

Refuge Cities; Land for Levi

Joshua 20-21

Introduction

Joshua 20-21 points to a new phase of land grants. God gave the promised land to Israel (chapters 13-19), and now the Israelites are instructed to give some of it back, setting it aside for specific purposes. In Joshua 20, two cities were set aside for people who had committed manslaughter so they could find refuge from someone trying to take vengeance on them. Joshua 21 contains a description of cities set aside for service to God. Instructions on how these areas were to be laid out were given in Numbers 35. Many of these were located near the borders of tribal lands, suggesting they were intended to preserve and promote faith and culture in Israel.

Cities of Refuge

Cities of refuge are referenced elsewhere in the Pentateuch.³² They were designed as a place for the unintentional killer to flee to for safety. The law made a distinction between premeditated murder and unintentional killing. Murder carried the death penalty, which could be carried out by the judicial authorities or via an *avenger of blood*. Cases of manslaughter did not carry the death penalty. In this case, the *avenger of blood* was to seek compensation for the loss of life incurred.

More About the Avenger of Blood

In biblical times, if someone was murdered, it was the responsibility of the *avenger of blood*, usually a family member, to seek justice by killing the murderer. This was based on the belief that murder tainted the land. The only way to cleanse it was through the death of the perpetrator, as outlined in Numbers 35:19 and 35:33. This was seen as a way of restoring balance: the avenger's actions were thought to compensate for the loss and rebalance nature, allowing the land to be fertile again. Thus, by executing the murderer, the avenger was believed to reverse the negative impact of the murder and enable the earth to be productive once more.

The redemption of property and people were concepts seen across the ancient Near East. Outside of Israel, many of these concepts were set in a royal context, whereas Israel's *avenger of blood* was directly tied to a society structured around kinship. One ancient treaty stated that if anyone connected to the royal house were killed, it was the duty of the treaty partner to avenge the lost blood. In the Hittite kingdom and across Mesopotamia, there was a *lord of blood*, referring to the slayer and the family representative of the one killed. Among the Hittites, the *lord of blood* was responsible for determining whether the guilty would be killed for his crime. In Mesopotamia, legal processes were in place for dealing with cases concerning the *lord of blood*, which referred to both the guilty party and a representative of the victim's family. However, in contrast to Israelite practices, the state administered these legal matters due to Mesopotamia's centralized governance structure.³³

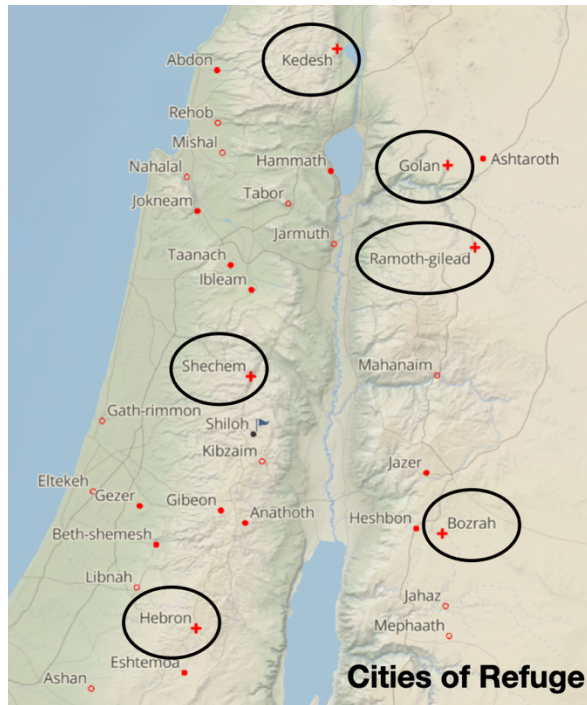
The Procedure in Israel

Joshua 20 outlines a process for unintentional killers seeking refuge. They must present their case at the city gate, and if admitted by the elders, they are safe until their trial, Numbers 35:22-28. Even if acquitted of premeditated murder, the threat from the *avenger of blood* persisted. To avoid this, they could reside in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest, whose demise symbolically ended the guilt associated with the killer's act. The priest's death would serve as compensation, satisfying the avenger of blood, and no further action is necessary.

In Christianity, the high priest's role in the practice of asylum foreshadows the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, whose death is directly linked to the permanent removal of sin and guilt, Hebrews 9:11-10:18. