



BY MARTHA S. BERGEN

“**I** DON’T GET MAD, I GET EVEN” might well be words from a television or movie script. Unfortunately, revenge is not limited to the entertainment screen. It shows up there because it spills over from real life. And revenge is nothing new. One need only look at Genesis 4 to see how one young man took vengeance upon his brother because God accepted his brother’s offering but rejected his own. History reveals numerous accounts of humanity’s personal vendettas and their regrettable outcomes. In the early Christian world Paul’s advice to the church at Rome runs contrary to the characteristic concept of getting even. While the natural man retaliates when wronged, the spiritual man is to respond in a nobler way.

**Preserving Honor**

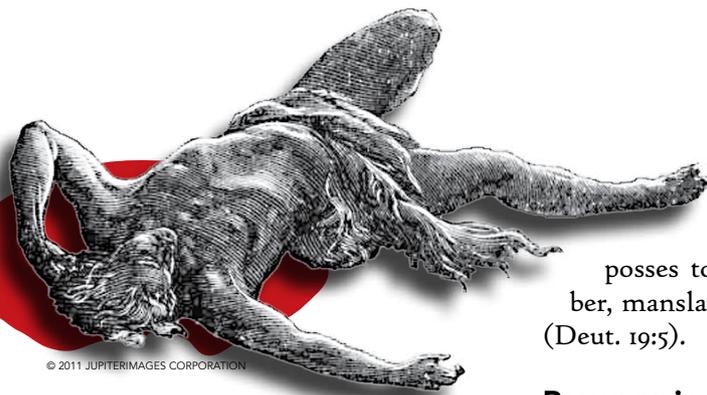
Throughout history people have associated revenge primarily with two things: (1) avenging the death of a clan or family member at the hands of another and (2) maintaining a family or clan’s honor. In the Old Testament world, people closely connected revenge to the concept of honor. To

defame a nation, tribe, individual, or deity was do destroy their honor. Those dishonored became a laughingstock and good-for-nothing in the eyes of others. Cultural expectations thus compelled groups or individuals to uphold honor out of commitment to their reputation and integrity. Consequently, commitment to the preservation of honor required retaliation. Likewise, this served as a means of rendering justice. For the Israelites, justice was to be delivered on God’s behalf. For example, Moses said in Numbers 31:3, “Equip some of your men...to inflict the LORD’s vengeance on them” (HCSB).

We see an example of someone preserving honor when King David sent a delegation of Israelites to express his sympathies to the Ammonite king, Hanun, who had inherited the throne at his

IN EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Revenge



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father's death. Hanun, however, refused to accept David's condolences for what they were, suspecting espionage. So Hanun insulted the Israelite men by shaving their beards and cutting off their clothing to expose their private parts. This humiliation resulted in a battle between Israel and Ammon, with Israel as the victor (see 2 Samuel 10).

Besmirching the honor of someone's deity resulted in retaliatory action in order to preserve that deity's honor as well. David knew this even when he was too young to serve in Israel's military and, therefore, took upon himself the responsibility of avenging the name of the God of Israel because of Goliath's belittling. David declared: "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" and "This day... the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel" (1 Sam. 17:26,46, NIV).

Significantly, in the Old Testament Era, vengeance was never to be an individual matter. Out of the backdrop of God's laws for holiness, Leviticus 19:18 states: "Never seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD" (NLT). Vengeance, then, on the personal level was not acceptable. This is why God provided cities of refuge for the Israelites (see map, page 65) when He

brought them into Canaan. Although individuals or clans might put together posses to track down the killer of a clan member, manslaughter was not a reason to kill someone (Deut. 19:5).

### Revenge in Ancient Greece

Much of Greek literature and drama deals with the matter of seeking revenge. Such, for example, is Homer's classic *The Iliad*, in which the character Achilles takes revenge upon Hector, the killer of Patroclus, by murdering him. In Homeric times, what a murderer

had to dread, was, not public prosecution and punishment, but the personal vengeance of the kinsmen and friends of the deceased, who were...[motivated]...by...honour and obligation to avenge the deed, and were considered by the public as specially privileged to do so. To escape from this danger, he is obliged to flee the country, unless he can prevail upon the incensed kinsmen to accept of a valuable payment...as satisfaction for their slain comrade.<sup>1</sup>

