

Joshua 20-21

Cities of Refuge

The command to set up Cities of Refuge, recorded in **Numbers 35:9-28** and **Deuteronomy 19:1-13**, is now implemented.

The cities were to be included among the 48 Levite cities, recorded in **Joshua 21**.

- Kadesh – in Naphtali
- Shechem – in West Manasseh
- Hebron - in Judah
- Golan – in East Manasseh
- Ramoth – Gilead in Gad
- Bezer – in Rueben

Roads were to be built, wider and smoother than other roads (52 ft wide!), to each City of Refuge to assist those fleeing. Valleys were raised and hills were leveled to make it easier to travel. Bridges were built where necessary. The roads were examined every year in the month of Adar. Clearly marked signposts were found at crossroads which read "*Miklat*" meaning "refuge" or "asylum" or "a place or receptacle of taking in." The word is found only in scriptures related to the Cities of Refuge.

The Cities of Refuge also offered asylum to foreigners and strangers. No rent was charged for those who fled there.

The six Cities of Refuge would protect only the unintentional manslayer, or someone who had caused death through negligence. The willful murderer was to be evicted, tried, and punished. What was revolutionary was the assertion that inner intention determines the meaning of an action.

As population increased, eventually all the Levite cities were considered Cities of Refuge.

On the surface, Cities of Refuge were there to curtail the practice of kinship vengeance and the cycle of vendettas that result in most other ancient (and some modern) cultures.

Instead of leaving it up to the private retaliatory vengeance from the victim's relatives or clan, God Himself "requires" the death of the murderer - i.e. God shows up and places himself in between the vengeful relatives and their target, so that his case has been heard, examined, tried, and judged fairly; The Targum of Jonathan adds, 'in judgment,' - that is, as Targum Onkelos explains it, "when he is condemned by judgment by the court of judicature."

That includes interviewing witnesses.

- **Numbers 35:30** - "Whoso killeth any person, the murderer shall be put to death by the

mouth of witnesses: but one witness shall not testify against any person to cause him to die."

- **Deuteronomy 19:15** - "at the mouth of two or three witnesses everything may be established"

Death of the High Priest

Even accidental killings had consequences, because the victim's family members would still hunt you down and kill you if they encountered you outside the City of Refuge.

[Some authorities say If the court finds that the death was the result of a freak accident, totally unforeseeable by anyone, he is exonerated and returns to normal life.]

But it appears that if someone throw a large stone but didn't see that it would hit someone, then he would go to the City of Refuge and "abide in it unto the death of the high priest, which was anointed with the holy oil." (**Numbers 35:25**)

Why? What does the death of the high priest have to do with anything?

Because "such was the general mourning for such a public loss as a high priest, that all private revenges would subside, and the cause of them be buried, in grief and forgetfulness. Thus the mothers of the priests used to supply with a sufficient quantity of food and raiment such who fled to the Cities of Refuge, that they might not pray for the death of their sons." (Misn. Maccot. c. 2. sect. 3. and 7.)

Seventeenth-century rabbi Jacob Abendana (Not. in Miclol Yophi in ver. 25.) observes that the death of the high priest atoned for the offense (of manslaughter), which was the reason the manslayer continued in the City of Refuge till the high priest's death.

The rabbis said if the perpetrator had died before reaching a City of Refuge, their body still had to be taken there.

Spiritual Meaning

The Cities of Refuge were an *imperfect* type of the perfect Rock of Refuge we have in Christ. As our High Priest, His death atones for all sin. That fulfills the "death of the High Priest" part of this. At the same time, after His resurrection, He will never die, "seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them" (**Hebrews 7:25**). We never have to leave that place of refuge.

David says (**Psalms 32:7**) "Thou art my hiding place; thou shalt preserve me from trouble; thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance."

"hiding place" = *cether* - a different word from refuge, but a similar idea implying a covert or shelter for protection.

- **Psalm 27:5** - "For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion: in the secret (*cether*) of his tabernacle shall he hide me; he shall set me up upon a rock."

Other words are more commonly used to mean "take refuge" = *chacah* - to trust in, to make someone or something your refuge

- **Ruth 2:12** - "The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust (*chacah*)."

machaceh - refuge, shelter, the person to whom one flees (usually God)

- **Psalm 46:1** - "God is our refuge (*machaceh*) and strength, a very present help in trouble."

- **Psalm 62:8** - "Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge (*machaceh*) for us. Selah."

manowc - refuge, place of escape, a way to flee

- **Psalm 59:16** - "But I will sing of thy power; yea, I will sing aloud of thy mercy in the morning: for thou hast been my defense and refuge (*manowc*) in the day of my trouble."

- **Jeremiah 16:19** - "O LORD, my strength, and my fortress, and my refuge (*manowc*) in the day of affliction"

We have fled to Jesus Christ, and He is our eternal "refuge."

As our High Priest, He will never die (**Hebrews 7:23-25**); and in Him we have eternal salvation. No avenger can touch us, because He has already died and risen from the dead.

As the Mishnah says, the death of the High Priest causes all private vengeance to "subside, and the cause of them be buried, in grief and forgetfulness." Even the private accusing guilt of our own conscience, which is now based only on one witness - ourselves.

As a consequence, according to Paul, we all died with Him on the cross (**Romans 6**). He has absorbed all of God's wrath on Himself.

