

Research Article

Proportional and Accountable Justice: An Ethical-Legal Study of Exodus 21:12–14 in Responding to Contemporary Criminal Justice Issues

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Abstract: Contemporary criminal justice systems continue to face challenges in ensuring that law enforcement is not merely legal-formal but also proportional, accountable, and humane, particularly in distinguishing intentional from unintentional homicide. This study examines the ethical-legal principles of Exodus 21:12–14 to explore their relevance for contemporary criminal justice. Specifically, it analyzes the principle of intent in determining criminal responsibility, examines the ethical significance of sanctuary as an early form of legal protection, and critiques the misuse of religious or institutional authority as a means of avoiding legal accountability. This qualitative study employs a literature-based approach through biblical exegesis and ethical-legal analysis. The findings identify three enduring ethical principles: (1) criminal liability should be assessed based on intentionality rather than solely on the resulting act; (2) sanctuary functions as an early expression of legal protection and procedural justice for unintentional offenders; and (3) the command to remove premeditated murderers even from the altar rejects all forms of impunity and affirms equal accountability before the law. The study concludes that Exodus 21:12–14 offers enduring ethical-legal insights that enrich contemporary discourse on criminal justice by promoting proportional, accountable, humane, and impartial law enforcement.

Keywords: Accountable Justice; Criminal Justice; Ethical-Legal Analysis; Homicide; Intentionality.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary era, criminal justice systems across the world continue to grapple with a longstanding yet critical challenge: ensuring that law enforcement is not merely legal-formal but also substantive, proportional, and accountable. Despite continuous legal reforms, practices such as vigilantism and emotionally driven mob justice frequently undermine legal objectivity, particularly in cases involving the loss of human life (Oktaviani & Kuswandi, 2025). Vigilantism itself violates the rule of law because it employs violence outside legal procedures, even when perpetrators believe their actions to be morally justified. Moreover, modern legal systems increasingly face the paradox of institutional impunity. When institutions expected to uphold justice instead become shelters for lawbreakers, the principle of equality before the law is seriously threatened (Sadzili et al., 2026). The abuse of public authority, manipulation of official positions, and exploitation of religious or political symbols as protective shields by white-collar offenders continue to widen the gap between legal ideals and the realization of justice.

These contemporary legal and ethical tensions are not entirely new. Similar concerns were addressed thousands of years ago through biblical legal traditions, particularly Exodus 21:12–14. According to Exodus 21, God prescribed capital punishment for four major offenses, one of which is premeditated murder (Stamps, 2004, p. 132). This passage represents one of the earliest legal foundations within the Judeo-Christian tradition

governing criminal responsibility. Exodus 21:12–14 follows a characteristic casuistic legal structure, beginning with a general legal principle and then introducing specific exceptions. Verse 12 establishes the general rule that anyone who causes another person's death shall be put to death, whereas verses 13–14 distinguish between accidental homicide and intentional murder. This distinction demonstrates that justice should not be determined solely by the external act but must also consider the offender's intent (*mens rea*). Furthermore, the provision of sanctuary for unintentional offenders serves as an early legal mechanism for preventing emotionally motivated blood vengeance, while the command to remove premeditated murderers even from God's altar emphasizes that sacred institutions must never become instruments of legal immunity.

Previous studies have examined biblical legal texts using a variety of methodological approaches. Historical-critical exegesis has primarily reconstructed the socio-historical context of Ancient Israel and the development of Mosaic law, while theological-ethical studies have emphasized biblical perspectives on justice, punishment, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Meanwhile, contemporary legal scholarship has generally analyzed criminal intent, homicide, asylum, and impunity through the perspectives of positive law, criminal jurisprudence, and international law. For example, Illu (2024) demonstrates that Exodus 21:22–25 promotes humanitarian values through proportional justice, victim protection, offender responsibility, and violence prevention. Hurmanisa et al. (2025) argue that Christian ethics evaluates capital punishment through a balance between justice, love, and forgiveness. Likewise, Wiratama et al. (2023) explain that premeditated murder constitutes one of the gravest offenses under criminal law because it involves deliberate planning and intentionality, whereas Putri and Arsika (2022) examine diplomatic asylum within international law as a humanitarian mechanism that simultaneously creates tensions with state sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention.

