H5381	H3588	H7235	H1870	
וְהָרַח הוּא	נֶפֶשׁ	אִין וְלוֹ	מִשְׁפָּט	מֵת	כִּי	
and slay	him	H0	whereas he was not worthy	of death	inasmuch as	
H5221	H5315	H369	H4941	H4194	H3588	
לֹא	שָׂנֵא	הוּא	לֹא	מִתָּמ וְ	שֶׁלִּשְׁוֹם:	
H3808	he hated	H1931	H0	him not in time	past	
	H8130			H8543	H8032	

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.

From KJV Study • kjevstudy.org