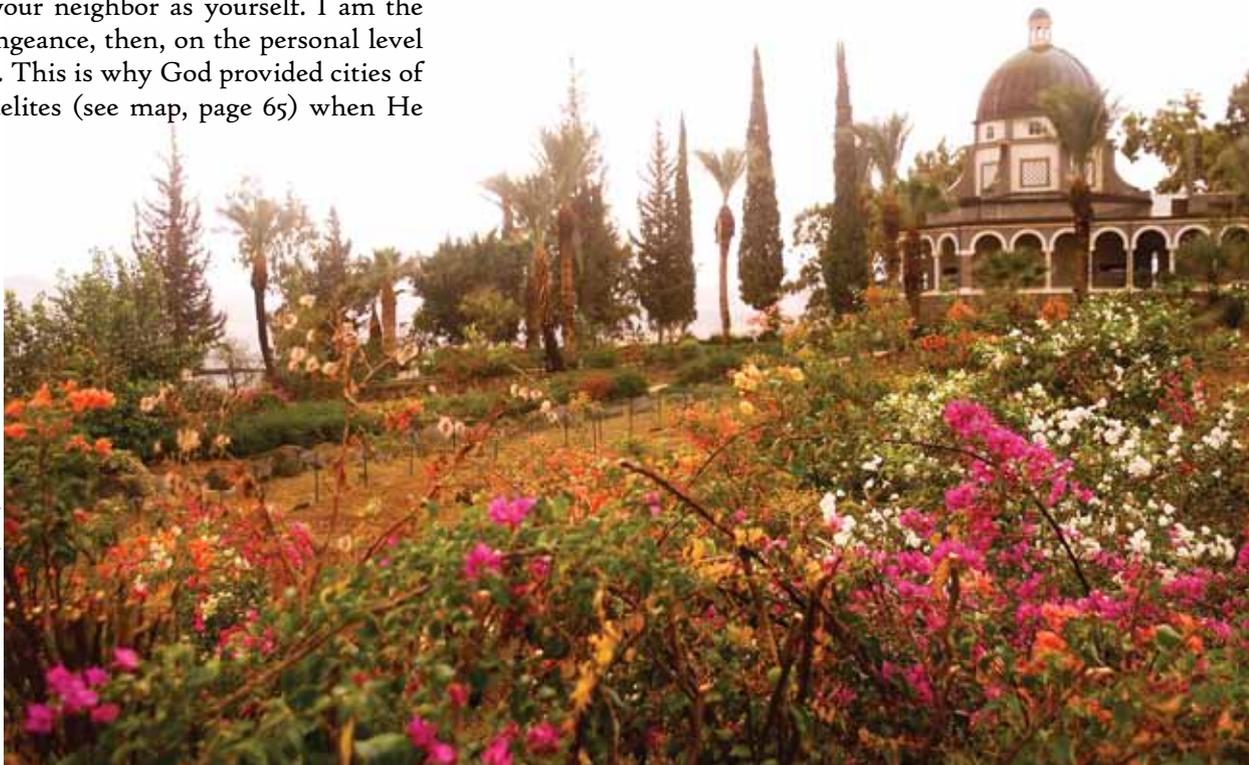
In the early days of Greek culture, Greeks made retribution—whether by vengeance or payment—else one had to, literally, "run for his life."

### Roman Vengeance

Hellenistic philosophy greatly influenced the culture of Rome. Consequently, Roman law adopted much of

**Right: Church of the Beatitudes in Galilee. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke about not seeking revenge: "But I tell you, don't resist an evildoer. On the contrary, if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matt. 5:39, HCSB). In that same sermon Jesus also said, "You are blessed when they insult and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of Me" (v. 11, HCSB).**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/MIKE RUTHERFORD (5/9/2005)



## A STORY OF REJECTION, REVENGE, AND REWARD

**A**CCORDING TO GREEK mythology, Hera (the queen of the Greek gods, the goddess of marriage, and the sister and wife of Zeus) rejected her son Hephaestus at birth because he had a birth defect. As Hephaestus grew and learned of the story, he vowed to take revenge.

Being a master craftsman, Hephaestus constructed a golden chair and sent it to Hera at Mount Olympus. Once Hera was

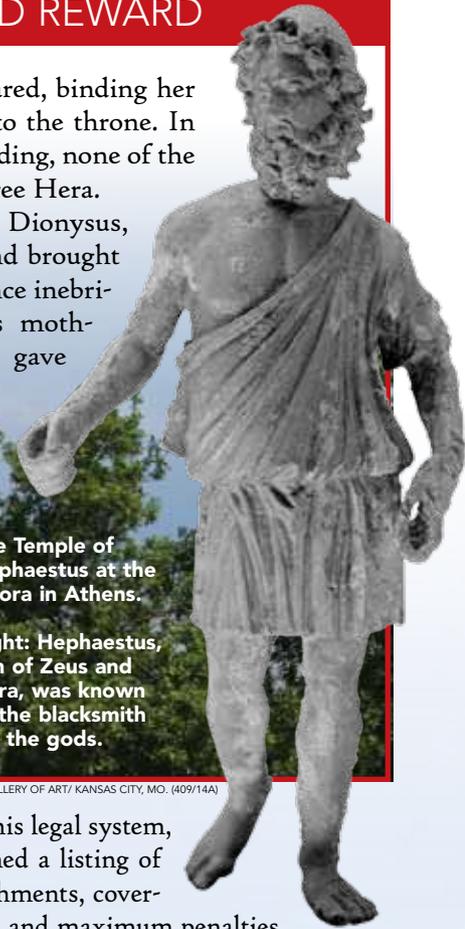
seated, though, chains appeared, binding her instantly and permanently to the throne. In spite of her begging and pleading, none of the other Olympic gods could free Hera.

