Numbers 33-36: Tending the Land

By
Peter Martin
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“These are the journeys of the children of Israel, who went out of the land of Egypt by their armies under the hand of Moses and Aaron. Now Moses wrote down the starting points of their journeys at the command of the LORD. And these are their journeys according to their starting points: They departed from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the day after the Passover the children of Israel went out with boldness in the sight of all the Egyptians. For the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn, whom the LORD had killed among them. Also on their gods the LORD had executed judgments.”

-Numbers 33:1-4

As we talked about last week, the narrative portion of the book of Numbers ended with chapter 32 and the remaining chapters of this book are various teachings from Moses before he launches into his final teaching to his people found in the book of Deuteronomy. At first glance, these chapters seem disconnected, almost as though they are instructions that Moses forgot to mention earlier in the book and just “tacked” them onto the back. However, studying them this week I believe I have found a pretty coherent way to harmonize them together and to understand them in relation to the overall narrative.

To give a brief overview, chapter 33 recounts the journey of the nation of Israel, chapter 34 establishes the boundaries of the land between the tribes, chapter 35 delineates some of the land to the Levites and also establishes “cities of refuge”, being cities that are to house those who are convicted of what we today would call involuntary manslaughter, and the final chapter of the book details the inheritance rights of the land, especially regarding land that is passed down to females.

As I said, at first glance, these feel fairly disconnected, but I believe that chapter 33 gives us a hint as to why these passages are placed together in the text, and why they close out this book. Chapter 33 gives an overview of the journey that the Israelites made from Egypt towards the promised land, but the unique thing about this depiction is that it gives very few details about the events of their journey, and instead focuses only on the *locations* that the Israelites went to. In other words, it isn’t primarily interested in what is happening to the Israelites, it seems to be only interested in the land that they are brought to. When we see the other passages from this perspective we can see that

all of these passages are interested in the land itself, as if the land were a character in the narrative that Moses is giving closure to as he ends the book.

For the modern audience, this is a strange thing to do, but I will say it isn't a completely foreign concept for us. While these stories are more rare, it was common practice for older authors to make the setting of their novels characters unto themselves. Mark Twain is famous for doing this in his depictions of the south, my favorite author John Steinbeck is unparalleled in his capacity to make the place of his birth, the Salinas Valley in California, a part of the narrative that is every bit as important and every bit as detailed as any of his other characters. A more modern example would be the musical "La La Land" by Damien Chazelle, which could be rightly called a "love letter" to the city of Los Angeles.

But even these more modern examples don't fully grasp or understand the way that an ancient author would understand the concept of "land", so for the next little bit I wanted to explore the vast differences between how the Biblical authors would view land and how we would so that we are properly positioned to understand the deep lessons that Moses is providing for us as he wraps up this book.

Man and the Earth

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."
-Genesis 1:1

For the modern person, land may have material value to us, but we don't tend to think about it too much and we would certainly not speak about it as though it was a living person, and yet that is exactly how our ancestors would have thought and spoken. The first reason for this disparity has to do with how we view the world as a whole. Our ancestors used to see the world of the spirit and the world of the flesh as the same world. They didn't separate the heavens and the earth, but they saw them as being intrinsically united, which is why their imaginations populated the waters with nymphs and sirens, the woods with elves and trolls, and the mountains and the skies with gods and goddesses.

Beyond that, their lives were tied to the land that they grew up on. It was rare for a person to live more than 25 miles away from the place they were born. They also drew their livelihood from the earth. Most were either farmers or shepherds of some sort, and even the ones who weren't were directly dependent on the farmers and shepherds in their own community. As such, they saw the land in a much more mystical and important

way than we do today, and this fact is revealed to us throughout the Scriptures, especially in the first couple chapters of Genesis.

The Heavens and the Earth

"...before any plant of the field was in the earth and before any herb of the field had grown. For the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground. And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."

