**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**JOSHUA-013. THE CITIES OF REFUGE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *The Lord also spake unto Joshua, saying, 2. Speak to the children of Israel, saying, Appoint out for you cities of refuge, whereof I spake unto you by the hand of Moses: 3. That the slayer that killeth any person unawares and unwittingly may flee thither: and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood. 4. And when he that doth flee unto one of those cities shall stand at the entering of the gate of the city, and shall declare his cause in the ears of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city unto them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them. 5. And if the avenger of blood pursue after him, then they shall not deliver the slayer up into his hand; because he smote his neighbour unwittingly, and hated him not beforetime. 6. And he shall dwell in that city, until he stand before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the high priest that shall be in those days: then shall the slayer return, and come unto his own city, and unto his own house, unto the city from whence he fled. 7. And they appointed Kedesh in Galilee in mount Naphtali, and Shechem in mount Ephraim, and Kirjath-arba, which is Hebron, in the mountain of Judah. 8. And on the other side Jordan by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer in the wilderness upon the plain out of the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead out of the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan out of the tribe of Manasseh. 9. These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourneth among them, that whosoever killeth any person at unawares might flee thither, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood, until he stood before the congregation.."*

*Joshua 20:1-9*

Our Lord has taught us that parts of the Mosaic legislation were given because of the hardness of the people's hearts. The moral and religious condition of the recipients of revelation determines and is taken into account in the form and contents of revelation. That is strikingly obvious in this institution of the cities of refuge. They have no typical meaning, though they may illustrate Christian truth. But their true significance is that they are instances of revelation permitting, and, while permitting, checking, a custom for the abolition of which Israel was not ready.

**I.** Cities of refuge were needed, because the avenger of blood was recognised as performing an imperative duty. Blood for blood was the law for the then stage of civilisation. The weaker the central authority, the more need for supplementing it with the wild justice of personal avenging. Neither Israel nor surrounding nations were fit for the higher commandment of the Sermon on the Mount. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, corresponded to their stage of progress; and to have hurried them forward to I say unto you, Resist not evil, would only have led to weakening the restraint on evil, and would have had no response in the hearers consciences. It is a commonplace that legislation which is too far ahead of public opinion is useless, except to make hypocrites. And the divine law was shaped in accordance with that truth. Therefore the goel, or kinsman-avenger of blood, was not only permitted but enjoined by Moses.

But the evils inherent in his existence were great. Blood feuds were handed down through generations, involving an ever-increasing number of innocent people, and finally leading to more murders than they prevented. But the thing could not be abolished. Therefore it was checked by this institution. The lessons taught by it are the gracious forbearance of God with the imperfections attaching to each stage of His people's moral and religious progress; the uselessness of violent changes forced on people who are not ready for them; the presence of a temporary element in the Old Testament law and ethics.

No doubt many things in the present institutions of so-called Christian nations and in the churches are destined to drop away, as the principles of Christianity become more clearly discerned and more honestly applied to social and national life. But the good shepherd does not overdrive his flock, but, like Jacob, leads on softly, according to the pace of the cattle that is before him. We must be content to bring the world gradually to the Christian ideal. To abolish or to impose institutions or customs by force is useless. Revolutions made by violence never last. To fell the upas-tree maybe very heroic, but what is the use of doing it, if the soil is full of seeds of others, and the climate and conditions favourable to their growth? Change the elevation of the land, and the `flora will change itself. Institutions are the outcome of the whole mental and moral state of a nation, and when that changes, and not till then, do they change. The New Testament in its treatment of slavery and war shows us the Christian way of destroying evils; namely, by establishing the principles which will make them impossible. It is better to girdle the tree and leave it to die than to fell it.

**II.** Another striking lesson from the cities of refuge is the now well-worn truth that the same act, when done from different motives, is not the same. The kinsman-avenger took no heed of the motive of the slaying. His duty was to slay, whatever the slayer's intention had been. The asylum of the city of refuge was open for the unintentional homicide, and for him only, Deliberate murder had no escape thither. So the lesson was taught that motive is of supreme importance in determining the nature of an act. In God's sight, a deed is done when it is determined on, and it is not done, though done, when it was not meant by the doer. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer, and he that killeth his brother unawares is none. We suppose ourselves to have learned that so thoroughly that it is trivial to repeat the lesson.

