



Numbers - Chapter Thirty Five

V Numbers 22:1-36:13 - Israel in the Plains of Moab **(continues)**

Summary of Chapter Thirty Five

The Levites did not receive any land as an inheritance because the Lord was their inheritance: <<*Therefore Levi has no allotment or inheritance with his kindred; the Lord is his inheritance, as the Lord your God promised him*>> (Deuteronomy 10:9); their sole purpose was to serve him and his people. Therefore, they received a total of forty eight towns in which to live, along with sufficient land to graze their animals. These towns were scattered throughout the land inherited by the main tribes.

The theological reason for the rule regarding the cities of refuge is given at the end of the section: <<*You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the Israelites*>> (v.34). Canaan is the holy land, not because Israel lives there but because God dwells there. He is the pre-eminently holy one, and sin and death are in absolute opposition to him. If the land is made unclean by violent death, drastic measures have to be taken to make atonement; otherwise the Lord will forsake the land and Israel will be exiled.

The cities of refuge and the laws associated with them show how cases of homicide are to be handled in order to prevent the nation's being forsaken. The Israelite system of justice involved the injured party seeking relief in court from the aggressor. In the case of homicide, the male relative closest to the murder victim was expected to exact retribution. This is the situation envisaged in vv.11-15. In hot anger, the avenger may hunt down the killer and execute him. However, the perpetrator can run to the nearest city of refuge to stand trial before the representatives of the people. The judges will then decide whether the killer deserves to be executed for his crime.

V.j Numbers 35:1-8 - Cities for the Levites

After the censuses for the secular tribes always come the censuses of the Levites (Chapters 1-3 and 26). The second census was for determining the size of the tribes so as to give them an appropriately sized territory. However, the Levites were expressly excluded from inheriting land (Numbers 26:52-62). Nevertheless, they had to live somewhere and needed land to graze the livestock they received in tithes from the other tribes.

Arrangements for the other tribes were discussed in Numbers 34:16-29, so now the Levites' needs are broached. Basically the Levites are assigned forty eight towns (in reality, little villages) and their immediately surrounding grazing land. The grazing land stretched for a thousand cubits, approximately 500 yards or 457 m, from the city wall (v.4). This meant that if the town was very small, the grazing lands would stretch two thousand cubits in each direction (v.5). Commentators assume that in the case of larger settlements, the pasturelands would still stretch one thousand cubits outward from the city wall, but overall the total size of the settlement would be bigger.

Among the Levitical towns are six cities of refuge, whose function is described in vv.9-34. Forty two other towns had to be chosen elsewhere, to make a total of forty eight. Big tribes had to have more Levitical towns, and small tribes had to have fewer towns (v.8). Joshua Chapter 21 reports the fulfilment of this command, but most tribes ended up with four Levitical towns each.

¹ In the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ² Command the Israelites to give, from the inheritance that they possess, towns for the Levites to live in; you shall also give to the Levites pasture lands surrounding the towns. ³ The towns shall be theirs to live in, and their pasture lands shall be for their cattle, for their livestock, and for all their animals. ⁴ The pasture lands of the towns, which you shall give to the Levites, shall reach from the wall of the town outwards a thousand cubits all around. ⁵ You shall measure, outside the town, for the east side two thousand cubits, for the south side two thousand cubits, for the west side two thousand cubits, and for the north side two thousand cubits, with the town in the middle; this shall belong to them as pasture land for their towns.

Numbers 35:1-5

Command the Israelites to give, from the inheritance that they possess, towns for the Levites to live in. The tribe of Levi had no state or province within Israel. Their inheritance was to be the Lord alone: <<*Then the Lord said to Aaron: You*

shall have no allotment in their land, nor shall you have any share among them; I am your share and your possession among the Israelites>> (Numbers 18:20).