-Genesis 2:6-7

It's important to note that one of the words for "land" or "earth" in Hebrew is "adama", Adam's name is actually directly related to this word. And you can see that in the creation of the earth, we have a life-giving mist emerging from the earth itself, and all living creatures upon the land are shaped by God from the very earth that they emerged from. However, this is where the Hebrew perspective deviates from our pagan ancestors. For the pagans, the divine was a part of the earth, but in the Bible, God doesn't emerge from the earth, He is the Creator of the earth.

But, even so, by animating mankind with His divine breath, we see that the heavens are not fully separable from the earth. Herein is the great drama of the Bible, the divine romance between heaven and earth. It is God who is spirit (John 4) who descends from the heavens to breathe life into man. This means that the world of the spirit is not only compatible with the earth, but chooses or even elects to dwell within mankind. And when we read Genesis 1, which begins with God creating the heavens and the earth, and Genesis 2 that focuses on God forming man, we see a connection between how God treats the earth, and how God treats mankind.

This is also why the "land" of Eden is so significant. It was in this land, this earth, that God was able to "walk with man in the cool of the day". Man was not separated from God, but was intimate with God Himself. It was this principle that animated the earth in the beginning, the earth wasn't the same as the spirit, but it was able to participate with that same life giving spirit and receive the gift of life itself.

"And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

-Genesis 2:9

The earth isn't merely a habitation for all life and the spirit of God, but equally, the roots of the tree of temptation sink into this same earth and receive life from this same land. This again is symbolic of the human soul, the same soul that can receive the spirit of God and be unified to Him, can also receive "nourishment" from the spirit of Satan and share in his rebellion against God. This is why Adam and Eve are tempted by Satan in the garden and eat of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil.

"Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': "Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return."

-Genesis 3:17-19

This means that the earth can be cursed because of us. The same soil that used to be the ground and root for every good and perfect gift from God is now the place where thorns and thistles thrive and receive life. The ground of blessing can be turned to the ground of cursing. This is again a symbol of the soul of man. The soul of man that was once the root for only good things that came from God, can now bear "thorns and thistles", which could be understood as sin and depravity, but also a symbol for pain and suffering in general. The first "fruit" of this curse manifests in the next chapter:

"Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground."

-Genesis 4:2

Cain being the firstborn "inherits the earth", meaning that his role is to tend to the earth that is now cursed and to work the ground to produce the fruit that once came up naturally. His brother Abel tends to the animals, which means that in a lot of ways, Abel is dependent on his older brother's vocation to ensure produce for his flocks. But this is also symbolic of the fact that the firstborn child of the new fallen race of man is commanded to tend the earth, or to put it another way, to tend to his soul and to keep the pleasant things of God, but to uproot the negative things growing in his heart. This is why the story turns in a sense around what Cain offers to God from the fruit of the earth.

And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

-Genesis 4:3-5

I think that there is a more literal way to understand these events, but symbolically this means that Cain is not tending to his heart correctly. What he is offering up to God is not accepted because he is, in some way, not attending to his soul with the same faithfulness of his brother Abel. This is why God rebukes Cain like this:

"So the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it."
-Genesis 4:6-7

Cain is not attending to the "thorns and thistles" of his own heart, and now they have grown out of control and seek to master him, but God says that Cain has the power to master it. Unfortunately he doesn't do this and we get another interesting insight into the earth:

"So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. "When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth."
-Genesis 4:11-12

Like his father before him, Cain has polluted the earth by spilling his brother's blood upon it. Now, it won't yield its strength to Cain and he is cast out of the earth as a vagabond. I believe the symbolic understanding of this is more clear than the literal. Just as we can create nurture the soil of the earth by ensuring that it has proper fertilizer, nutrients, sun exposure, and water so that it can bear good plants, we can "curse" the earth by pouring substances like bleach, poison, or salt, to make sure that the earth can't produce any life. This is the state of Cain's soul, the blood of his brother has poisoned the earth, Cain's soul is now a wilderness, incapable of producing life and love, it is now a place only fit for weeds and brambles as he is cast from civilization.

It is in this more ancient context we can understand what God says to His people throughout the story of Israel's movement into the promised land:

"'So you shall not pollute the land where you are; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. 'Therefore do not defile the land which you inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the LORD dwell among the children of Israel.' "

-Numbers 35:33-34

The land itself can be cursed by the behavior of the people. This trope shows up in ancient stories more often, like in some of the legends of the Holy Grail, the kingdom that possessed the grail was made into a desolate wasteland by “The Dolorous Stroke” in which a reckless knight maims the king who possesses the grail with the same spear that pierced Christ. Similarly, in the more modern movie “The Lion King”, the once flourishing land of Pride Rock is made desolate when Scar murders his brother Mufasa and steals the throne from him and exiles Mufasa’s son Simba.

While God literally fulfills this in exiling the people of Israel when they rebel against Him, there is a symbolic way of understanding this. It isn’t as though the behavior of the pagans has some sort of mystical power to curse the land, it’s that the land becomes a metaphor for the soul of those who inhabit it. By practicing these evil acts, they are poisoning the heart of the nation and making it a place where only evil and iniquity can reign. This point is made more explicit in passages like this:

“‘But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell. ‘Moreover it shall be that I will do to you as I thought to do to them.’ ”

-Numbers 33:55-56

Notice the reference to “thorns” relating to the inhabitants of the land. Once again, it wasn’t the Canaanites that God hated, but their practices, their shedding of innocent blood, that had cursed the land. Now God is telling His people to “root them out”, again, not the race or ethnicity, but the practices that defiled the land in the first place. This is made clear at the end when He says “*Moreover it shall be that I will do to you as I thought to do to them.’ ”* God is telling His people that since it was the practices of the Canaanites that defiled the land, if they practice the same things, they will suffer the same fate.

“‘You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, and shall not commit any of these abominations, either any of your own nation or any stranger who dwells among you ‘(for all these abominations the men of the land have done, who were before you, and thus the land is defiled), ‘lest the land vomit you out also when you defile it, as it vomited out the nations that were before you.”

-Leviticus 18:26-28

This is why God is so concerned with the land receiving rest upon the Sabbatical years:

“I will scatter you among the nations and draw out a sword after you; your land shall be desolate and your cities waste. Then the land shall enjoy its sabbaths as long as it lies desolate and you are in your enemies’ land; then the land shall rest and enjoy its sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate it shall rest—for the time it did not rest on your sabbaths when you dwelt in it.”

-Leviticus 26:33-35

Once again, this sounds strange that God’s concern is for the land itself. But when we understand how to connect phrases like this, it makes sense. It was the soul of the Israelites who had not been resting in God and had instead grown in their depravity and sin. They needed to be “made desolate” so that they could relearn how to be faithful to God.

But in a larger sense, this is exactly what has happened to the world as a whole. All human societies shed innocent blood upon the earth and curse the ground, removing us from the light of God and the goodness He intends. But this is why we are told:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

-John 3:16

God’s love is expressed to “the world” not mankind. This is not because God loves the earth more than man, but because the earth is a symbol for mankind. This symbol is made more explicit in a famous parable of Christ:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

-Matthew 13:44

The treasure is humanity, the field is the earth. God redeems the world in order to possess the treasure. This helps us understand His parables. In the famous one about the sower and the seed, we are told:

“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.”

-Luke 8:11

And the word of God is sowed into the souls of man to produce good fruit. The Apostle Paul also makes this connection between the earth and the soul of man:

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.”

-2 Corinthians 4:7

Here we have jars made out of “clay” or a type of “earth” that are constructed to hold a treasure. This is a call back to Genesis in which God breathes His Spirit into the clay that He formed Adam out of to make us living. The same act was repeated by Christ when He breathes over them after the Resurrection:

“And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

-John 20:22

Once again, this symbolic understanding doesn’t erase the literal understanding. Land is important, nations are important, and our bodies are important. Not just because they house a spirit, but because the spirit sanctifies the body. The land of a nation is beautiful and sacred, not because it is sacred in itself, but because the people who have made that land their home have learned to dwell within it and have grown a civilization upon it.

This is why the land of Israel is so important to people, even to this day. It is the recapitulation of Eden upon the Earth. It was the place where God dwelt with mankind once again, first in the temple, and then in the person of Jesus Christ. But with that being said, let’s look at how God instructs His people on how they are to tend to their land.

Detailing the Journey

“These are the journeys of the children of Israel, who went out of the land of Egypt by their armies under the hand of Moses and Aaron. Now Moses wrote down the starting points of their journeys at the command of the LORD. And these are their journeys according to their starting points: They departed from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the day after the Passover the children of Israel went out with boldness in the sight of all the Egyptians. For the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn, whom the LORD had killed among them. Also on their gods the LORD had executed judgments.”

-Numbers 33:1-4

With this perspective, when Moses is detailing the journey of the Israelites by simply naming the various lands they visited on the way, this is an attempt to remind the Israelites of their own spiritual journey. I am fond of alluding to Joseph Campbell’s

conception of “the hero’s journey”, which is an attempt to explain the various tropes that are present in all myths and stories as a way of understanding every person’s journey to self-actualization and independence. So when we read stories like “The Odyssey” in which the hero is traveling across a vast distance in order to come home, we aren’t supposed to think of this as just an impressive accounting of the length they travelled, but instead a metaphor for their own spiritual journey and maturation.

In our lives I think we can understand this. We have all moved through various phases of life and maturation and we can usually demarcate these transitional periods based on where we were physically. If we physically moved states or something like that, this can be even more literal, but for most of us, when we think about times of transition we say things like “that was when I was going to this school” or “that was when I worked at this place” or “that was when I was living in that house or that apartment.” We subconsciously tie our spiritual journey to our physical presence.

Moses is helping the people of Israel remember where they have come from. When he talks about Egypt, he isn’t trying to stir up memories of the Egyptian nation, but their time in slavery. When he talks about moving towards the Red Sea, this is supposed to remind them of how they were liberated, when he speaks of Mount Sinai, he is reminding them of where they met with God, and when he describes the various stops in their wilderness wandering, he is reminding them of the fruitless journey that they have been on as a consequence of their rebellion.

Why is he doing this? Because they are on the threshold of the largest transition in their journey, the transition from being a bunch of nomadic tribes living in the wilderness to a singular, unified nation dwelling within borders. This is a key component to tending to our souls, we must remember the journey that we are on, both where we came from and where we are going. Without this “map” we tend to wander aimlessly, immune to the lessons of the past, and without a clear vision of where we are going.

Established Boundaries

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Command the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you come into the land of Canaan, this is the land that shall fall to you as an inheritance—the land of Canaan to its boundaries. ‘Your southern border shall be from the Wilderness of Zin along the border of Edom; then your southern border shall extend eastward to the end of the Salt Sea…”

-Numbers 34:1-3

Next, he tells them to fix established boundaries for the nation. He begins with the borders of the nation as a whole, and then moves into the borders between the various tribes. The wisdom here is relatively straight forward and doesn't need to be elaborated on that much. In order to have a clear vision of your future, you first need to establish borders for your vision to grow.

Imagine you have a desire to be a doctor. That dream needs "soil" to grow in, and it needs to be as broad as possible. If you are a teenager dreaming of becoming a doctor, it would be relatively foolish to try to figure out exactly what kind of doctor you want to become. At that stage of planning you simply need to establish the desire to become a doctor and then within those boundaries you can populate that desire with concrete steps on how to make that a reality. But these clear borders keep you from wandering or entering into conflict with yourself. You must exclude from your vision the desire to become an astronaut or a firefighter. Since these visions contradict what you are trying to accomplish, they exist, "outside the borders" of your vision.

But then within the borders of your dream, there still needs to be demarcation. You can't just become singularly focused on being a doctor, you need to figure out how that vision harmonizes with your family, your romantic partner, your desire to have kids, the place you want to live and so on. To grow from the seed of inspiration, dreams need earth to become solid and real.

