

Deuteronomy 21:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And all the elders of that city, that are next unto the slain man, shall wash their hands over the heifer that is beheaded in the valley:

Analysis

And all the elders of that city, that are next unto the slain man, shall wash their hands over the heifer that is beheaded in the valley. Hand washing symbolically declares innocence - I am clean from this blood. This public gesture demonstrates the community's protest that they did not commit or negligently permit this murder.

That all the elders participate emphasizes corporate declaration. This is not individual protestation but community-wide assertion of innocence. Leadership represents the entire city in declaring they fulfilled their responsibility for justice and safety.

Washing over the heifer connects the declaration to the ritual sacrifice. The slain heifer's blood addresses the victim's blood, and the hand washing declares that this blood does not rest on the community's hands.

Pilate later mimicked this gesture when declaring innocence of Jesus' blood, though his guilt was real. True innocence requires actual faithfulness, not mere ritual protestation.

Historical Context

Ritual hand washing as declaration of innocence appears throughout ancient Near Eastern cultures. The gesture communicated publicly that the participant bore no guilt for the matter at hand.

Psalm 26:6 uses similar imagery - I will wash mine hands in innocency: so will I compass thine altar, O LORD - connecting cleanliness with worship access.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What does public hand washing communicate about declaring innocence?
2. How does corporate participation emphasize community-wide responsibility?
3. What is the connection between the slain heifer and the elders' innocence declaration?
4. Why is actual faithfulness required beyond mere ritual protestation?
5. How does Pilate's misuse of this gesture demonstrate the danger of empty religious formalism?

Interlinear Text

וְכָל ל	זִקְנֵי	הָעִיר	הָהִיא	הַקְּרֹבִים	אֵל	הַחֵל ל
H3605	And all the elders	of that city	H1931	that are next	H413	unto the slain
	H2205	H5892		H7138		H2491
יִרְחֹצוּ	אֶת	יְדֵיהֶם	עַל	הַעֵגֶל	הַ	הַעֲרוּפָה
man shall wash	H853	their hands	H5921	over the heifer		that is beheaded
H7364		H3027		H5697		H6202
בְּנָחַל:						
in the valley						
H5158						

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 26:6 (Parallel theme): I will wash mine hands in innocency: so will I compass thine altar, O LORD:

Psalms 73:13 (Parallel theme): Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency.