

Note: The following one-pager is a response to a reader question. We still receive reader questions and do answer them. You may email your requests to Rashiyomi@GMail.Com.

[Background: The Bible deals with the scenario of finding a dead body; additionally, the murderer cannot be ascertained. The Bible prescribes the broken-neck-calf procedure to atone for such a horrible scene. After the procedure there is a responsive recital by the city leadership and priests]

Rashi #1, #2, #3: Biblical Text: Dt21-05:09

Dt21-05) <i>The priests come near; for they were chosen to i) serve God, ii) to bless in the name of God, and iii) to adjudicate disputes and afflictions</i>	Dt21-06) <i>All city leadership wash their hands [spilling water] over the calf broken-necked in the stream</i>
Dt21-07) <i>They responsively say (#1)</i>	
Dt21-09) <i>Atone (#1) for your nation which you have redeemed God; do not let innocent blood lie in the midst of Israel</i>	Dt21-08) <i>We have not provoked (#2) killing this person; we have not overlooked anything</i>
<i>And the unknown murder will be atoned (#3)</i>	

Rashi text #1: Rashi explains that the responsive reading mentioned in Dt21-07 refers to both the previous two verses (v5, v6) listing the responsive speakers (Priests and elders) as well as the following two verses (v8, v9) listing their respective statements. In connection with this Rashi several points can be made: i) v7 explicitly says there is responsive reading!, ii) the previous two verses mention two players, priests and elders, iii) v5 explicitly identifies priests as the arbiters of disputes and afflictions while v9 mentions the petition to atone for the unknown death. Hence Rashi logically assigns v9 to the priests and v8 to the city leadership. The Bible is not written with tabular structure; the table provides strong visual aid for Rashi.

Rashi text #2: The actual biblical text seems to say, “We have not killed this person.” However, the word for kill has an added terminal Hey in the written text which is not read (The bible occasionally uses this written-read duality to communicate nuance).

The terminal Hey in Hebrew indicates the subjunctive mood. Let us review grammar. Every verb or activity has a mood. The indicative mood indicates *what actually happened in the real world*. For example, I ate, I drank, I sang. The subjunctive mood indicates *what is happening in my mind*. For example, *I wish I could eat, I desire to drink, etc.* For example, the song by the Red Sea when the Egyptians pursuing the Jews drowned (Ex15-01) would read “Oh, I wish I could sing to God on how great he is...” (The current translation is “I will sing to God on how great he is” incorrectly using the indicative mood. Shammai Gelernder in his beautiful book on Psalms skillfully shows how the psalmist (or anyone praying) under conditions of extreme emotion may speak about wishing to do something but finding themselves unable.)

So Rashi, upon seeing the terminal Hey explains that the verse is not saying “We did not kill this person” but rather “We did not provoke into killing” a subjunctive mood rather than an indicative mood.

It is interesting, that as usual, the Rashi *form* is not scientific and abstract, a speech by Dr. Rashi Academic about the different moods, but is in the form of a playful pun. Rashi says, “Why should the elders say, ‘We didn’t kill this person?’ Did anyone suspect them of killing? But the verse means ‘We didn’t see a wayfarer and not provide food and lodging’” Of course this Rashi text is simply a punchy way to remember the real reason, the use of the subjunctive mood.

Rashi text #3: Through the Table formatting we have indicated that the responsive reading stops at verse 9. The bible has no tables so Rashi infers this from the sudden change to the passive conjugation “The murder will be atoned.” The message here is that i) the murder was not provoked, ii) an appropriate ritual expressing seriousness was done, and therefore, since nothing more can be done, iii) God will atone.