But this is the same basic truth for the rest of our lives. We need to figure out what kind of people we want to be. When I stood at the altar to marry my wife, I had to think "What kind of a husband do I want to be?" and "What kind of a marriage do I want?" Since this is a shared vision I had to communicate with my wife about that, but we needed borders for that vision to grow. We need to know when we have violated the boundaries of our intentions so that we can course correct. But when my career expanded, and when we started having children, the "borders" of our marriage had to get divided even further. We had to figure out, how much of our lives do we want to devote to career or children? These borders can stretch or shrink, but they need to be there for the marriage to stay on track.

Our modern world struggles with boundaries and borders. We see them as limitations as opposed to the necessary soil that allows for identities to grow. To say that your identity has no boundaries or borders is to say that it is rootless and without potential to grow. It can only exist in the vaguest of terms because it has no ground to root itself in. This is why questions of identity, both individual and national, are so hotly contested and why there is far more confusion than clarity on these topics nowadays. If we want to grow, we must learn from this lesson and establish good boundaries for ourselves.

“Do not remove the ancient landmark, Nor enter the fields of the fatherless…”
-Proverbs 23:10

Inheriting Land

“Now the chief fathers of the families of the children of Gilead the son of Machir, the son of Manasseh, of the families of the sons of Joseph, came near and spoke before Moses and before the leaders, the chief fathers of the children of Israel. And they said: “The LORD commanded my lord Moses to give the land as an inheritance by lot to the children of Israel, and my lord was commanded by the LORD to give the inheritance of our brother Zelophehad to his daughters. “Now if they are married to any of the sons of the other tribes of the children of Israel, then their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our fathers, and it will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry; so it will be taken from the lot of our inheritance. “And when the Jubilee of the children of Israel comes, then their inheritance will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry; so their inheritance will be taken away from the inheritance of the tribe of our fathers.”
-Numbers 36:1-4

We’re going to skip to the last chapter because this concept is relatively straightforward as well. For practical purposes, this chapter is addressing a problem that an earlier ruling created. Moses had previously ruled that if parents only have girls, and the father dies, who inherits the land? God gives a special dispensation for daughters to inherit the family land in cases like this. The obvious problem is, what happens if a man marries one of these daughters? Do they receive a double inheritance of both the woman’s land and the man’s land? This seems unfair and it also has the potential to split the land in a way that goes against God’s intent, with one family having possession on two different lands, maybe even stretching across national borders. So God responds like this:

“This is what the LORD commands concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, saying, ‘Let them marry whom they think best, but they may marry only within the family of their father’s tribe.’ “So the inheritance of the children of Israel shall not change hands from tribe to tribe, for every one of the children of Israel shall keep the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers.”
-Numbers 36:6-7

“Thus no inheritance shall change hands from one tribe to another, but every tribe of the children of Israel shall keep its own inheritance.”
-Numbers 36:9

God merely restricts their potential for marriage to their own tribe, and actually only within the same family. This does not violate the Bible's previous incest laws given in Leviticus, but would more than likely necessitate marriage between cousins, hopefully to second cousins or further removed.

When we apply this to our souls we see a relatively simple lesson being taught to us that dovetails nicely with what we just talked about. As we grow and develop it is easy for boundaries to get confused. When me and my wife had our first child, we did have an initial plan for how to balance our need to encourage and bless our own marriage while giving our daughter the proper amount of time and attention for our relationship with her to grow and flourish.

Any parent knows that this balance is not really easy to maintain. We quickly find ourselves neglecting either the marriage or our children at times. And when we had a second kid, the boundaries became even more muddled. And just like with the nation of Israel, this confusion was not caused by sin or rebellion, but the natural course of life will throw all kinds of confusion into our well laid plans. But like Moses, we can't let these understandable circumstances to distort our borders. We have to adjust to our circumstances and do whatever we can to keep these borders clear, otherwise our priorities have a nasty habit of becoming hopelessly confused.

