

Numbers 35:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then ye shall appoint you cities to be cities of refuge for you; that the slayer may flee thither, which killeth any person at unawares.

Analysis

Ye shall appoint you cities of refuge, that the slayer may flee thither, which killeth any person at unawares.' These cities demonstrate God's justice distinguishing intentional murder from accidental killing. The Hebrew 'ratsach' (רָצַח, manslayer) refers to unlawful killing, while the phrase 'at unawares' (bishgagah, בִּשְׁגָגָה) means unintentionally or accidentally. The cities of refuge protected the unintentional killer from the 'avenger of blood' (goel hadam, גּוֹאֵל הַדָּם), the victim's relative responsible for blood vengeance. This system balanced justice (life for life) with mercy (protection for the innocent). The cities had to be accessible from anywhere in Israel, showing God provides refuge for those who flee to Him. This typifies Christ our refuge from sin's judgment—those who flee to Him find safety. Hebrews 6:18 applies this imagery: we who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.

Historical Context

Six cities were designated (three on each side of the Jordan): Kedesh, Shechem, Hebron (western); Bezer, Ramoth, Golan (eastern). All were Levitical cities, ensuring priestly oversight of justice. The roads to these cities were maintained and marked so fleeing manslaughterers could easily find them. Jewish tradition says signposts reading 'Refuge' pointed the way. Archaeological identification of these cities shows they were strategically located for accessibility. The manslayer remained in the refuge city until the high priest's death (Numbers 35:25), when he

could return home—the high priest's death providing atonement for bloodshed. Ancient Near Eastern law codes (Hammurabi, Hittite laws) also addressed homicide but lacked Israel's sophisticated distinction between intentional and accidental killing. The cities functioned throughout Israel's history until the exile.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How do the cities of refuge illustrate God's balance of justice and mercy in dealing with guilt?
2. In what ways does Christ fulfill the typology of the refuge city as our place of safety from judgment?

Interlinear Text

וְהִקְרִיתֶם	לָכֶם	עָרֵי	עָרֵי	מִקְלָט	תְּהֵי יָנָה
Then ye shall appoint	H0	to be cities	to be cities	of refuge	H1961
H7136		H5892	H5892	H4733	
לָכֶם	וְנָס	שָׁמָּה	רָצִיחַ	מִמֶּנָּה	
H0	may flee	H8033	for you that the slayer	thither which killeth	
	H5127		H7523	H5221	
וְכָל־אִישׁ	בְּשֹׁנְאָה:				
any person	at unawares				
H5315	H7684				

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 21:13 (Parallel theme): And if a man lie not in wait, but God deliver him into his hand; then I will appoint thee a place whither he shall flee.

Joshua 20:2 (Parallel theme): Speak to the children of Israel, saying, Appoint out for you cities of refuge, whereof I spake unto you by the hand of Moses:

Numbers 35:6 (Parallel theme): And among the cities which ye shall give unto the Levites there shall be six cities for refuge, which ye shall appoint for the manslayer, that he may flee thither: and to them ye shall add forty and two cities.

Deuteronomy 4:42 (Parallel theme): 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:

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