

A Refuge for Justice by Lou Ann Mokwa

Coming out of their enslavement in Egypt, the Israelites are nearing the end of their years of wandering in the desert. Their entire journey, stage by stage is recorded by Moses in Numbers chapter thirty-three. This detailed summary tells us every place they camped, even the one site that had no water. *“Here are the stages in the journey of the Israelites when they came out of Egypt by divisions under the leadership of Moses and Aaron...They left Alush and camped at Rephidim, where there was no water for the people to drink.”* As they are crossing the Jordan into the land of Canaan, God speaks to Moses, giving him directives on how they were to occupy the land. *“Drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols and demolish all their high places. Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess. Distribute the land by lot, according to your clans. To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one. Whatever falls to them by lot will be theirs. Distribute it according to your ancestral tribes.”* (Num 33: 52-56)

A chapter later, God informs Moses what land is to be given to the Levites. Why were they any different from the other tribes of Israel? The tribe of Levi was chosen by God for the high honor of the priesthood which was established by God in the time of Moses. A high priest was God’s elect, the very first was Moses’ brother Aaron. Priests were so special to God; they did not inherit any land. *“The LORD said to Aaron, “You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.”* God provided them with *“all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance”* in exchange for the all-important work they would do. (Num 18: 20-21) Clearly the Levites needed a place to settle and have homes, once again God gives Moses’ direction to accomplish this. *“Command the Israelites to give the Levites towns to live in from the inheritance the Israelites will possess.”* (Num 35:2) God’s plan left nothing out, He even included room for their livestock to pasture.

Forty-eight cities were given to the Levites, six of these cities were set apart as *“cities of refuge.”* (Num 35:6) These special cities were designated to protect someone who unintentionally murdered another. In the book of Joshua, the names of the cities are given, as well as instructions on how these cities are to be constructed. *“When he flees to one of these cities, he is to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state his case before the elders of that city. Then they are to admit him into their city and give him a place to live with them.”* (Joshua 20:4) These cities are to be easily accessible or centrally located. Looking at a map, all 6 cities are positioned within thirty miles from any point in the land, where one could flee quickly. The perfect placement of these cities shows us that God is *“our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”* (Psalm 46:1)

God explains very clearly the difference between intentional and unintentional homicide. *“But if without hostility someone suddenly shoves another or throws something at him unintentionally or, without seeing him, drops a stone on him that could kill him, and he dies, then since he was not his enemy and he did not intend to harm him, the assembly must judge...the assembly must protect the one accused of murder.”* (Num 35: 22-25) This divine guidance shows the great mercy God has for those involved in situations resulting in accidental death. This person would live in the city of refuge until they could stand before an assembly of their peers with evidence to support their claim of innocence. These commands from God form the basis of our judicial system today, some 2,000 years later. *“These are to be legal requirements for you throughout the generations to come, wherever you live.”* (Num 35: 29)

The person who intentionally *“with malice aforethought”* (v 20) commits murder would immediately be put to death. But only on the *“testimony of witnesses...no one is to be put to death on the testimony of one witness.”*(v 30) A *“blood avenger,”* the nearest blood relative could carry out the death penalty without a trial. Thus, the city of refuge did not protect those accused of witnessed, intentional homicide.

God makes provision for those living in a city of refuge waiting for their case to go before the assembly. *“The accused must stay in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest; only after the death of the high priest may he return to his own property.”* (Num 35:28)

This “get out of jail free” card could be an Old Testament shadow of the New Testament liberation won by our Messiah, the one and only Jesus Christ. But, unlike the alleged murderer in the time of Moses who was provided a temporary reprieve, God gave us Jesus as our forever High Priest. Our sins are not alleged, they are real and we all stand guilty before the throne of glory. But Jesus’ death and resurrection fully liberate us from the bondage of our sin, giving us complete eternal freedom in Him and Him alone.

Our eternal city of refuge, won for us by Jesus Christ is accessible to all who repent and believe. *“The Father rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption and forgiveness of sins.”* (Col 1:13 EHV) Therefore, *“rejoice in that day and leap for joy because great is your reward in heaven.”* (Luke 6:23)

I’m but a stranger here, heav’n is my home; earth is a desert drear, heav’n is my home; danger and sorrow stand round me on eve’ry hand; heav’n is my fatherland, heav’n is my home.