Although these studies have made valuable contributions, each methodological approach presents certain limitations. Historical-critical studies successfully reconstruct the original context of biblical law but rarely extend their findings to contemporary criminal justice issues. Theological-ethical approaches emphasize moral and spiritual values but often provide limited discussion of institutional accountability and legal responsibility. Conversely, positive legal scholarship offers systematic analyses of criminal liability, asylum, and homicide yet generally overlooks the transcendental ethical foundations that originally shaped these legal concepts. Consequently, existing scholarship has not sufficiently integrated biblical legal ethics with contemporary criminal justice through an interdisciplinary ethical-legal framework.

This limitation reveals a significant research gap. Existing studies have neither directly analyzed the principle of criminal intent (*mens rea*) in Exodus 21:12–14 nor explored the ethical significance of sanctuary as a foundation for legal protection and procedural justice. Furthermore, very few studies have interpreted Exodus 21:12–14 as a normative ethical critique of institutional impunity, despite the passage explicitly rejecting the misuse of sacred institutions as places of legal immunity. As a result, the potential contribution of biblical legal ethics to contemporary criminal justice discourse remains largely underexplored.

To address this gap, this study adopts an interdisciplinary ethical-legal approach that integrates biblical exegesis with contemporary legal ethics. Rather than treating Exodus 21:12–14 merely as an ancient religious text, the study interprets the passage as a normative ethical framework capable of informing present-day discussions concerning proportional justice, criminal accountability, due process, human rights protection, and institutional integrity. Through this approach, the ethical principles embedded within the biblical text are reconstructed and contextualized for contemporary legal discourse.

This study makes four principal contributions. First, it reconstructs the ethical-legal principles embedded in Exodus 21:12–14 from the perspective of criminal justice ethics. Second, it develops the concept of sanctuary as an early ethical model of legal protection and procedural justice for unintentional offenders. Third, it demonstrates that the command to remove premeditated murderers even from the altar represents a fundamental biblical rejection of institutional impunity and selective law enforcement. Fourth, it proposes an interdisciplinary ethical framework through which biblical legal principles may enrich contemporary discussions concerning accountable, proportional, humane, and impartial criminal justice.

Against this background, this study addresses the following research question: How does Exodus 21:12–14 provide an ethical-legal foundation for distinguishing criminal intent,

protecting legal rights through sanctuary, and rejecting institutional impunity in response to contemporary criminal justice challenges? Accordingly, this study aims to (1) analyze the principle of intent in Exodus 21:12–14, (2) examine the ethical significance of sanctuary as a foundation for legal protection and procedural justice, and (3) investigate the passage's critique of the misuse of institutional and religious symbols as instruments of legal impunity in the contemporary era.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 explains the research methodology employed in this study. Section 3 presents an exegetical analysis of Exodus 21:12–14. Section 4 discusses the ethical and legal implications of the findings for contemporary criminal justice systems. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper by summarizing the principal findings, highlighting the theoretical contributions, and proposing directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Biblical Legal Ethics and Criminal Responsibility

The relationship between biblical law and criminal responsibility has attracted considerable attention in biblical scholarship. Most studies interpret the legal materials in Exodus within the framework of the Ancient Near Eastern legal tradition, emphasizing their historical, theological, and social contexts (Westbrook, 2003; Walton, 2009). Historical-critical scholars generally argue that Mosaic law should be understood as a covenantal legal system designed to preserve justice, social order, and communal responsibility rather than merely to impose punishment (Paterson, 2015).

One of the central legal principles found in Exodus 21 is the distinction between intentional and unintentional homicide. This distinction reflects an early recognition that criminal liability should depend not only on the harmful act itself but also on the offender's intention (*mens rea*). Illu (2024) argues that the legal provisions in Exodus 21:22–25 demonstrate proportional justice through the protection of victims, offender responsibility, and the prevention of recurring violence. Likewise, Wright (2004) maintains that Old Testament ethics consistently integrates justice with covenantal responsibility, indicating that punishment should always be exercised within the framework of divine justice rather than arbitrary retaliation.

Although these studies successfully explain the historical and theological significance of biblical law, they generally remain confined to exegetical or theological discussions. Consequently, they provide limited explanation regarding how biblical legal ethics may contribute to contemporary debates on criminal justice, institutional accountability, and legal proportionality.