- **Romans 5:9** - "Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him."

These six Cities of Refuge are beautiful types of Christ, to whom we "have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us" (**Hebrews 6:18**).

- **Romans 8:33** - "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that

justifieth."

- **Psalm 34:22** - "The Lord will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned."

Because these Cities of Refuge were under the care of the Levites, it places a responsibility on the church. Are we making a wide and smooth path for troubled souls to join us? Are we putting stumbling blocks along the way?

The safe-haven area included a 2,000-cubit area around the city, a "sabbath day's journey" of 2/3 of a mile. If a city's population fell, priests and Levites were encouraged to move there to bolster the population.

The City of Refuge not only represents sanctuary and safety from lawless revenge. It represents submission to lawful judgment and the interrogation of our souls before the one Judge. The pathway to the City of Refuge must be wide and smooth, but not so easy that we bypass repentance.

The rabbinical authorities required those who fled to a City of Refuge to always contemplate the fact that they had caused someone's death and should refuse any honor that the people of the city might grant them. In other words, they were to live continually in humility.

Philo explained that it was believed an innocent man would never be chosen by God as the instrument of another man's death, and therefore those claiming refuge at these cities must have committed some sin before they had killed, for which their exile acts as an atonement.

The Punishment of Exile

From "Cities of Refuge" Masay (Numbers 33-36)
<https://www.aish.com/tp/i/m/48923837.html>

- **Exodus 21:12-13** - "He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death. And if a man lie not in wait, but God deliver him into his hand; then I will appoint thee a place whither he shall flee."

God had already outlawed revenge, but this is very hard to eliminate for the human heart:

- **Leviticus 19:18** - "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the LORD."

The first punishments were exiles. Adam and Eve were banished from the garden. Then Cain was exiled to wander in the world (**Genesis 4:11-12**).

Exile was the very first punishment mentioned by the Torah, imposed on Adam for

having inadvertently brought about the mortality of mankind, allowing the angel of death entry into this world by committing the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Soon thereafter, Cain suffered the same fate for the inadvertent murder of his brother Abel. How could this be inadvertent? The rabbis said Cain did not know that you could kill another human being, who is a primarily spiritual being.

It Benefits Man to Die

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, in his work *Nefesh Hachaim* (Gate 1:6) said it is to man's own benefit to die, once sin and death entered the world. When he dies, his body returns to its basic elements and becomes purified. It can be returned to him in its pure, pristine state at the time of the resurrection, in the sort of mint condition which the soul was imbued with the power to transform. In order to enjoy his eternal life man must first die. He dies in order to live.

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God He made man." (**Genesis 9:6**)

Killing another human being is to disregard the image of God in that person. The murderer must first have disregarded that image in himself.

The Mark of Cain

Cain's exile was moderated by God placing a mark on his forehead. (**Genesis 4:15**)

In Ezekiel's vision, a similar protective mark - the Hebrew letter *tau*, a sort of tilted cross - is applied to all those who are crying out in repentance:

- **Ezekiel 9:4** - "And the LORD said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark (*tau*) upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof."

The letter *tau* was used by scribes in the centuries before Christ to indicate scripture passages that referred to the Messiah.

The Cities of Refuge are a type of this protective mark of the cross on the forehead of Cain, which in turn is reflected in the blood on the doorposts in the shape of crude crosses at the Exodus on Passover, and fulfilled by Christ on the cross, atoning for sin with His own blood.

Levites as Scattered and 'Exiled' in their Own Land

The Cities of Refuge were Levite cities. Levites were - like Cain - also scattered and "in exile" with no portion of the Promised Land set apart for them as a tribe.

- **Numbers 18:20** - "In their land you shall have no heritage, and a share you shall not have among them; I am your share and your heritage among the people of Israel."

The Levites were to mirror repentance and the presence of God for those who fled to their sanctuary.

This is also the aspirational calling for us, the church in this world.

Parable of the Good Samaritan

Dereliction of this responsibility is shown in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and Levite passed by on the other side of the road. Finally a hated Samaritan took the wounded man to an inn for healing.

- **Luke 10:34-37** - "He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two *denarii* and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

We are the inn. The inn represents us acting out and representing Christ as a City of Refuge.

The mark of *tau* the cross on our forehead (our thoughts) shows that we recognize the image of God in our fellow humans and in ourselves, we accept our own death as the only way to eternal life, and make a smooth and wide path for the guilty to flee to the sanctuary of the Messiah for atonement and forgiveness.

The Levite Cities

After the listing of the 48 cities for the Levites, comes a summing up - a remarkable passage since we know there still remained Canaanites and some giants still unconquered.

Joshua 21:43-45 - "And the LORD gave unto Israel all the land which he swore to give unto their fathers; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein. And the LORD gave them rest round about, according to all that he swore unto their fathers: and there stood not a man of all their enemies before them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. There failed not ought of any good thing which the LORD had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass."

The New Testament reminds us that this statement is not talking about historical events, but prophetically about the Joshua/Jesus who fulfilled it by providing for us a spiritual resting place.

- **Hebrews 4:8** - "For if Jesus [Joshua] had given them rest, then would he [David] not

afterward have spoken of another day. There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.”

- Quoting David in **Psalm 95:7-8, 11** - “For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. To day if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness... Unto whom I sware in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.”