

Joshua 20 The Cities of Exile

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Overview

The chapter brings together three themes of Pentateuchal teaching, each of which merits understanding in more detail:

1. The sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not murder.”
2. The role of the *go'el*, or kinsman redeemer.
3. The role of the High Priest.

The first highlights the problem of sin; the second and third are God’s provision for that sin, and each in its way anticipates the work of the Lord Jesus.

4. With these three concepts in hand, we can proceed through the chapter,
5. And then consider one case that is not covered by the OT law, but that is available to us today.

The Law of Murder

Two foundations in the Book of Genesis. Each prescribes a different level of punishment.

1. Gen 4:9-15, Cain’s punishment after killing Abel: exile, severed from his land and driven out from his people.
2. Gen 9:5,6, instruction to Noah after the flood: now murder is to be punished, not just with exile, but with death. Note that the root of this command lies in the relation between man and his creator. Absent that relation, there is no foundation for absolute morality, in this command or any other. Denying God means rejecting any sound moral compass, and casting oneself upon relativism.

Formalized as the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not murder,” in Exod 20:13. NB: special verb referring to murder or manslaughter; never applied to warfare or judicial execution.

Exod 21:12-14 provides commentary on the commandment, and makes an important distinction, between deliberate murder (12, 14) and involuntary manslaughter (13).

- Deliberate murder is not to be excused on any grounds, and in fact **MUST** result in the death of the murderer. For the reference to the altar as a place of asylum, cf. 1 Kings 2:5-6, 28ff, with Joab.
- God promises to provide a place where those guilty of involuntary manslaughter may escape execution. Yet this is hardly a deliverance, but actually constitutes an imprisonment, an exile, for manslaughter is still wrong.

Note that the consequences correspond to the two instances in Genesis: death (per the instruction to Noah) and exile (per the verdict on Cain).

The distinction is the same as that in Num 15:22-31 between sins of ignorance (*shegagah*, used explicitly of manslaughter in Num 35:11, 15 and Josh 20:3, 9, where it is translated “unawares”), and sins of high hand. (However, Cain’s offense was NOT in ignorance; it merely establishes the

appropriateness of exile as a punishment for manslaughter. The terms under which this verdict is appropriate are not defined until Exodus.)

God provides detailed instructions in two other passages concerning the cities of exile (Num 35 and Deut 19) to distinguish the two cases, to guide the congregation in deciding the plea of the fugitive:

- Num 35:22-23; Deut 19:4-6, involuntary manslaughter, resulting from an accident. Two excusing characteristics: no previous hatred or enmity, and accidental rather than deliberate death.
- Num 35:16-21; Deut 19:11, murder, marked by hatred and deliberate action, e.g., “lying in wait.” Note that Num 35:30 requires at least two witnesses to convict him.

The accidental nature of one case does not eliminate the offense against the commandment. We shall see that the involuntary manslaughter is still a sin, and needs expiation, but need not result in the death of the killer.

Application: As creatures of a holy God, we are under his law, and even ignorance of our violations does not excuse them. We stand in need of salvation.

Sin has consequences in two directions: toward the victims of the sin, and toward the perpetrator. The next two topics deal with these two consequences. The first deals with the consequences toward the victim, while the second deals with the consequences toward the perpetrator.

The Kinsman Redeemer

Throughout these passages concerning the cities of exile, we read of the “avenger of blood,” *go’el haddam*. This is one of the functions of the *goel*, elsewhere translated “redeemer.” Here, he is responsible for executing judicial execution on the murderer of his family member. The function is illustrated in 2 Sam 14:1-11 in Joab’s ruse. Other functions:

1. Deut 25:5-9, marries a childless widow to provide offspring for his deceased brother (cf. Ruth 3:13)
2. Lev 25:25,48, purchases a kinsman or his property out of bondage (cf. Jer 32:7-12)
3. Num 5:5-8, receives payments of reparation if the original offended person is no longer alive.

Lev 25:48 shows the need for a kinship relation to carry out these duties.

These legal prescriptions dominate the use of the term in Lev, Num, Ruth, Sam, and Kings. However, in the Pss and Prophets the term is never used to refer to a human kinsman redeemer; instead, it becomes a title for God, and in fact it was available for this sense much earlier. The first use of the word in the OT is Gen 48:16, in which Jacob, blessing the sons of Joseph, describes God as “the Angel that redeemed me from all evil.” This picture carries over into the NT, in which “redeemer” is one of the titles of the LJC. The clearest exposition of his role in this regard is Heb. 2.

- vv. 5-9, the Messiah comes as a man, according to Psalm 8.
- Vv. 10-13 emphasize that this makes him our kinsman.
- Vv. 14-15 explains his ministry in terms of two of the *go’el*’s functions:

- Destruction of our murderer, the devil, according to the function of the “avenger of blood” in the passages we are considering;
- Deliverance of us from bondage, according to the function of the redeemer in Lev. 25 in buying us out of slavery.

Thus the role of the *go'el* in relation to the sin of manslaughter is to protect the interests of the *victim* of the murder by slaying the murderer.

When we see that the LJC has this role of avenging a murder, it adjusts our view of vengeance in the NT. It is not cast away with the coming of the New Covenant; compare

- 2 Thes 1:4-10 comforts the Thessalonians with the thought of the vengeance the Lord Jesus will bring on their persecutors;
- Rev 6:10, the cry of the martyrs;
- Paul’s prayer for vengeance, 2 Tim. 4:14.