Space for the Sacred

"And the LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho, saying: "Command the children of Israel that they give the Levites cities to dwell in from the inheritance of their possession, and you shall also give the Levites common-land around the cities. "They shall have the cities to dwell in; and their common-land shall be for their cattle, for their herds, and for all their animals. "The common-land of the cities which you will give the Levites shall extend from the wall of the city outward a thousand cubits all around."

-Numbers 35:1-4

In the middle of his discourse, he spends time explaining the importance of making space for the Levites. When the land was to be split up the only tribe who would receive no inheritance in the land was the tribe of Levi. Instead, they were to be dispersed amongst the various tribes in order to act as priests throughout the land. However, Moses wants to make sure that there would be specific land allocated for the Levites in each city that Israel had, as well as specific cities throughout the land.

The interesting thing about the land that the Levites would receive, is that their dwellings *within* the city were not delineated, but instead they would be given land *outside* the city to graze their cattle. This is really interesting because this means that in any given city the Levites are entitled to land within the city like anyone else, but they are also given specific land just for them to graze their cattle. It also shows that the Levites were expected to regularly exit the city and to come back in since this land was outside the city walls. The specific amount of land gets a little confusing in the description but it looks like they would receive two thousand cubits (which is about a half a mile).

What does this mean? It means that we can't place the sacred neatly in the borders of our souls, the sacred must surround every border. This means I can't merely place the sacred parts of my life as being Sunday, or when I pray or read my Bible, it must surround every relationship and every endeavor.

"And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ."
-Colossians 3:23-24

It is far too easy for us as Christians to try to relegate our relationship with God to clearly delineated times. We see our tithe as our allocation of "sacred" money, and prayer and church as our "sacred" time. But, practices like tithing and praying are not to make a border between the sacred and the secular, but it is to *sanctify* the secular and raise it to the sacred.

"For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer."
-1 Timothy 4:4-5

This is the purpose of the Levites in the land. Through their sacrifices they taught the people of God how to take their material goods and transform them into a spiritual blessing, this is why they burned them turning them to smoke that ascended to the heavens. But again, they had to enter and exit the city as a constant reminder of the presence of the sacred that was among them. And any visitor had to pass through the sacred land of the Levites to enter into the city, and they had to pass through that same territory when they left.

Giving space for the sacred is not merely about setting aside more time to perform religious acts, though that is a necessary part, it is about *using* those times to discipline our minds to see everything as sacred. That all that we do belongs to God and that we are reserved for God, the more we understand this the happier and the more successful

we will be. But when we forget this, our endeavors and our behavior will belong to a lesser god. This god might be our own pride, ambition, greed, ego, anger, lust, or something else, but if it doesn't belong to God it will worship something less than God.

Cities of Refuge

"Now among the cities which you will give to the Levites you shall appoint six cities of refuge, to which a manslayer may flee. And to these you shall add forty-two cities. "So all the cities you will give to the Levites shall be forty-eight; these you shall give with their common-land."

-Numbers 35:6-7

The final thing that we see here, which is also the most strange, is that among the cities given to the Levites, six of them were set aside as cities of refuge. These cities were set up as a place where people who were convicted of, what we today would call involuntary manslaughter could dwell. So these are not individuals guilty of premeditated murder, only someone who killed someone unintentionally, without malice or forethought could dwell here. But this dwelling was given to appease the "avenger of blood."

We need to remember that Israel at this point is still very tribal in their mindset and did not have an established legal system. Since we live in a society that has these things we tend to take these things for granted, but they are incredibly difficult to set up in a given society. In more tribal societies, justice is deeply rooted in the concepts of honor and were expected to be carried out by individuals or families.

There is an interesting play written in ancient Greece called "The Orestia" that details this. In the play, a king named Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter to the gods in order to receive fair winds as he sailed with his army to Troy. The wife feels honor bound to avenge her daughter, but this means killing her husband. So she murders her husband, but now her son feels honor bound to avenge his father, but this means murdering his mother. Then the mystical Furies avenge the murder of his mother by torturing him and it is only when Athena adjudicates the case that everything is brought back to harmony.

