

JOSHUA

CHAPTER 20

The Cities of Refuge

Then the LORD said to Joshua, 2 “Say to the people of Israel, ‘Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, 3 that the manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood. 4 He shall flee to one of these cities and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and explain his case to the elders of that city. Then they shall take him into the city and give him a place, and he shall remain with them. 5 And if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unknowingly, and did not hate him in the past. 6 And he shall remain in that city until he has stood before the congregation for judgment, until the death of him who is high priest at the time. Then the manslayer may return to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled.’” 7 So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. 8 And beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they appointed Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland, from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. 9 These were the cities designated for all the people of Israel and for the stranger sojourning among them, that anyone who killed a person without intent could flee there, so that he might not die by the hand of the avenger of blood, till he stood before the congregation.

Ch 20 No examples in the OT of anyone making use of the refuge afforded by these cities. We may assume that Israel used this arrangement during times of covenant faithfulness but perhaps ignored it when unfaithful. Even the Passover was neglected for years (2Ki 23:21–23). (TLSB)

20:1–9 Having distributed the land to the tribes, the Lord’s next administrative regulation (see note on 13:1–32) provided an elementary system of government, specifically a system of regional courts to deal with capital offenses having to do with manslaughter. Thus this most inflammatory of cases was removed from local jurisdiction, and a safeguard was created against the easy miscarriage of justice (with its potential for endless blood feuds) when retribution for manslaughter was left in the hands of family members. The cities chosen were among those also assigned to the Levites, where ideally the law of Moses would especially be known and honored. (CSB)

20:3 *manslayer*. Form of Hbr verb used in the Fifth Commandment, “You shall not murder” (Ex 20:13; Dt 5:17). (TLSB)

avenger of blood. Also translated “kinsman-redeemer” (Ru 3:9), or “Redeemer” (Ps 19:14). The avenger was a near relative with the obligation of exacting retribution (see Lev 24:17; Nu 35:16–28). (CSB)

Hbr *go’el*. In other contexts, translated “redeemer” (cf Ru 3:12; Jb 19:25). Life belongs to God, who has authority in issues of life and death. In the OT, He exercised His authority under this arrangement involving an “avenger of blood” (cf Gn 4:10; 9:6; Dt 32:35). Both OT and NT affirm the practice of capital punishment. The high value of each human life under the Creator is affirmed by requiring the payment of the highest price if a life is taken unjustly. Ancient documents attest that avengers existed also in Mesopotamia at the time of Joshua. They exist today in countries with strong tribal identity. (TLSB)

20:4 *gate of the city*. Traditional place for trials, where the elders sat to hold court. (CSB)

explain his case. The preliminary hearing; the full trial took place inside the city (v 6). (TLSB)

elders. Distinguished from Israel's "heads," "judges," and "officers" (23:2; 24:1). (TLSB)

20:5 Those who unintentionally kill another have a God-ordained legal right to safety in a city of refuge. (TLSB)

20:6 *congregation.* Made up of the adult males of the city. Their function in the trial before the elders (v. 4) is not clear, but perhaps they witnessed the trial to see that it was fair (closed courts are notoriously corruptible). (CSB)

death of him who is high priest. See Nu 35:25–28. Either an atoning effect or a kind of amnesty was achieved by the high priest's death. (CSB)

The death of the high priest, intercessor for all Israel, evidently restored harmony and signaled the safe release of the manslayer to his former hometown. Death of the OT high priest anticipated the death of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ, whose blood makes full atonement for all. (TLSB)

the manslayer may return to his own town. Assures safety for the unintentional manslayer. The avenger of blood has no legal right to harm him. (TLSB)

20:7–8 Lists 6 of the 48 cities the Levites would receive by lot from the inheritance of the other 12 tribes (cf ch 21; Nu 35:1–8). Ultimately, God is the "owner" of these cities and all the tribal allotments (Lv 25:23). The fact that these were Levite cities places a special burden for judgment and justice on the priestly tribe. The locations of these six cities (see map, p 365), no more than c 30 mi from any spot in the land, made it possible for one fleeing to arrive at a city of refuge within hours. The six cities lie in a horseshoe pattern beginning in the northwest and ending in the northeast. (TLSB)

20:7 *they set apart Kedesh.* A wordplay in the Hebrew: "they consecrated (the town of) consecration." The other two cities west of the Jordan already had sacred associations: For Shechem see 8:30–35 and note; Ge 12:6–7; for Hebron see Ge 23:2; 49:29–32. The geographical distribution of the cities was important: one in the north, one in the midlands and one in the south. (See v. 8, where the order of the three cities of refuge that served in Transjordan is reversed: Bezer in the south, Ramoth in the midlands and Golan in the north.) (CSB)

Only these three cities are newly appointed here by Joshua. (TLSB)

20:8 Cf Dt 4:43 for Moses' earlier appointment of these three cities. (TLSB)

20:9 *or any alien.* Evidence of the equal protection granted to the foreigners living in Israel (cf. Lev 19:33–34; Dt 10:18–19). (CSB)

Native and nonnative Israelites had equal rights in regard to the safety afforded by the cities of refuge. Cf Ex 22:21; 23:9; Lv 19:33–34; Dt 10:17–19. (TLSB)

Ch 20 At the Lord's direction, Joshua appoints six cities of refuge, demonstrating the Lord's desire for both justice and mercy. Today, through Jesus' perfect life and atoning death, our God of grace "is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps 46:1). • Dear God of love, "we flee for refuge to Your infinite mercy, seeking and imploring Your grace for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ." Amen. (LSB, p 184) (TLSB)