

Deuteronomy 23:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

He shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him.

Analysis

He shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him.

This verse expands the protection offered to escaped slaves (v. 15), granting them remarkable freedom and rights within Israel. The phrase 'dwell with thee' (yeshev immekha) denotes full residential rights, not mere temporary asylum. The slave could choose where to settle ('in that place which he shall choose') and wasn't confined to specific areas or subjected to restricted movement. The permission to select 'where it liketh him best' (batov lo, literally 'in the good to him') granted personal preference rarely afforded to foreigners in ancient societies.

The prohibition against oppression (lo tonenu, לֹא תֹּנוּן) used a term denoting exploitation, abuse, or taking advantage of vulnerability (Leviticus 25:14, 17). This guarded against Israelites re-enslaving refugees or subjecting them to harsh treatment. The command recognized that escaped slaves were particularly vulnerable to re-exploitation by those who might offer 'help' only to extract harsh labor or other benefits. God protected their newfound freedom through explicit law, demonstrating covenant concern for the powerless.

Theologically, this law illustrated redemption's fullness. God didn't merely free slaves from bondage but granted them freedom to choose, dignity, and protection

from re-enslavement. This mirrors Christian redemption: Christ doesn't merely free us from sin's penalty but grants us freedom to serve Him willingly (John 8:36, Galatians 5:1), adoption as children with inheritance rights (Romans 8:14-17), and protection from spiritual re-enslavement. The law's generous provision foreshadowed the gospel's comprehensive liberation and the dignity God grants all who flee to Him for refuge.

Historical Context

The freedoms granted to escaped slaves in this law were unprecedented in the ancient world. Typically, refugees and displaced persons in ancient Near Eastern societies occupied the lowest social strata with severely restricted rights. Even free foreigners faced discrimination, limited legal protections, and restrictions on where they could live and work. Escaped slaves who avoided recapture typically survived only by hiding or accepting re-enslavement under different masters, often in worse conditions than before.

Ancient legal texts from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Hittite empire consistently favored masters' property rights over slaves' welfare. Slaves were chattel property with virtually no legal standing or rights. The concept of allowing an escaped slave to choose where to live and protecting him from oppression was revolutionary, challenging fundamental economic and social structures of the ancient world. This law would have made Israel attractive to oppressed individuals throughout the region, potentially creating diplomatic tensions with neighboring states.

Archaeological and textual evidence reveals that ancient Near Eastern economies depended heavily on slave labor for agriculture, construction, domestic service, and temple operations. Large estates, royal building projects, and commercial enterprises required significant enslaved workforces. Israel's willingness to shelter escaped slaves and grant them rights potentially disrupted regional economic systems and challenged surrounding nations' labor practices. This demonstrated that covenant loyalty to Yahweh's humanitarian principles took precedence over economic advantage and international relations, establishing a pattern of countercultural ethics that should characterize God's people in every age.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How does the freedom granted to escaped slaves illustrate the comprehensive nature of God's redemption in Christ?
2. What does this law teach about how Christians should treat refugees and others fleeing oppressive situations?
3. In what ways does this command challenge economic systems that prioritize profit over human dignity and freedom?

Interlinear Text

עָמָךְ בְּקָרְבָּךְ וְשָׁבֵךְ אֲשֶׁר בָּמְלֹךְ וְמִן
H5973 H3427 H7130 H4725 H834

He shall dwell with thee even among you in that place

לֹא לֹא שָׁעֵר יְהִי בְּאַמְתָּד יְגַנֵּךְ בְּטַבְ�נָה
H0 H3808 H8179 H2896

which he shall choose in one of thy gates where it liketh him best

תֹּאַכְלֵנָה:
thou shalt not oppress
H3238

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 22:21 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Exodus 23:9 (Parallel theme): Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.

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