

Numbers 35:34

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Defile not therefore the land which ye shall inhabit, wherein I dwell: for I the LORD dwell among the children of Israel.

Analysis

Defile not therefore the land which ye shall inhabit, wherein I dwell: for I the LORD dwell among the children of Israel. This verse concludes God's instructions about cities of refuge and laws concerning murder and manslaughter (Numbers 35:1-34). The Hebrew verb *lo tame'u* (לֹא תִטְמְאוּ, "do not defile") is in the imperfect, expressing ongoing command. The word *tame* (טָמֵא) means to make ceremonially unclean or polluted, often through moral corruption.

The phrase *asher atem yoshevim bah* (אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יוֹשְׁבִים בָּהּ, "which you inhabit") emphasizes Israel's tenancy, not ownership—the land ultimately belongs to God. The powerful clause *asher ani shokhen betokhah* (אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי שׁוֹכֵן בְּתוֹכָהּ, "wherein I dwell") reveals the theological foundation: God Himself dwells among His people in the land. The verb *shakhen* (שָׁכַן, "to dwell") is the root of *Shekinah*, referring to God's manifest presence.

This verse establishes that unpunished bloodshed defiles the land where God dwells. The land cannot simultaneously be holy (set apart for God's dwelling) and polluted by innocent blood. This principle underscores the seriousness of human life created in God's image (Genesis 9:6) and the necessity of justice. The land itself cries out for righteousness—an unresolved murder makes the ground unfit for God's presence. This foreshadows the New Testament truth that Christ's blood cleanses what animal sacrifices could not (Hebrews 9:13-14).

Historical Context

Numbers 35 was given during Israel's encampment on the plains of Moab, just before entering the Promised Land (approximately 1406 BC by conservative dating). The cities of refuge system God instituted was unique in the ancient Near East. While other ancient law codes (Hammurabi, Hittite laws) distinguished between intentional murder and accidental killing, none provided the comprehensive asylum system described in Numbers 35 and expanded in Deuteronomy 19 and Joshua 20.

Ancient Near Eastern cultures recognized that bloodshed polluted land. Hittite texts describe rituals to purify land defiled by murder. However, Israel's understanding was distinct: the land was defiled specifically because Yahweh dwelt there. God's presence among His people (manifested in the Tabernacle and later the Temple) required holiness. The concept that God's dwelling required the land's moral purity emphasized covenant relationship—Israel's obedience or disobedience directly affected God's presence among them.

Archaeological evidence from ancient Israelite cities shows careful attention to justice administration. City gates, where legal cases were heard (Ruth 4:1; Deuteronomy 21:19), have been excavated at sites like Dan, Megiddo, and Beersheba, revealing elaborate structures for public legal proceedings. The six cities of refuge (three west of Jordan, three east) were strategically distributed so that any Israelite could reach one quickly. Rabbinic tradition calculated that no one in Israel lived more than 30 miles from a city of refuge, ensuring access to justice and asylum.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does God's dwelling among His people create obligations for holy living and justice in the community?
2. What does this verse teach about the seriousness of human life and the necessity of just punishment for murder?
3. In what ways do we allow unresolved injustice or moral compromise to defile communities where God's people dwell?
4. How should the principle that God dwells among us shape our pursuit of justice and righteousness today?
5. What does this Old Testament requirement for land purity teach us about God's holiness and the need for atonement?

Interlinear Text

אֶת־תְּטִימָא וְלֹא־	אֶת־	תְּטִימָא	וְלֹא־	הָאֶרֶץ	אֶשְׁכֵּן	אֶת־
H3808		Defile	H853	not therefore the land	H834	H859
		H2930		H776		
יִשְׁבּוּ־בָהּ	אֶשְׁכֵּן	אֶת־	יְהוָה	שֹׁכֵן	בֵּית־וְ	כִּי־אֶת־
which ye shall inhabit	H0	H834	H589	I dwell	among	H3588 H589
H3427				H7931	H8432	
יְהוָה	שֹׁכֵן	בֵּית־וְ	בְּנֵי־	יִשְׂרָאֵל:		
for I the LORD	I dwell	among	the children	of Israel		
H3068	H7931	H8432	H1121	H3478		

Additional Cross-References

Numbers 5:3 (Parallel theme): Both male and female shall ye put out, without the camp shall ye put them; that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof I dwell.

Psalms 135:21 (References Lord): Blessed be the LORD out of Zion, which dwelleth at Jerusalem. Praise ye the LORD.

