

## The City of Refuge

**Joshua 20:1 The Lord also spoke to Joshua, saying, :2 “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses,**

The Lord God now commands Joshua to fulfill that which He spoke to Moses, i.e., to establish the cities of refuge. The concept for these cities of shelter was expressed to Moses in Exodus 21:13; Numbers 35:6ff.; and Deuteronomy 19:2. Moses actually appointed the cities east of the Jordan in Deuteronomy 4:41–43. The reference to Moses here gives veiled testimony that Joshua was acquainted with the Pentateuch, perhaps as a corpus, since the words quoted are from Numbers and Deuteronomy. Also, these books were recognized to be **by the hand of Moses**. What can we learn from this?

**Joshua 20:3 that the slayer who kills a person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there; and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood. :4 And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city as one of them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them.**

The purpose of the cities of refuge (Heb *miqlat*, meaning “to contract” or “receive”) was to provide a shelter for any who kills any person unawares and unwittingly. The Old Testament makes a clear distinction between premeditated murder and unintentional manslaughter (cf. Num 35:16–18; Deut 19:5).

When a premeditated murder was committed, the penalty must be paid. The avenger of blood (Heb *go'el hadam*) was literally a “redeemer” who bought back the honor of the family by slaying the murderer (Deut 19:12).

But he who took the life of another accidentally would present himself at the entering or gate of one of the cities of refuge (where all legal business was transacted, see Ruth 4:1; 2 Sam 15:2) and plead his cause to the elders of the city and thus would find shelter in the city.

Later, he had to stand trial before the congregation of the town nearest the scene of the slaying. If deemed innocent, he was returned to the shelter of the city of refuge until the death of the current high priest (presumably enough time for the wrath of the family of the slain to be abated).

**Joshua 20:5 Then if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not deliver the slayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unintentionally, but did not hate him beforehand. :6 And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the slayer may return and come to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled.’ ”**

For the sinner, to be found in the city of refuge was to be found in the only place of salvation. The correspondence between these cities and the Lord Jesus is striking.

The Apostle Paul, after rehearsing his pedigree and privileges in the Jew’s religion (Phil 3:4–6), counted them all but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus and the joy to “... be found in him ...” (Phil 3:9). Also, the writer of Hebrews alludes to God as the only one to whom we “... have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us” (Heb 6:18).

Christ Jesus is the refuge for the sinner; and thus, He calls to all and says, “Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

**Joshua 20:7 So they appointed Kedesh in Galilee, in the mountains of Naphtali, Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and Kirjath Arba (which is Hebron) in the mountains of Judah. :8 And on the other side of the Jordan, by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer in the wilderness on the plain, from the tribe of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. :9 These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwelt among them, that whoever killed a person accidentally might flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stood before the congregation.**

The cities of refuge are interesting and of theological importance. MacLear gives traditional details about the cities: Jewish commentators tell us how in later times, in order that the asylum offered to

the involuntary homicide might be more secure—(a) the roads leading to the cities of refuge were always kept in thorough repair, and required to be about 32 cubits (about 48 feet) broad;

(b) all obstructions were removed that might stay the flier's foot or hinder his speed;

(c) no hillock was left, no river was allowed over which there was not a bridge;

(d) at every turning there were posts erected bearing the words 'Refuge,' to guide the unhappy man in his flight;

(e) when once settled in such a city the manslayer had a convenient habitation assigned to him, and the citizens were to teach him some trade that he might support himself.

These cities picture the nation of Israel and its guilt in connection with the slaying of the Messiah. Christ is the City of Refuge to whom penitent Israel may flee for sanctuary.

D. L. Moody noted that "the cities of refuge are a type of Christ, and their names are significant in that connection." The cities of refuge and the meaning of the names are as follows: West of Jordan, Kedesh—Holiness, Shechem—Strength, Kirjath-Arba or Hebron—Fellowship, East of Jordan Ramoth-Gilead—Uplifting, Golan—Happiness, Bezer—Safety  
Thus Christ provides every blessing suggested by the names of these cities.

A glance at the map will show that the cities of refuge were strategically located so that no point in the land was more than thirty miles from one of them.

Moody makes the application: As the cities of refuge were so situated as to be accessible from every part of the land, so Christ is very accessible to needy sinners (1 John 2:1, 2).

Notice the parallels between the temporal salvation offered the manslayer in the cities of refuge and the eternal salvation offered the sinner in Christ. The roads to the city were clear and well-marked, just like the way of salvation, so that none would make a mistake and lose his life.

The cities were spread throughout the land and easily accessible to all, even as Christ is accessible to all men.

Crisis drove people to the city of refuge, and many times a crisis is needed to drive people to the Lord Jesus for refuge.

There was no neutral ground for the guilty person—he was either safe in the city or subject to the wrath of the blood avenger. Each individual is either safe in Christ or under the judgment of God (John 3:36).‡

### **Cities of the Levites**

**Joshua 21:1 Then the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites came near to Eleazar the priest, to Joshua the son of Nun, and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the children of Israel. :2 And they spoke to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, saying, "The Lord commanded through Moses to give us cities to dwell in, with their common-lands for our livestock." :3 So the children of Israel gave to the Levites from their inheritance, at the commandment of the Lord, these cities and their common-lands:**

The descendants of Levi were not given a specific inheritance, but were scattered throughout Israel (see Gen 49:7) so they may teach the law to the tribes and exert spiritual influence on them.

When the heads of the Levites appeared before Eleazar and Joshua at Shiloh, they reminded them that the Lord had commanded Moses (Num 35) to give them **cities** to dwell in and **suburbs** (Heb *migrash*, lit., "pasture lands").

### **Summary of Joshua 21:4-12**

Again, the lot was used to apportion the cities. This referred the matter entirely to God.

"The method followed by Israel in selecting the Levitical cities appears to have been something like this. First, the court, after duly considering the size of its inheritance, appointed how many cities should be taken out of each tribe. Then the 'fathers of the tribes' agreed among themselves which cities were most suitable. After