Contemporary Criminal Justice, Sanctuary, and Institutional Impunity

Contemporary criminal justice scholarship has extensively discussed intentional homicide, criminal liability, legal protection, asylum, and institutional accountability. Modern criminal law emphasizes that criminal responsibility requires both the commission of a prohibited act (*actus reus*) and a culpable mental state (*mens rea*) (Dressler, 2018). Accordingly, intentional homicide is distinguished from accidental killing because intentionality significantly influences the degree of criminal liability.

Recent legal studies similarly highlight the importance of procedural justice and legal protection. Putri and Arsika (2022) argue that diplomatic asylum functions as a humanitarian mechanism intended to protect individuals facing serious threats to their safety and fundamental rights, although it often creates tension with state sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention. Likewise, Sadzili et al. (2026) explain that institutional impunity constitutes a major obstacle to constitutional accountability because legal institutions may be manipulated to protect individuals from prosecution. Wiratama et al. (2023) further emphasize that premeditated murder represents one of the gravest criminal offenses because it involves deliberate planning and conscious intent before the unlawful act is committed.

From a Christian ethical perspective, Hurmanisa et al. (2025) argue that justice should not be understood exclusively in terms of retributive punishment but must also consider restoration, mercy, and respect for human dignity. Nevertheless, most contemporary legal studies approach these issues primarily from secular legal perspectives and rarely engage biblical legal ethics as a normative framework for evaluating criminal justice.

The existing literature therefore demonstrates two significant gaps. First, biblical scholarship has rarely reconstructed Exodus 21:12–14 as an ethical-legal framework

applicable to contemporary criminal justice. Second, legal scholarship has seldom explored how biblical concepts such as intentionality, sanctuary, and the rejection of impunity may contribute to present-day discussions concerning accountable, proportional, and humane law enforcement. Addressing these gaps, the present study integrates biblical exegesis with contemporary legal ethics to reconstruct the ethical principles embedded in Exodus 21:12–14 and examine their relevance for modern criminal justice systems.

3. Proposed Method

This study employed a qualitative research design based on library research using an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical-contextual biblical exegesis with contemporary ethical-legal analysis (Andreas B. Subagyo; 2004). The purpose of this approach was not merely to interpret Exodus 21:12–14 within its original historical and literary context but also to reconstruct its ethical-legal principles as a normative framework for evaluating contemporary criminal justice issues.

The primary source of this study was Exodus 21:12–14, which served as the principal text for exegetical analysis. Secondary sources consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, biblical commentaries, legal literature, philosophical works, and studies on criminal justice, human rights, and institutional accountability. These materials were collected through systematic searches of reputable academic databases to ensure the credibility, relevance, and currency of the supporting literature.

Data analysis was conducted using a dialogical-reflective approach through qualitative content analysis. The analysis began with a historical-contextual examination of Exodus 21:12–14 to identify its literary structure, legal characteristics, and theological meaning. Particular attention was given to the distinction between intentional and unintentional homicide, the legal function of sanctuary, and the prohibition against exploiting sacred institutions as places of immunity for premeditated offenders.

The exegetical findings were subsequently synthesized into three interrelated ethical-legal principles: intentionality (*mens rea*), sanctuary as legal protection, and anti-impunity. These principles were then critically examined in dialogue with contemporary theories of criminal justice, including proportional justice, criminal responsibility, procedural fairness, human rights protection, and equality before the law. Through this comparative process, the study identified both the continuity and the ethical distinctiveness of biblical legal principles in relation to modern legal thought.

Finally, the results of the exegetical and comparative analyses were integrated through deductive reasoning to formulate an ethical-legal framework for proportional and accountable justice. This framework demonstrates how the legal ethics embodied in Exodus 21:12–14 continue to offer relevant normative insights for addressing contemporary challenges related to criminal intent, legal protection, institutional accountability, and the rejection of impunity.

