
NUMBERS 35:1 The LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying,

The Israelites are commanded to give the Levites, out of their inheritances, cities and their suburbs for themselves and for their cattle, goods, etc., Num 35:1-3. The suburbs to be 3,000 cubits round about from the wall of the city, Num 35:4, Num 35:5. The cities to be forty-two, to which six cities of refuge should be added, in all forty-eight cities, Num 35:6, Num 35:7. Each tribe shall give of these cities in proportion to its possessions, Num 35:8. These cities to be appointed for the person who might slay his neighbor unawares, Num 35:9-12. Of these six cities there shall be three on each side Jordan, Num 35:13, Num 35:14. The cities to be places of refuge for all who kill a person unawares, whether they be Israelites, strangers, or sojourners, Num 35:15. Cases of murder to which the benefit of the cities of refuge shall not extend, Num 35:16-21. Cases of manslaughter to which the benefits of the cities of refuge shall extend, Num 35:22, Num 35:23. How the congregation shall act between the manslayer and the avenger of blood, Num 35:24, Num 35:25. The manslayer shall abide in the city of refuge till the death of the high priest; he shall then return to the land of his possession, Num 35:26-28. Two witnesses must attest a murder before a murderer can be put to death, Num 35:29, Num 35:30. Every murderer to be put to death, Num 35:31. The manslayer is not to be permitted to come to the land of his inheritance till the death of the high priest, Num 35:32. The land must not be polluted with blood, for the Lord dwells in it, Num 35:33, Num 35:34.

NUMBERS 35:2 "Command the children of Israel to give to the Levites of the inheritance of their possession cities to dwell in. You shall give suburbs for the cities around them to the Levites.

NUMBERS 35:3 The cities shall they have to dwell in. Their suburbs shall be for their livestock, and for their substance, and for all their animals.

NUMBERS 35:4 "The suburbs of the cities, which you shall give to the Levites, shall be from the wall of the city and outward one thousand cubits around it.

Verse 4

And the suburbs of the cities - shall reach from the wall of the city and outward a thousand cubits round about.

NUMBERS 35:5 You shall measure outside of the city for the east side two thousand cubits, and for the south side two thousand cubits, and for the west side two thousand cubits, and for the north side two thousand cubits, the city being in the middle. This shall be the suburbs of their cities.

Verse 5

And ye shall measure from without the city - two thousand cubits, etc. - Commentators have been much puzzled with the accounts in these two verses. In Num 35:4 the measure is said to be 1,000 cubits from the wall; in Num 35:5 the measure is said to be 2,000 from without the city. It is likely

these two measures mean the same thing; at least so it was understood by the Septuagint and Coptic, who have δισχιλιους πηχεις, 2,000 cubits, in the fourth, as well as in the fifth verse; but this reading of the Septuagint and Coptic is not acknowledged by any other of the ancient versions, nor by any of the MSS. collated by Kennicott and De Rossi. We must seek therefore for some other method of reconciling this apparently contradictory account. Sundry modes have been proposed by commentators, which appear to me, in general, to require full as much explanation as the text itself. Maimonides is the only one intelligible on the subject. "The suburbs," says he, "of the cities are expressed in the law to be 3,000 cubits on every side from the wall of the city and outwards. The first thousand cubits are the suburbs, and the 2,000, which they measured without the suburbs, were for fields and vineyards." The whole, therefore, of the city, suburbs, fields, and vineyards, may be represented by the diagram.

NUMBERS 35:6 "The cities which you shall give to the Levites, they shall be the six cities of refuge, which you shall give for the man slayer to flee to. Besides them you shall give forty-two cities.

NUMBERS 35:7 All the cities which you shall give to the Levites shall be forty-eight cities together with their suburbs.

NUMBERS 35:8 Concerning the cities which you shall give of the possession of the children of Israel, from the many you shall take many; and from the few you shall take few. Everyone according to his inheritance which he inherits shall give some of his cities to the Levites."

NUMBERS 35:9 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

NUMBERS 35:10 "Speak to the children of Israel, and tell them, 'When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan,

NUMBERS 35:11 then you shall appoint for yourselves cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the man slayer who kills any person unwittingly may flee there.

Verse 11

Ye shall appoint - cities of refuge - The cities of refuge among the Israelites were widely different from the asyla among the Greeks and Romans, as also from the privileged altars among the Roman Catholics. Those among the Hebrews were for the protection of such only as had slain a person involuntarily. The temples and altars among the latter often served for the protection of the most profligate characters. Cities of refuge among the Hebrews were necessary, because the old patriarchal law still remained in force, viz., that the nearest akin had a right to avenge the death of his relation by slaying the murderer; for the original law enacted that whosoever shed man's blood, by man should his blood be shed, Gen 9:6, and none was judged so proper to execute this law as the man who was nearest akin to the deceased. As many rash executions of this law might take place, from the very nature of the thing, it was deemed necessary to qualify its claims, and prevent injustice; and the cities of refuge were judged proper for this purpose. Nor do we ever read that they were ever found inefficient, or that they were ever abused.

NUMBERS 35:12 The cities shall be to you for refuge from the avenger, that the man slayer not die, until he stands before the congregation for judgement.

 Verse 12

Until he stand before the congregation in judgment - So one of these cities was not a perpetual asylum; It was only a pro tempore refuge, till the case could be fairly examined by the magistrates in the presence of the people, or the elders their representatives; and this was done in the city or place where he had done the murder, Jos 20:4, Jos 20:6. If he was found worthy of death, they delivered him to the avenger that he might be slain, Deu 19:12; if not, they sent him back to the city of refuge, where he remained till the death of the high priest, Num 35:25. Before the cities of refuge were appointed, the altar appears to have been a sanctuary for those who had killed a person unwittingly; see on Exo 21:13 (note), and Exo 21:14 (note).