The towns shall be theirs to live in. Yet, the Levites had to live somewhere. God commanded that each tribe give towns to the Levites, so that the Levites would be spread throughout the whole nation, thus able to minister to all of God's people. The Levites also had the right to roam and settle in other towns: *<<If a Levite leaves any of your towns, from wherever he has been residing in Israel, and comes to the place that the Lord will choose (and he may come whenever he wishes), then he may minister in the name of the Lord his God, like all his fellow-Levites who stand to minister there before the Lord. They shall have equal portions to eat, even though they have income from the sale of family possessions>> (Deuteronomy 18:6-8).*

Their pasture lands shall be for their cattle. The Levites were to be given more than just the towns; around each town they were to be given common-land, land suitable for the grazing of their animals and for small-scale farming.

⁶ The towns that you give to the Levites shall include the six cities of refuge, where you shall permit a slayer to flee, and in addition to them you shall give forty-two towns. ⁷ The towns that you give to the Levites shall total forty-eight, with their pasture lands. ⁸ And as for the towns that you shall give from the possession of the Israelites, from the larger tribes you shall take many, and from the smaller tribes you shall take few; each, in proportion to the inheritance that it obtains, shall give of its towns to the Levites.

Numbers 35:6-8

The towns that you give to the Levites. There were to be a total of forty-eight Levitical towns: six cities of refuge and forty-two additional towns.

From the larger tribes you shall take many, and from the smaller tribes you shall take few. The towns were to be distributed proportionally throughout the nation, so that where there were larger populations and larger areas of land there would be more Levitical towns. Therefore, no one in Israel would be far from a city of refuge. This was in line with the distribution of the lands to the other tribes: *<<To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance; every tribe shall be given its inheritance according to its enrolment>> (Numbers 26:54).*

In proportion to the inheritance that it obtains. This reflects God's desire to evenly distribute the Levites, who were to be the most spiritually focused

Israelites, the full-time ministers, so to speak, evenly throughout Israel, so their influence could be distributed throughout the whole nation. This shows the wisdom of God in not making a Levitical state that others would have to go to. God intended that these ministers go out among the people, to influence them for the Lord. In the same way, God does not intend that there be a Christian country or state where all the Christians live together in spiritual bliss, and simply say to the world “come and join us if you want to.” Instead, God wants Christians to be present throughout the whole world, influencing people for Jesus Christ.

V.k Numbers 35:9-15 - Cities of Refuge

Although there was to be a good judicial system in the land, in the case of homicide, the closest male relative of the victim was expected and, indeed, permitted to seek retribution. This is the principle of *lex talionis*: <<***If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe***>> (Exodus 21:23-24). To allow a perpetrator of homicide to seek justice where they believe the death was unintended, cities of refuge were to be set up so that the perpetrator could seek refuge from the family member seeking revenge until they could be brought before the courts. Six cities of refuge were chosen: three beyond the Jordan (Bezer, Ramoth-gilead, and Golan), and three in the land of Canaan (Hebron, Shechem, and Kedesh). The law of refuge applied not just to the Israelites but also to the stranger and the sojourner.

⁹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ¹⁰ Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, ¹¹ then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, so that a slayer who kills a person without intent may flee there. ¹² The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, so that the slayer may not die until there is a trial before the congregation.

Numbers 35:9-12

So that a slayer who kills a person without intent may flee there. In the ancient culture of Israel, it was not left entirely up to the government to avenge a murder. Each extended family had a recognised avenger who would ensure that one who murdered a family member would likewise be killed. This practice was based upon a correct understanding of: <<***Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind***>> (Genesis 9:6).

Who kills a person without intent. This, if properly understood and applied, could be an effective deterrent to murder and not a bad institution. Yet, the system had a fatal weakness: what if a death was accidental, yet difficult to prove that it was

accidental? The situation can easily be pictured. Two people work together, chopping down trees when one of them swings an axe and the axe head flies off, striking the other person in the head and instantly killing them. The survivor had good reason to believe the avenger of blood from the dead person's family would track them down and kill them, believing the death was murder. Therefore, such a person could flee to a city of refuge, an appointed Levitical town, where they could stay, safe from the avenger of blood, until the issue was settled and they could leave the city of refuge safely.

¹³ The cities that you designate shall be six cities of refuge for you:
¹⁴ you shall designate three cities beyond the Jordan, and three cities in the land of Canaan, to be cities of refuge.