4. Results and Discussion

The title Exodus is derived from the Greek term *Exodos*, as found in the Septuagint, from which the English title *Exodus* is transliterated (Pfeiffer & Harrison, 2014, p. 153). Traditionally, the authorship of the Book of Exodus has been attributed to Moses, who is recognized as the central figure of the Pentateuch and the leader of the Israelites during their deliverance from Egypt (Stamps, 2004, p. 93). The intended audience of the book was not limited to the first generation of Israelites but also included subsequent generations who continued to read, preserve, and transmit this covenantal tradition of faith (Paterson, 2015, pp. 10–11). Within this context, the Book of Exodus serves an important pedagogical function by teaching the values of faith, obedience, and holiness to God's people throughout successive generations. Therefore, Exodus should be understood not merely as a historical narrative but also as a normative theological and ethical text that continues to provide guidance for the faith and conduct of the covenant community.

Context of Exodus 21:12–14

The context of Exodus 21:12–14 is situated within the collection of civil laws that God delivered to the Israelites through Moses following the proclamation of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. This passage forms part of the Covenant Code, which regulates interpersonal relationships, particularly those concerning the protection of human life (Paterson, 2015, pp. 10–11). Verses 12–14 specifically distinguish between intentional and unintentional homicide while prescribing the corresponding legal consequences for each offense. The preceding passages address slavery and social rights, whereas the subsequent sections discuss various forms of violence and liability for personal injury and property damage. Consequently, Exodus 21:12–14 occupies a significant position within Israel's legal system by affirming the principles of justice, moral responsibility, and respect for human life as God's creation.

From a linguistic perspective, the legal provision begins with the Hebrew participial expression meaning “whoever strikes,” a formulation commonly employed in biblical casuistic law to introduce general legal principles. Although the Hebrew noun referring to the victim appears in the masculine form, the regulation is generally understood to apply universally, including to women. Overall, an etymological analysis of Exodus 21:12–14 demonstrates that the legislation concerning homicide is founded upon a concept of justice that considers not only the external act but also the offender's intention and moral responsibility. The Hebrew terminology underscores the seriousness of intentional murder while simultaneously providing legal protection for individuals who cause death without deliberate intent. This distinction establishes one of the earliest legal expressions of proportional justice by differentiating criminal liability according to the offender's state of mind rather than solely the resulting harm.

Distinguishing Intent and Action as the Ethical Foundation of Objectivity in Modern Criminal Justice

Verse 12 states, “Whoever strikes a person so that he dies shall surely be put to death.” The Hebrew verb *נָכָה* (*nakhah*) means “to strike,” “to attack,” or “to wound” (Achenbach, 2012, p. 214). This verb frequently appears in contexts involving violent acts that result in injury or death. In Exodus 21:12, it refers to a physical act that causes another person's death. The use of *nakhah* emphasizes that homicide is understood as an aggressive act carrying serious legal consequences.

The Hebrew word *מוֹת* (*muth*) means “to die” or “death” (Achenbach, 2012, p. 173). In verse 12, the term denotes the direct consequence of the offender's action. From a theological perspective, *muth* signifies the loss of life, which the Old Testament consistently regards as a divine gift. Consequently, homicide—whether motivated by revenge or the defense of personal honor is never considered ethically or theologically legitimate (Suryawinata, 2025). Death caused by human violence therefore constitutes a serious violation of the divine order.

The phrase *מוֹת יוֹמָת* (*muth yumat*) represents a characteristic Hebrew legal construction employing an infinitive absolute followed by a passive verb to express emphatic certainty. Literally translated as “dying, he shall surely die,” the expression indicates that the death penalty is mandatory. Within the Old Testament legal system, capital punishment functioned as an instrument for maintaining justice and social order (Theofany & Wijati, 2025). This grammatical construction underscores the uncompromising stance of Mosaic law toward intentional homicide while affirming justice as a fundamental principle of Israel's legal system.

Verse 12 establishes the foundational legal principle of protecting human life. The verb “to strike” denotes an act of violence resulting in death, whereas the phrase “shall surely be put to death” reflects the severity of the legal sanction imposed upon intentional homicide. Within Israelite law, human life was regarded as sacred because humanity was created in the image of God. From a legal perspective, a legal act is understood as a deliberate action performed with the intention of creating legal rights and obligations regulated by law (Sinaulan, 2018). Consequently, homicide is viewed not only as a violation of social order but also as a sin against God.