What, then, of our thoughts and desires which never come to light in acts? Do we recognise our criminality in regard to these as vividly as we should? Do we regulate the hidden man of the heart accordingly? A man may break all the commandments sitting in an easy-chair and doing nothing. Von Moltke fought the Austro-Prussian war in his cabinet in Berlin, bending over maps. The soldiers on the field were but pawns in the dreadful game. So our battles are waged, and we are beaten or conquerors, on the field of our inner desires and purposes. Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.

**III.** The elaborately careful specification of cases which gave the fugitive a right to shelter in the city is set forth at length in Numbers 35:15-24, and Deuteronomy 19:4-13. The broad principle is there laid down that the cities were open for one who slew a man unwittingly. But the plea of not intending to slay was held to be negatived, not only if intention could be otherwise shown but if the weapon used was such as would probably kill; such, for instance, as an instrument of iron, or a stone, or a weapon of wood, whereby a man may die. If we do what is likely to have a given result, we are responsible for that result, should it come about, even though we did not consciously seek to bring it. That is plain common sense. I never thought the house would catch fire is no defence from the guilt of burning it down, if we fired a revolver into a powder barrel. Further, if the fatal blow was struck in hatred, or if the slayer had lain in ambush to catch his victim, he was not allowed shelter. These careful definitions freed the cities from becoming nests of desperate criminals, as the sanctuaries of the Middle Ages in Europe became. They were not harbours for the guilty, but asylums for the innocent.

**IV.** The procedure by which the fugitive secured protection is described at length in the passages cited, with which the briefer account here should be compared. It is not quite free from obscurity, but probably the process was as follows. Suppose the poor hunted man arrived panting at the limits of the city, perhaps with the avenger's sword within half a foot of his neck; he was safe for the time. But before he could enter the city, a preliminary inquiry was held at the gate by the city elders. That could only be of a rough-and-ready kind; most frequently there would be no evidence available but the man's own word. It, however, secured interim protection. A fuller investigation followed, and, as would appear, was held in another place,--perhaps at the scene of the accident. The congregation was the judge in this second examination, where the whole facts would be fully gone into, probably in the presence of the avenger. If the plea of non-intention was sustained, the fugitive was restored to his city of refuge, and there remained safely till the death of the high-priest, when he was at liberty to return to his home, and to stay there without fear.

Attempts have been made to find a spiritual significance in this last provision of the law, and to make out a lame parallel between the death of the high-priest, which cancelled the crime of the fugitive, and the death of Christ, which takes away our sins. But--to say nothing of the fact that the fugitive was where he was just because he had done no crime--the parallel breaks down at other points. It is more probable that the death of one high-priest and the accession of another were regarded simply as closing one epoch and beginning another, just as a king's accession is often attended with an amnesty. It was natural to begin a new era with a clean sheet, as it were.

**V.** The selection of the cities brings out a difference between the Jewish right of asylum and the somewhat similar right in heathen and mediaeval times. The temples or churches were usually the sanctuaries in these. But not the Tabernacle or Temple, but the priestly cities, were chosen here. Their inhabitants represented God to Israel, and as such were the fit persons to cast a shield over the fugitives; while yet their cities were less sacred than the Temple, and in them the innocent man-slayer could live for long years. The sanctity of the Temple was preserved intact, the necessary provision for possibly protracted stay was made, evils attendant on the use of the place of worship as a refuge were avoided.

Another reason--namely, accessibility swiftly from all parts of the land--dictated the choice of the cities, and also their number and locality. There were three on each side of Jordan, though the population was scantier on the east than on the west side, for the extent of country was about the same. They stood, roughly speaking, opposite each other,--Kedesh and Golan in the north, Shechem and Ramoth central, Hebron and Bezer in the south. So, wherever a fugitive was, he had no long distance between himself and safety.

We too have a strong city to which we may continually resort. The Israelite had right to enter only if his act had been inadvertent, but we have the right to hide ourselves in Christ just because we have sinned wilfully. The hurried, eager flight of the man who heard the tread of the avenger behind him, and dreaded every moment to be struck to the heart by his sword, may well set forth what should be the earnestness of our flight to lay hold on the hope set before us in the gospel. His safety, as soon as he was within the gate, and could turn round and look calmly at the pursuer shaking his useless spear and grinding his teeth in disappointment, is but a feeble shadow of the security of those who rest in Christ's love, and are sheltered by His work for sinners. I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall pluck them out of My hand.