Numbers 35:13-14

Six cities of refuge. There were to be six cities of refuge, with three on each side of the Jordan River. Each of the three cities on either side would be positioned as north, central, and south. Joshua 20:7-8 records the actual choice of the cities. They fulfilled the plan of being evenly distributed perfectly. Deuteronomy 19:3 also reveals that proper roads were to be built and maintained to these cities of refuge. A city of refuge was no good to the perpetrator if they could not get there quickly.

To be cities of refuge. This meant that the cities were as close as possible to everyone; no one was very far from a city of refuge. This was obviously important when the avenger of blood was in close pursuit.

¹⁵ These six cities shall serve as refuge for the Israelites, for the resident or transient alien among them, so that anyone who kills a person without intent may flee there.

Numbers 35:15

So that anyone who kills a person without intent may flee there. Anyone, whether they are a stranger or a citizen of Israel, who needed to find protection in the cities of refuge could. The protection of this statute was not limited to the children of Israel.

V.I Numbers 35:16-34 - Concerning Murder and Blood-Revenge

If a person is killed then their death can be avenged by a close male relative. This section deals with what should happen in the two differing cases of homicide, where they could be deemed as having intent or being accidental.

V.I.i Numbers 35:16-21 - Homicide that Warrants the Death Penalty

The common factor that links these examples is planning or premeditation. The killer in these cases had a lethal weapon, such as an iron tool or a stone, or was known to hate the victim, or had lain in wait for the victim. These killings all count as murder and the avenger of blood was permitted to execute the killer.

¹⁶ But anyone who strikes another with an iron object, and death ensues, is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁷ Or anyone who strikes another with a stone in hand that could cause death, and death ensues, is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁸ Or anyone who strikes another with a weapon of wood in hand that could cause death, and death ensues, is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁹ The avenger of blood is the one who shall put the murderer to death; when they meet, the avenger of blood shall execute the sentence. ²⁰ Likewise, if someone pushes another from hatred, or hurls something at another, lying in wait, and death ensues, ²¹ or in enmity strikes another with the hand, and death ensues, then the one who struck the blow shall be put to death; that person is a murderer; the avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when they meet.

Numbers 35:16-21

The murderer shall be put to death. Significantly, the Bible makes the clear distinction between killing and murder. All murder is killing; but not all killing is murder. Society needs laws to establish the principles that decide a death to be either an unfortunate killing or true murder.

Anyone who strikes another with an iron object, with a stone in hand, with a weapon of wood in hand. If the death occurred because the victim was struck with something that was clearly being used as a weapon then it would be deemed as murder and the death penalty should be applied.

If someone pushes another from hatred, or hurls something at another, or in enmity strikes another with the hand, and death ensues. Murder could also be judged by discerning the state of heart and presence of premeditation in the killer. If the killing happens while lying in wait murder can also be judged.

V.I.ii Numbers 35:22-29 - Homicide that does not Deserve Death

These are killings that are not planned but are the result of an accident or impulsive behaviour where real harm was unintended. In these cases the congregation shall rescue the perpetrator from the avenger of blood. However, the

killer in this case is not deemed totally innocent, but is punished by being confined to one of the cities of refuge for a period of time. If the avenger of blood finds the killer outside the boundaries of the town, he may kill him. The perpetrator must stay within the city limits until the high priest dies.

²² But if someone pushes another suddenly without enmity, or hurls any object without lying in wait, ²³ or, while handling any stone that could cause death, unintentionally drops it on another and death ensues, though they were not enemies, and no harm was intended, ²⁴ then the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the avenger of blood, in accordance with these ordinances; ²⁵ and the congregation shall rescue the slayer from the avenger of blood. Then the congregation shall send the slayer back to the original city of refuge. The slayer shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. ²⁶ But if the slayer shall at any time go outside the bounds of the original city of refuge, ²⁷ and is found by the avenger of blood outside the bounds of the city of refuge, and is killed by the avenger, no blood-guilt shall be incurred. ²⁸ For the slayer must remain in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest; but after the death of the high priest the slayer may return home.

Numbers 35:22-28

If someone pushes another suddenly without enmity. If there was the absence of murderous intent, or the absence of premeditation, or if the death was clearly accidental, then the man was not guilty of murder and could not be turned over to the avenger of blood.