The imposition of capital punishment in this passage functions both as the enforcement of justice and as a warning to society to respect the sanctity of human life. It

demonstrates that Mosaic law rejects acts of violence committed intentionally and with full moral responsibility. In contemporary criminal law, premeditated murder is generally regarded as the most serious form of homicide and is punishable by either capital punishment or life imprisonment (Sandini, 2023). Accordingly, Exodus 21:12–14 affirms that the death penalty for intentional murder represents the implementation of God's justice in safeguarding the sanctity of human life while emphasizing that every act of unlawfully taking another person's life entails profound legal consequences and moral responsibility.

The concept of criminal intent in Indonesian criminal law consists of two essential elements: *willens* (the element of volition) and *wetens* (the element of knowledge). An act is therefore considered intentional when the offender both wills the conduct and is fully aware of the consequences arising from that conduct (Utoyo & Afriani, 2020). In this respect, Exodus 21:12–14 presents a remarkably advanced legal paradigm by clearly distinguishing between intentional and unintentional homicide. The expression “*but he did not intend it*” (v. 13), contrasted with “*acts presumptuously... with deceitful intent*” (v. 14), shifts the focus of justice from the mere physical consequence—the loss of life—to the offender's psychological state (*mens rea*).

From a contemporary perspective, this principle demonstrates that justice must never ignore the circumstances underlying a criminal act. Modern criminal justice systems incorporate this principle by requiring proof of the offender's degree of culpability before imposing criminal sanctions. Exodus 21:12–14, however, offers a deeper ethical foundation by insisting that objective investigation must precede legal judgment. From the perspective of Christian ethics, capital punishment should neither be categorically accepted nor categorically rejected. Rather, it may only be considered as a last resort under conditions of careful deliberation, justice, and respect for human dignity (Theofany & Wijati, 2025). Accordingly, Exodus 21:12–14 teaches that genuine justice must be grounded in truth, wisdom, and reverence for the value of human life bestowed by God.

This principle also provides a compelling critique of contemporary sociological phenomena such as vigilantism and media-driven *trial by press*. Acts of revenge are often motivated by the desire to restore personal honor and a subjective sense of justice (Nainggolan, 2023). By requiring careful examination of criminal intent before punishment is imposed, Exodus 21:12–14 calls modern societies to break the cycle of emotionally driven retaliation and to ensure that every legal sanction remains proportionate to the offender's actual degree of moral culpability.

Sanctuary as a Space for Human Rights Protection and the Right to Self-Defense

Verse 13 states, “*But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee.*” The Hebrew term **צָדָה** (*tsādāh*) used in this verse means “to lie in wait,” “to plan,” or “to hunt” (Achenbach, 2012, p. 250). The term conveys the element of deliberation or premeditation in an act of homicide. When the text declares that the offender did not “lie in wait” for the victim, it indicates that the killing occurred without prior intent. Thus, Mosaic law establishes a clear distinction between premeditated murder and unintentional homicide.

This verse provides an exception for cases of accidental homicide. The text explicitly differentiates between intentional murder and death resulting from an accident. The concept of “unintentional” refers to an act arising from negligence or the offender's failure to exercise appropriate caution. In such circumstances, the offender has no intention of producing the fatal outcome, yet the consequence occurs because of a failure to meet the required standard of care and responsibility (Utoyo & Afriani, 2020). The expression “*he did not intend it*” indicates the absence of malicious intent or prior planning. In such situations, God designates “a place” of refuge for the offender. This concept was later institutionalized in Israelite law through the establishment of the Cities of Refuge (Deut. 4; 19; 35). These sanctuaries were intended to protect individuals accused of unintentional homicide from acts of revenge by the victim's family until a lawful judicial process could take place.

The phrase **וַהֲאֵלֹהִים אֱנָהּ לֵיָדּוֹ** (*weha'elohim innāh leyādō*), translated as “God let it happen,” indicates that the incident was accidental rather than the result of deliberate criminal intent. This expression acknowledges God's sovereignty over human events without implying that God is the author of evil. Accordingly, the passage demonstrates that divine law emphasizes not only punishment but also justice, mercy, and careful consideration of

the offender's motives. Likewise, the Hebrew term **מָקוֹם** (*māqôm*), meaning “place,” refers to the sanctuary appointed by God for individuals who committed unintentional homicide. Theologically, this concept illustrates that God provides both justice and protection for those who are not morally culpable.