NUMBERS 35:13 The cities which you shall give shall be for you six cities of refuge.

NUMBERS 35:14 You shall give three cities beyond the Jordan, and you shall give three cities in the land of Canaan. They shall be cities of refuge.

NUMBERS 35:15 For the children of Israel, and for the stranger and for the foreigner living among them, shall these six cities be for refuge; that everyone who kills any person unwittingly may flee there.

NUMBERS 35:16 ““But if he struck him with an instrument of iron, so that he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall surely be put to death.

NUMBERS 35:17 If he struck him with a stone in the hand, by which a man may die, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall surely be put to death.

NUMBERS 35:18 Or if he struck him with a weapon of wood in the hand, by which a man may die, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall surely be put to death.

NUMBERS 35:19 The avenger of blood shall himself put the murderer to death. When he meets him, he shall put him to death.

Verse 19

The revenger of blood - גאל הדם goel haddam, the redeemer of blood; the next in blood to him who was slain. See on Num 35:12 (note).

NUMBERS 35:20 If he shoved him out of hatred, or hurled at him, lying in wait, so that he died,

NUMBERS 35:21 or in hostility struck him with his hand, so that he died, he who struck him shall surely be put to death. He is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death, when he meets him.

NUMBERS 35:22 ““But if he shoved him suddenly without hostility, or hurled on him anything without lying in wait,

NUMBERS 35:23 or with any stone, by which a man may die, not seeing him, and cast it on him, so that he died, and he was not his enemy, neither sought his harm;

NUMBERS 35:24 then the congregation shall judge between the striker and the avenger of blood according to these ordinances.

NUMBERS 35:25 The congregation shall deliver the man slayer out of the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge, where he had fled. He shall dwell therein until the death of the high priest, who was anointed with the holy oil.

NUMBERS 35:26 ““But if the man slayer shall at any time go beyond the border of his city of refuge, where he flees,

NUMBERS 35:27 and the avenger of blood finds him outside of the border of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the man slayer; he shall not be guilty of blood,

NUMBERS 35:28 because he should have remained in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest. But after the death of the high priest, the man slayer shall return into the land of his possession.

NUMBERS 35:29 ““These things shall be for a statute and ordinance to you throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

NUMBERS 35:30 ““Whoever kills any person, the murderer shall be slain at the mouth of witnesses; but one witness shall not testify against any person that he die.

Verse 30

But one witness shall not testify against any - This was a just and necessary provision. One may be mistaken, or so violently prejudiced as to impose even on his own judgment, or so wicked as to endeavor through malice to compass the life of his neighbor: but it is not likely that two or more should be of this kind; and even were they, their separate examination would lead to a discovery of the truth, and to their conviction.

NUMBERS 35:31 ““Moreover you shall take no ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death; but he shall surely be put to death.

Verse 31

Ye shall take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer - No atonement could be made for him, nor any commutation, so as to save him from death. All the laws of the civilized world have either adjudged the murderer to death, or to a punishment equivalent to it; such as perpetual imprisonment, in a dungeon, under ground, on a stone floor, without light, and to be fed on a small portion of bread and water. In such circumstances a man could live but a short time; and though it is not called the punishment of death, yet, from its inevitable consequences, it only differed from it by being a little longer respite than was usual where the punishment of death was awarded. See the note on Gen 9:6.

NUMBERS 35:32 ““You shall take no ransom for him who is fled to his city of refuge, that he may come again to dwell in the land, until the death of the priest.

Verse 32

Until the death of the priest - Probably intended to typify, that no sinner can be delivered from his banishment from God, or recover his forfeited inheritance, till Jesus Christ, the great high priest, had died for his offenses, and risen again for his justification.

NUMBERS 35:33 "So you shall not pollute the land in which you are; for blood pollutes the land. No atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, but by the blood of him who shed it."

Verse 33

For blood it defileth the land - The very land was considered as guilty till the blood of the murderer was shed in it. No wonder God is so particularly strict in his laws against murderers,

1. Because he is the author of life, and none have any right to dispose of it but himself.
2. Because life is the time to prepare for the eternal world, and on it the salvation of the soul accordingly depends; therefore it is of infinite consequence to the man that his life be lengthened out to the utmost limits assigned by Divine Providence. As he who takes a man's life away before his time may be the murderer of his soul as well as of his body, the severest laws should be enacted against this, both to punish and prevent the crime.

The Mosaic cities of refuge have in general been considered, not merely as civil institutions, but as types or representations of infinitely better things; and in this light St. Paul seems to have considered them and the altar of God, which was a place of general refuge, as it is pretty evident that he had them in view when writing the following words: "God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath; that by two immutable things, (his oath and promise), in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation who have Fled for Refuge to lay Hold upon the Hope set before us," Heb 6:17, Heb 6:18. Independently of this, it was a very wise political institute; and while the patriarchal law on this point continued in force, this law had a direct tendency to cool and moderate the spirit of revenge, to secure the proper accomplishment of the ends of justice, and to make way for every claim of mercy and equity. But this is not peculiar to the ordinance of the cities of refuge; every institution of God is distinguished in the same way, having his own glory, in the present and eternal welfare of man, immediately in view.

NUMBERS 35:34 You shall not defile the land which you inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell; for I, the LORD, dwell in the midst of the children of Israel."