The Greek god of wine, Dionysus, gave wine to Hephaestus and brought him to Mount Olympus. Once inebriated, Hephaestus freed his mother. As a reward the gods gave Aphrodite to Hephaestus.



The Temple of Hephaestus at the Agora in Athens.

Right: Hephaestus, son of Zeus and Hera, was known as the blacksmith for the gods.



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ WILLIAM ROCKWELL NELSON GALLERY OF ART/ KANSAS CITY, MO. (409/14A)

Greek law. Roman law permitted *talio*, the retaliation for a wrong that dictated reciprocal infliction, for example, “eye for eye” or “tooth for tooth.” Even as Rome transitioned from permitting personal vengeance to requiring state-sanctioned compensation, as early as the sixth to fifth centuries B.C., *talio* was still allowable in cases of assault (*injuria*).<sup>2</sup> The Laws of the Twelve Tables, Rome’s earliest law code, for example, states: “If one has maimed a limb and does not compromise with the injured person, let there be retaliation.”<sup>3</sup> The law made no distinction, though, between public and private crimes until the second and third centuries A.D. From this point on, the courts addressed private abuses as civil actions.<sup>4</sup> The state adjudicated crimes involving the taking of human life. Thus, personal vengeance was not sanctioned.

By the first century, Rome’s legal system had progressed in such a way that it applied to all citizens, covering offenses against individuals and society, as

well as government. This legal system, known as *ordo*, contained a listing of crimes and their punishments, covering both the minimum and maximum penalties for violations.<sup>5</sup> When those in Roman society committed wrongs, recompense of some sort was the expectation. Roman law clearly addressed such concerns. Paul also spoke to such ethical matters in his writings; however, he did so from a perspective that promoted a superior response.

### Divine Law

Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Rome, appealed to something far greater than any human law of revenge. He appealed to divine law, calling for conduct that transcended, and therefore put aside, the urge to get even and harm another. Pulling from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, he said, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do



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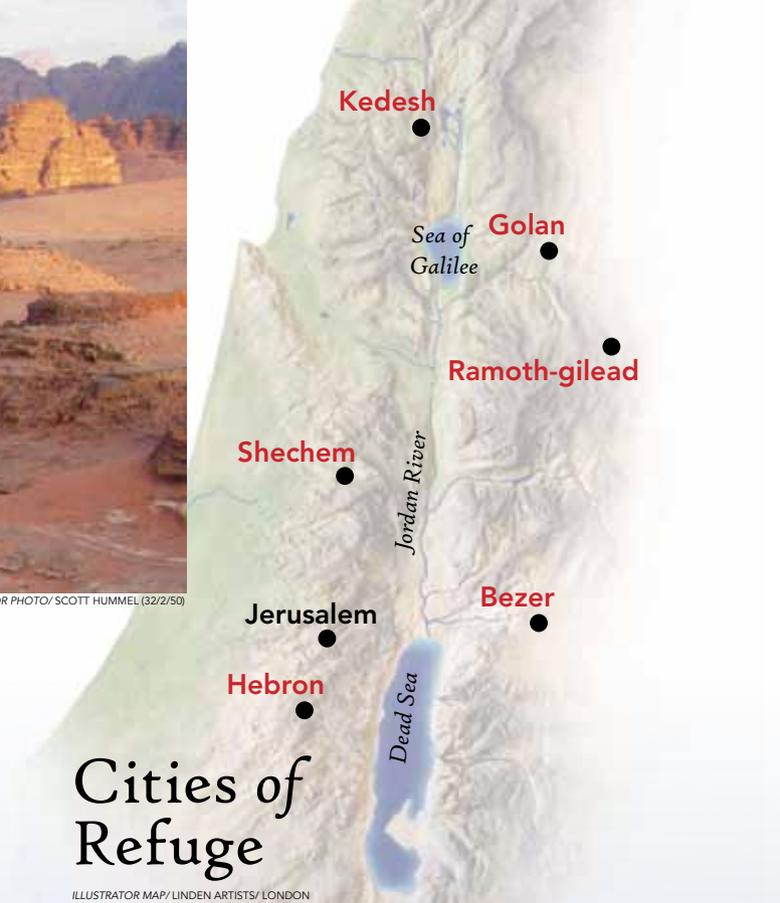