Originally, this regulation referred to the altar, where an accused person could seek refuge until a legal decision concerning the case had been rendered (Paterson, 2015, pp. 10–11). God's appointment of “a place” of refuge for an unintentional killer should therefore not be understood merely as a spatial regulation but as an ethical expression of the protection of fundamental human rights during situations of conflict. In the Ancient Near East, the institution of the *blood avenger* frequently allowed immediate retaliation without judicial examination. The establishment of cities of refuge interrupted this cycle of violence by providing a secure place where the accused could remain until a fair legal process was completed. Consequently, justice could be administered through proper legal procedures, even though every wrongdoing still carried consequences for which the offender remained accountable (Stamps, 2004, p. 136).

From a contemporary perspective, this principle of sanctuary has evolved into an ethical foundation for asylum institutions, the principle of *non-refoulement*, and equal access to legal aid. Human rights protection is fundamentally directed toward preventing violations through the establishment of legal regulations, human rights institutions, and protective mechanisms involving individuals, civil society, and the state. Nevertheless, the state bears the primary responsibility for guaranteeing and safeguarding the fundamental rights of all citizens (Sinaulan, 2018). Ethically, Exodus 21:13 challenges modern civilization not to focus exclusively on punitive justice but also to provide procedural safeguards that guarantee the right to a fair defense and due process of law. Such procedural space enables material truth to be established objectively, free from intimidation and from extrajudicial acts of vigilantism.

Indonesian criminal law likewise explicitly recognizes the doctrine of **noodweer** (self-defense). Nevertheless, in practice, individuals who act in legitimate self-defense often continue to face legal uncertainty during criminal proceedings. The legal consequences for a victim who causes another person's death while defending himself or herself depend upon the factual circumstances established during trial and the assessment of law enforcement authorities regarding the surrounding circumstances. When the act is legally recognized as legitimate self-defense, the individual may be exempted from criminal prosecution and liability. Viewed through this perspective, Exodus 21:13 provides an enduring ethical framework that upholds procedural justice, protects the rights of individuals who lack criminal intent, and rejects emotionally driven retaliation as a substitute for lawful judicial process.

The Desacralization of the Altar as Resistance to Impunity and the Misuse of Institutional Symbols

Verse 14 states: “*But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.*” This verse refers to an offender who clings to the altar in search of protection. The Hebrew word **מִזְבֵּחַ** (*mizbēah*) means “altar,” the sacred place where sacrifices and worship were offered to God (Achenbach, 2012, p. 173). Within Israelite culture, the altar symbolized holiness and divine protection. Nevertheless, Exodus 21:14 emphatically declares that the sanctity of the altar must never be exploited to shield those who deliberately commit criminal acts. In this way, the text establishes that God's justice takes precedence over religious symbols and institutions.

The expression translated as “by treachery” or “deceitfully” derives from the Hebrew root **עָרְמָה** (*‘ormāh*), which denotes cunning, deceit, or deliberate planning carried out with malicious intent (Achenbach, 2012, p. 258). The use of this term highlights the element of *malice aforethought* in the act of murder. Consequently, Mosaic law evaluates homicide not merely according to its physical consequences but also according to the offender's intention and moral motivation. This emphasis reflects the ethical principle that justice must consider both the external act (*actus reus*) and the internal disposition (*mens rea*).

Verse 14 therefore reaffirms the legal consequence for intentional and premeditated murder. The phrase “*by treachery*” indicates planning, deception, and malicious intent, thereby distinguishing the offender from one who kills unintentionally. Unlike accidental killers,

premeditated murderers are denied legal sanctuary. Even if they seek refuge at the altar—the holiest symbol of divine protection—they must still be removed, tried, and sentenced to death. This demonstrates that sacred institutions cannot function as sanctuaries for deliberate wrongdoing. God's justice transcends religious symbolism, affirming that genuine spirituality must always be accompanied by moral accountability and the faithful administration of justice.

The ethical climax of this pericope appears in the divine command, *“you shall take him even from My altar, that he may die.”* The altar represented the most sacred space within Israel's theocratic order and embodied God's covenantal presence and protection. Yet God Himself rejects any attempt to transform His altar into a refuge for those who commit premeditated murder. The holiness of God's house cannot be manipulated as a shield for criminal behavior. This principle later informed the development of the cities of refuge, which were established exclusively for individuals who caused death unintentionally rather than through deliberate intent (Camerling, 2020).