Then the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the avenger of blood. Both sides of the story had to be taken into account. Judgement was not to be made on the basis merely on just one side of the story; the accused must be able to speak out: <<***Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?***>> (John 7:51).

The congregation shall rescue the slayer from the avenger of blood. Having been judged innocent of murder, the perpetrator could live in peace and safety, but only within the walls of the city of refuge. Significantly, someone who killed another, but was innocent of murder, still had their life profoundly affected. They had to move away from their home town, and presumably their family as well, and had to live in that city of refuge, potentially for the rest of their lives. The tragedy also affected their life.

The slayer shall live in it until the death of the high priest. The only thing that could set the person free from the city of refuge was the death of the high priest; at the death of the high priest, the avenger of blood no longer had any rights over the person in the city of refuge, who could then leave and travel freely.

If the slayer shall at any time go outside the bounds of the original city of refuge. Until the time of the high priest's death, if the person who sought protection in the city of refuge wandered outside the walls of the city, he was fair game for the avenger of blood, only within his place of refuge could safety be guaranteed.

²⁹ These things shall be a statute and ordinance for you throughout your generations wherever you live.

Numbers 35:29

Throughout your generations wherever you live. This law was intended to be applied by all subsequent generations. It likely means wherever they lived within the Promised Land but it could also be applied to those who were subsequently sent into exile. If they were to kill another Israelite accidentally in a foreign land they could presumably still flee to a city of refuge in the Promised Land.

V.I.iii Numbers 35:30-34 - Final Points

At least two witnesses are required for a murder conviction (v.30); refer also to Deuteronomy 19:15-21. The laws of Exodus 21:28-32 allow for ransom when someone is killed by a bull. In other words, instead of the bull's owner being put to death, the victim's family may accept monetary compensation, i.e. a ransom, instead. This chapter prohibits such an arrangement in these cases. Ransom is not permitted in the case of murder or even less culpable homicide, for no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it

³⁰ If anyone kills another, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses; but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of a single witness.

Numbers 35:30

No one shall be put to death on the testimony of a single witness. One witness was never enough to condemn a murderer to death:. Furthermore, the witnesses had to be so certain that one of them must be willing to initiate the actual execution, to 'cast the first stone' (Deuteronomy 17:6-7). This puts the words of Jesus regarding the woman taken in adultery in John Chapter 8 in perspective: <<**Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her**>> (John 8:7b). Jesus asked for the official witness to step forward and go on

record as having witnessed this act of adultery, yet show himself hypocritical enough to bring the woman, but not the man to judgement.

Christians may comfort themselves that they would never judge someone guilty of murder so quickly, without proper evidence; but how often do they murder someone's reputation in their own minds or in the minds of others with no witnesses, much less one. God is concerned about the murder of reputation, as well as physical murder, and commands: <<*Never accept any accusation against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses*>> (1 Timothy 5:19), the same standard as for proving murder! Remember 1 Timothy 5:19 does not say 'except from two or three gossips'; it says except from two or three witnesses. If a matter is false, it does not become true because many people hear it or many people repeat it.

³¹ Moreover, you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer who is subject to the death penalty; a murderer must be put to death.

³² Nor shall you accept ransom for one who has fled to a city of refuge, enabling the fugitive to return to live in the land before the death of the high priest.

Numbers 35:31-32

You shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer. If someone was guilty of murder, they could not make monetary restitution in the place of their life. The principle of Genesis 9:6 stands.

Nor shall you accept ransom for one who has fled to a city of refuge. This reflects an important principle; namely, that money cannot replace justice. Sometimes a monetary reward satisfies justice, as in Exodus 22:4, for example; but other times it does not, and should not be used as a replacement for justice.

³³ You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. ³⁴ You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the Israelites.

Numbers 35:33-34

For blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land. Unjudged murders defile a nation. When murderers are not brought to justice, there is a blot on a nation that only the severe judgement of God can cleanse.

Except by the blood of the one who shed it. The way to avoid this defilement is to judge, and execute murderers.