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**Above: Wadi Rum in southern Jordan, in what would have been the northern part of ancient Midian. Moses instructed the people: “Equip some of your men for war. They will go against Midian to inflict the LORD’s vengeance on them” (Num. 31:3, HCSB).**

**Left: Part of a Roman road at Medaba (modern Madaba), Jordan. In the battle between the Israelites and Ammonites, the Arameans sided with the Ammonites and camped at Medeba (1 Chron. 19:7).**

not curse” (Rom. 12:14, HSCB). His focus on Christian ethics in Romans 12 grew out of the premise that vengeance belongs to none other than God Himself (v. 19). Furthermore, since the Christian belongs to God—in body, mind, and spirit—whatever he or she does is to be done out of love for Him, which in turn rightfully expresses itself in loving acts toward others. The selfish person retaliates; the sacrificial person honors another above himself. Choosing revenge is conformity to the world’s inferior standard, but the choice to “love each other with



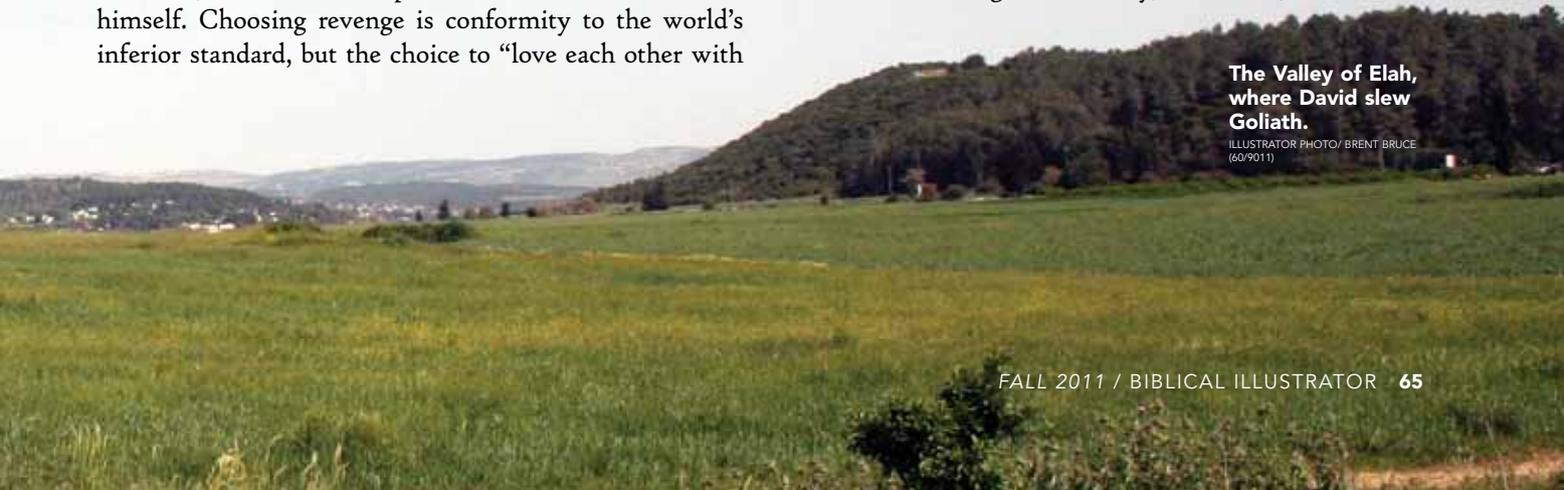
## Cities of Refuge

ILLUSTRATOR MAP/ LINDEN ARTISTS/ LONDON

genuine affection” (v. 10, NLT) requires discipline. It can only result from a qualitative change in one’s will and thinking process, motivated by a higher standard. Such a transformation, Paul said, gives discernment for “the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God” (v. 2, HCSB) to which every Christian should aspire. **B**

1. Henry Smith Williams, *The Historians’ History of the World*, vol. 3, *Greece to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Outlook Company, 1904), 95.
2. “Roman Law: Delict and Contract.” *Encyclopedia Britannica* [online; accessed 18 October 2010]. Available from the Internet: [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/507759/Roman-law/41328/Delict-and-contract](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/507759/Roman-law/41328/Delict-and-contract).
3. “The Roman Twelve Tables of Law, circa 450 BC,” UNRV History [online; accessed 8 February 2011]. Available from the Internet: [www.unrv.com/government/twelvetables.php](http://www.unrv.com/government/twelvetables.php). This law is sometimes understood to be law 2 of Table VIII or law 9 of Table VII. No complete copy of the Laws of the Twelve Tables exists; all versions are reconstructions compiled from other ancient documents.
4. “Delict” in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2002), 3:974.
5. Stephen L. Cox, “Roman Law” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1407.

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**The Valley of Elah, where David slew Goliath.**

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