In the context of contemporary legal systems, this principle offers a powerful ethical critique of institutional impunity and the abuse of political, religious, or organizational authority to evade legal responsibility. Equality and justice constitute foundational principles not only of democratic legal systems but also of Christian social ethics (Dawir et al., 2024). When political elites, public officials, or religious leaders exploit their institutional influence to avoid investigation or prosecution, they effectively reenact the very abuse of the altar condemned in Exodus 21:14. Weak law enforcement undermines the rule of law, allowing impunity to flourish by enabling offenders to escape legal accountability (Udit et al., 2021). Accordingly, Exodus 21:14 unequivocally proclaims that no individual is above the law. The honor and sanctity of an institution should never be preserved at the expense of justice; rather, an institution's integrity is demonstrated by its willingness to uphold moral responsibility and submit to the supremacy of law.

Unequal treatment within judicial processes further reflects inconsistencies in the implementation of the principle of *equality before the law*. Allegations of political intervention or institutional interference in criminal proceedings indicate that legal decisions are often influenced by power, social status, or vested interests, thereby compromising impartiality and justice (Arief et al., 2023). Such circumstances reveal a significant gap between the normative ideal of equal justice and the realities of contemporary legal practice.

From the perspective of Christian theology, the Church possesses a prophetic responsibility to resist every form of institutional abuse and legal impunity. Pastors and church leaders are called not only to nurture the spiritual lives of believers but also to serve as agents of social transformation by promoting social justice, defending human dignity, advocating for human rights, and encouraging active participation in the pursuit of a just and equitable society (Arifianto et al., 2025). Consequently, the ethical message of Exodus 21:14 extends far beyond the legal context of ancient Israel. It continues to function as a prophetic critique of institutional impunity and the misuse of religious or political authority, while offering an enduring ethical foundation for accountable governance, judicial integrity, and the equal application of justice in contemporary society.

Forgiveness as the Path to Restoration Amid the Administration of Justice

Exodus 21:12–14 affirms that God regards the taking of human life as a matter of utmost seriousness. Those who intentionally commit murder are required to receive an appropriate punishment, whereas those who cause death unintentionally are treated under a different legal standard. This distinction demonstrates that God is a just Judge who differentiates between crimes committed with malicious intent and acts resulting from accidental circumstances. Yet, alongside the administration of justice, the passage also reveals God's mercy, which opens the possibility of human restoration through forgiveness. Forgiveness is not merely a moral obligation but also a relational principle aimed at restoring broken relationships within the community and fostering reconciliation among individuals (Kristian & Junias, 2026). Therefore, justice and forgiveness should not be viewed as opposing values but as complementary dimensions of God's redemptive work to restore humanity, uphold truth, and cultivate harmonious relationships within society.

The biblical principle of forgiveness does not negate justice but rather completes it. Although Exodus 21:12–14 prescribes punishment for homicide, God also establishes cities

of refuge for those who kill unintentionally (Num. 35:9–15). This provision demonstrates that forgiveness does not imply ignoring wrongdoing; instead, it provides offenders with an opportunity to live, repent, and be restored. Justice functions to uphold moral order and preserve social stability, whereas love inspires forgiveness and compassion toward others. When these two values are maintained in proper balance, Christians are able to cultivate a community that honors justice while simultaneously embodying mercy and understanding without compromising the essential principles of their faith (Waoma & Moimau, 2024). From a theological perspective, God's forgiveness always operates in conjunction with human moral responsibility for one's actions.

For contemporary believers, Exodus 21:12–14 teaches that justice must be upheld while forgiveness remains an essential value of the Kingdom of God. Human beings possess not only the natural inclination to seek revenge for the wrongs committed against them but also the God-given capacity to forgive (Nainggolan, 2023). Victims and their families have the legitimate right to obtain justice, yet they are likewise called to imitate God's love by extending the possibility of repentance and restoration to offenders. Forgiveness does not eliminate the legal consequences of criminal conduct; rather, it serves as the means of restoring relationships with God and with others. Consequently, the administration of justice is prevented from degenerating into personal vengeance and instead becomes a pathway toward reconciliation, healing, and lasting peace.

