

Numbers 35:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

God commands that among the Levitical cities, six must be designated as 'cities of refuge' where manslayers could flee for protection from avengers of blood. This merciful provision protected those guilty of accidental homicide from retaliation before their case could be fairly adjudicated. The Hebrew 'miq lat' (מִקְלָת, 'refuge') means 'absorption' or 'receiving,' indicating these cities absorbed fugitives into safety. The requirement for six cities (three on each side of the Jordan, Numbers 35:14) ensured accessibility throughout Israel's territory. The system balanced justice and mercy: intentional murderers received execution (35:16-21), while accidental killers received protection until the high priest's death, after which they could return home safely (35:25). The cities of refuge typologically point to Christ as our refuge from the avenger (divine justice pursuing sin). Believers flee to Christ for protection from wrath we deserve, finding sanctuary through His blood. The high priest's death freeing the manslayer anticipates Christ's death freeing us from sin's bondage and wrath's pursuit. This institution demonstrates God's concern for both justice and mercy, protecting the innocent while punishing the guilty.

Historical Context

The six cities of refuge were formally established after Israel conquered Canaan: Kedesh, Shechem, and Hebron west of the Jordan; Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan east of the Jordan (Joshua 20:7-8). These were Levitical cities (Levites lived in 48 cities throughout Israel's territory, Numbers 35:7) strategically located for accessibility. Ancient Near Eastern cultures included similar concepts of sanctuary—certain temples or sacred places could provide temporary refuge—but Israel's system was more developed and legally structured. The requirement that the manslayer stand trial before the congregation (35:12, 24-25) ensured judicial process rather than mob violence or arbitrary sanctuary. The high priest's death serving as a time limit for the manslayer's exile (35:25, 28) was unique to Israel, symbolically representing atonement—the high priest's death covered the blood guilt. Rabbinic tradition held that the high priest's mother would provide food to the cities of refuge so the exiled manslayers wouldn't pray for her son's death. The system functioned throughout Israel's history, demonstrating practical application of justice tempered with mercy.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. How do the cities of refuge typologically point to Christ as our refuge from divine justice pursuing our sin?
2. What does the balance between protecting accidental killers and executing intentional murderers teach about combining justice and mercy?

Interlinear Text

וְאַתָּה בּוֹא כִּי תַּעֲשֶׂה
H853 And among the cities H5892 H834 thither and to them ye shall add H5414

וְאַתָּה בּוֹא כִּי תַּעֲשֶׂה
unto the Levites H3881 H853 there shall be six H8337 H5892 And among the cities H4733 for refuge

וְאַתָּה בּוֹא כִּי תַּעֲשֶׂה
H834 thither and to them ye shall add H5414 H5127 that he may flee H8033

וְאַתָּה בּוֹא כִּי תַּעֲשֶׂה
for the manslayer H7523 H5921 thither and to them ye shall add H5414 forty H705

וְאַתָּה בּוֹא כִּי תַּעֲשֶׂה
and two H8147 And among the cities H5892

Additional Cross-References

Joshua 21:13 (Parallel theme): Thus they gave to the children of Aaron the priest Hebron with her suburbs, to be a city of refuge for the slayer; and Libnah with her suburbs,

Joshua 21:3 (Parallel theme): And the children of Israel gave unto the Levites out of their inheritance, at the commandment of the LORD, these cities and their suburbs.

Psalms 9:9 (Parallel theme): The LORD also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble.

Joshua 21:36 (Parallel theme): And out of the tribe of Reuben, Bezer with her suburbs, and Jahazah with her suburbs,

Joshua 21:21 (Parallel theme): For they gave them Shechem with her suburbs in mount Ephraim, to be a city of refuge for the slayer; and Gezer with her suburbs,

Joshua 21:27 (Parallel theme): And unto the children of Gershon, of the families of the Levites, out of the other half tribe of Manasseh they gave Golan in Bashan with her suburbs, to be a city of refuge for the slayer; and Beesh-terah with her suburbs; two cities.

Joshua 21:32 (Parallel theme): And out of the tribe of Naphtali, Kedesh in Galilee with her suburbs, to be a city of refuge for the slayer; and Hammoth-dor with her suburbs, and Kartan with her suburbs; three cities.

Joshua 21:38 (Parallel theme): And out of the tribe of Gad, Ramoth in Gilead with her suburbs, to be a city of refuge for the slayer; and Mahanaim with her suburbs,