

Deuteronomy 4:42

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

That the slayer might flee thither, which should kill his neighbour unawares, and hated him not in times past; and that fleeing unto one of these cities he might live:

Analysis

That the slayer might flee thither, which should kill his neighbour unawares, and hated him not in times past...

Moses specifies the cities' purpose: refuge for the manslayer (רֹצֵחַ, 'manslayer') who kills bivli da'at (בְּבִלְיָ דַּא'ת, 'without knowledge/unintentionally'). Two conditions qualify for refuge: unintentional death and absence of prior hatred (velo soneh lo, וְלֹא שֹנֵא לוֹ). Premeditated murder forfeits sanctuary; accidental death without malice receives protection.

The Hebrew legal system distinguished intent from outcome—a remarkably sophisticated jurisprudence. Ancient Near Eastern cultures often practiced blood vengeance without examining motive; the blood-avenger (go'el hadam) could kill the slayer regardless of circumstance. Israel's law interrupted this cycle by requiring investigation and providing interim protection. Justice demanded examining the heart, not merely the result.

The manslayer who reached the refuge city vachai (וַחַי, 'shall live'). Life is preserved pending proper legal process. This system anticipates gospel realities: Christ is our city of refuge (Hebrews 6:18), to whom sinners flee for protection from the just consequences of transgression. In Him, those deserving death find life—not because they are innocent, but because sanctuary has been provided for the guilty who run to Him.

Historical Context

The cities of refuge provided asylum for those guilty of manslaughter but not premeditated murder. This law, rooted in earlier revelation (Numbers 35), balanced justice with mercy in Ancient Near Eastern culture where blood vengeance was customary. Moses' implementation of these cities before entering Canaan established legal infrastructure for the new society.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does the cities of refuge system anticipate the gospel truth that sinners can flee to Christ for protection from judgment?
2. What does it mean that biblical justice examines intent and motive, not merely outcomes?

Interlinear Text

וְנָס	שָׁמָּה	יִרְצֵחַ	אֲשֶׁר	יִרְצֵחַ	אֵת
and that fleeing	H8033	That the slayer	H834	That the slayer	H853
H5127		H7523		H7523	
רֵעֵהוּ	בְּבִלִי	וְהָיָא	לֹא	שָׂנֵא	לֹ
his neighbour	unawares	H1847	H1931	and hated	H0
H7453	H1097		H3808	H8130	
מִתְּמַל	שְׁלֹשׁ	וְנָס	אֶל	אֶחָד	מִן
him not in times	past	and that fleeing	H413	unto one	H4480
H8543	H8032	H5127		H259	cities
					H5892
הָאֵלֶּה	יִחְיֶה				
of these	he might live				
H411	H2425				

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