5. Comparison

Compared with previous studies, this research offers a broader and more comprehensive perspective on the ethical significance of Exodus 21:12–14 for contemporary criminal justice. Earlier biblical scholarship has primarily interpreted this passage from historical, exegetical, or theological perspectives. For example, Illu (2024) emphasizes the humanitarian values reflected in the legal provisions of Exodus, particularly proportional justice, victim protection, and offender responsibility. Similarly, Hurmanisa et al. (2025) examine capital punishment from the perspective of Christian ethics by highlighting the balance between justice, love, and forgiveness. While these studies provide valuable theological insights, they do not reconstruct Exodus 21:12–14 as an ethical framework for evaluating contemporary criminal justice issues, nor do they explore the legal significance of criminal intent, sanctuary, or institutional accountability.

Likewise, contemporary legal scholarship has extensively discussed concepts such as criminal intent (*mens rea*), premeditated murder, self-defense, and equality before the law. Utoyo and Afriani (2020) explain the concepts of *willens* and *wetens* as essential elements of criminal intent in Indonesian criminal law, whereas Sandini (2023) analyzes premeditated murder from a juridical perspective. Rizal et al. (2024) focus on legal protection for individuals acting in self-defense, while Udit et al. (2021) and Arief et al. (2023) discuss impunity and equality before the law within the framework of positive law. Although these studies contribute significantly to legal discourse, they generally remain confined to normative legal analysis and rarely engage with the ethical-theological foundations that may enrich contemporary legal reasoning.

This study differs from previous research by integrating historical-contextual biblical exegesis with legal ethics and contemporary criminal justice discourse. Rather than treating Exodus 21:12–14 merely as an ancient legal text, this study reconstructs its ethical principles as normative guidance for addressing present-day legal challenges. The distinction between intentional and unintentional homicide is interpreted as an ethical foundation for objective legal judgment based on *mens rea*. The concept of sanctuary is understood as an early manifestation of due process, legal protection, and fundamental human rights. Furthermore, the command to remove a premeditated murderer even from God's altar is interpreted as a prophetic rejection of institutional impunity and the misuse of religious or political authority to evade legal accountability.

Therefore, the principal contribution of this research lies in demonstrating that Exodus 21:12–14 is not only historically significant but also normatively relevant to contemporary criminal justice. By integrating biblical exegesis, Christian ethics, legal philosophy, and modern criminal law, this study offers a novel interdisciplinary framework for promoting justice that is objective, accountable, humane, and free from institutional

favoritism. In this respect, the research extends the current state-of-the-art by positioning biblical legal ethics as a critical resource for addressing modern issues such as vigilantism, unequal law enforcement, abuse of institutional authority, and violations of human rights.

6. Conclusions

This study identifies three fundamental principles of legal ethics derived from Exodus 21:12–14 that remain highly relevant as moral foundations for contemporary criminal justice systems. First, the clear distinction between intentional and unintentional homicide establishes the ethical principle that justice must be grounded in an objective assessment of the offender's intent (*mens rea*). This principle challenges the contemporary phenomena of vigilantism, trial by public opinion, and emotionally driven judgments by emphasizing the necessity of impartial investigation and proportionate legal accountability.

Second, the provision of a place of refuge (*sanctuary*) for individuals who commit unintentional homicide represents an early expression of the protection of human dignity and fundamental rights. In the modern legal context, this principle underscores the importance of guaranteeing due process of law, the right to legal defense, and access to fair legal assistance free from intimidation or extrajudicial retaliation.

Third, the radical command to remove a premeditated murderer even from God's altar unequivocally rejects every form of institutional impunity. The passage demonstrates that neither religious sanctity nor political authority may be exploited as a shield against legal responsibility. The integrity of any institution is measured not by its ability to protect its members from prosecution but by its commitment to justice, accountability, and equality before the law.

Therefore, Exodus 21:12–14 demonstrates that ancient biblical legal ethics are far from obsolete. Instead, they offer a profound ethical and theological framework capable of critically engaging contemporary criminal justice issues. By integrating the principles of objective legal responsibility, procedural protection, institutional accountability, and restorative forgiveness, this passage contributes to the development of a criminal justice system that is not merely legally valid but also morally accountable, humane, impartial, and firmly committed to the rule of law.

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