This is a good depiction of how society develops. It begins with mob justice carried out to avenge honor, but this leads to an endless cycle of wrongs to be avenged. It is only when law and order are established by a system reflecting God's justice and carried out by ministers of that justice that a society can have peace. God is leading His people to this society, but as part of that leading He establishes these cities to provide refuge for

those who kill by accident. But the killer is still held in exile and is even forbidden to leave these cities:

“But if the manslayer at any time goes outside the limits of the city of refuge where he fled, ‘and the avenger of blood finds him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood, ‘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 manslayer may return to the land of his possession.”

-Numbers 35:26-28

It seems as though God was trying to establish an interesting thought, related to something we talked about in an earlier paper, the shedding of blood, even when justified or accidental, stains the person who does it. Even though his act was accidental, there is still a mark on his soul that requires a type of exile. But in the above passage we notice something odd. The exile is not tied to the life of the “avenger of blood” but to the High Priest. Why is that? I like how Dennis Prager put this point in his commentary on this passage:

“The individual who killed a human being unintentionally - but due to negligence - was uprooted from his home and community and confined to a city of refuge (where his family could join him, and where he could still practice his profession). He remained there until the death of the High Priest. The Talmud recounts that the mother of the High Priest would sew beautiful clothing and bake fresh bread for all the inhabitants of a city of refuge, so that they would not pray for her son’s death.

Why was the manslayer allowed to leave a city of refuge when the High Priest died? We do not know for sure, but there are at least two plausible reasons: First, the death of the High Priest signified a new era - one in which the slate was clean, so to speak. The death of the High Priest was deemed a national tragedy in ancient Israel. It therefore affected all Israelites in such a profound way that the family of someone unintentionally killed would be prepared to forego their desire to avenge that family member’s death. And if they were not so prepared, they had no choice: with the death of the High Priest, God ordered them to cease seeking revenge.

Second, the death of the High Priest in some way “atoned” for the death of the individual who was unintentionally killed. It was the blood of the murderer that atoned for the murder, but whose blood atoned for the death of someone who was inadvertently but negligently killed? The blood of the High Priest. And that was understood by families seeking vengeance for the death of their next of kin.”

-Dennis Prager - Exodus Commentary

I want to focus primarily on the latter point that he made, that the death of the High Priest, in some way, atoned for the accidental killing. This concept of vengeance is a constant problem in the Bible. In cases like this, the problem becomes more clear, since a wrong was done with no specific person to blame or to be put to death, but this problem exists everywhere. If every wrong were avenged, the flow of blood wouldn't stop until all mankind were destroyed.

God is helping His people understand that, beyond the sacrificial system that He set up, there was a higher sacrifice required to actually answer the problem of human evil and the need for ultimate justice. As Christians this point becomes abundantly clear in the person of Christ:

"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."
-Romans 3:21-26

To those willing to accept it, the blood of Christ answers the flow of blood that began with Abel and continues to this day. We can understand that we can be forgiven for the wrongs that we have committed, and that we don't need to seek vengeance on those who have wronged us. The need for vengeance in our own strength has ended and now there can be forgiveness and atonement. Since the world is still fallen, not everyone will abide in this world of peace that Christ has purchased, and so for now, though the answer to bloodshed has been given, it hasn't been applied to the earth in a way that solves the problem, yet.

God in His patience allows man to judge ourselves in accordance with our own frailty and limited knowledge, and as Christians we know that this is necessary in the course of the world and so we don't condemn governments from carrying out this necessary task, we do however condemn unjust forms of justice when necessary. But the main point is that the frail governments of the world will be replaced with the Kingdom of Heaven at the end of the age. The Priest who died for us so that we might have peace with God is the same Priest who will return to rule and reign over the world, bringing about eternal peace and harmony.

“And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him.”

-Revelation 22:1-3