In this last instance, notice the contrary prayer in 4:16 for pardon of those who have offended him, compare the Lord’s words from the tree, echoed by Stephen, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” The lack of vengeance in these cases appears to be due to the distinction between sins of ignorance and sins of high hand, not a change from Old to New covenant. (In our Lord’s case, the cry for pardon permitted the salvation of the Centurion; in Stephen, the salvation of Paul. In both cases, someone involved was truly ignorant, cf. Paul’s explanation in 1 Tim 1:13.

When vengeance does come, it is brought by the Lord, not by us: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” saith the Lord,” Rom 12:19; we can see that it is actually part of his work as redeemer.

The High Priest

The *go'el haddam* plays a critical role in correcting the effects of sin with respect to the victim. The High Priest addresses the effects on the perpetrator, in the case of involuntary manslaughter. Note 20:6; Num 35:25-28.

After the death of the High Priest the avenger of blood is no longer free to attack the manslayer, who may return with impunity to his own city.

- This shows that the avenger of blood is under the law.
- But then why, once the congregation has judged the case and determined that the killing is accidental, must the murderer remain in the city of exile? Why not just at this point tell the avenger of blood to abandon his claim?

We have already alluded to the answer. The sixth commandment forbids all manslaughter, not just deliberate malicious murder. The manslayer is still guilty under the law; the city of exile protects him from receiving too harsh a penalty (execution), but at the same time serves as a lesser penalty, exile from his own city and people.

Lexical note: the root ql+ is extremely rare in biblical Hebrew, being used only in the word mql+ to describe these cities, and in Lev 22:23 as the opposite of “stretched out.” Milgrom in the JPS Torah commentary on Num 35:9 makes a good case that the emphasis is not on asylum from the avenger of blood but on exile or confinement, enforced by the avenger of blood until the

appointed end of the exile, the death of the high priest. The other Heb exile vocabulary is based on gllh, but that refers to captivity imposed by a conqueror, not separation as imposed by law. Thus the cities of exile in fact perpetuate the judgment on Cain, just as capital punishment perpetuates the verdict of Noah.

He is constrained to stay within the “borders” of the city (Num 35:26), not its “walls” (although at least some of these cities, such as Shechem and Hebron, would have had walls), but probably the associated pasturelands described in the early part of Num 35 (vv. 2-5). (At Gezer there exist to this day actual engravings in rocky outcrops, dating from the first century B.C., marking such an outer limit, though at about twice this distance from the city wall, and called *texom* rather than *gebul*.) Thus he can work as a hired hand or indentured servant, but cannot improve his own patrimony. Like Cain, he is cut off from his own land.

This exile ends with the death of the High Priest, which thus appears to be expiatory in nature. Compare the statement that the High Priest (Exod 28:38; Num 18:1) as well as the sinner (Lev 5:1) or a sacrifice (Lev 16:22) is said to “bear sin,” to carry its burden. In this he anticipates the work of the Lord Jesus, who as a high priest offered himself for us, that he might “bear our sins,” 1 Pet 2:24; Heb 9:28; John 1:29. The manslayer is sanctioned even after the congregation determines that he is not guilty of murder, until the death of the High Priest removes his sin, at which point he is free to return to his people without fear of the avenger of blood.

Heb 9:11-14 appears to draw on this; note that there Christ *in his role as High Priest* offers himself, and that he does so “through the eternal spirit.” Compare the emphasis on the High Priest’s anointing oil in Num 35:25.

Review of Joshua 20

2-3,9, Overview

These brackets highlight the main features:

The Place	Appoint out for you cities of [exile],	9 These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourneth among them,
The Defendant	3 That the slayer that killeth [any] person unawares [and] unwittingly	that whosoever killeth [any] person at unawares
The Action	may flee thither:	might flee thither,
The Avenger	and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood.	and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood,
The Trial	(vv.4-6)	until he stood before the congregation.

The command explicitly recalls the instructions of Moses to establish such cities. In addition to Num 35 and Deut 19, which we have already considered, in Deut 4:41-43 he himself establishes the three transjordanian cities.

4-6, Procedure

v.4 shows the slayer seeking access to the city. He presents his case before them, and they are required to “give him a place” among them.

v.5, he is protected there from the avenger of blood, so long as he stays in the city. As we saw from Num 35, if he leaves the territory of the city, he is fair game.

v.6 anticipates two circumstances under which he may leave the city:

- when he comes before the congregation for judgment. Apparently, subsequent to his initial arrival, there might be a more formal trial, at which the elders of his city (Deut 19:12) would bring the required multiple witnesses. If this trial found him guilty, he would be put back out of the protection of the city, delivered to the avenger of blood.
- Otherwise, after the death of the High Priest the avenger's claims no longer have any hold, and he is free to return home.

7-8, Execution

The people obey God's command, and set apart Kadesh, Shechem, and Hebron on the western bank of Jordan to balance the three cities established by Moses on the eastern bank. Note that these are spread throughout the country so as to be accessible to people living anywhere.

The Superiority of the NT Provision

The OT law of exile makes provision only for involuntary manslaughter. There is no provision for deliberate murder; in fact, Num 15:30-31 explicitly says that there is no sacrifice under the law for deliberate, premeditated sin of any kind.

Yet we know that deliberate sinners were pardoned; cf. David in his murder of Uriah the Hittite. How could God justly pardon his sin?

Answer: the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus is much more powerful than the death of the Jewish High Priest. His death takes away not only sins of ignorance, but also those of high hand.

- It is expressly said to be the basis for God's passing over of OT sins: Rom. 3:25 (where "remission" would be better translated "passing over"); Heb 9:15. Thus in him we find the answer to the problem of how David's flagrant, high-handed sin could be forgiven.
- The offer of salvation in Rev. 22:17 is without restriction.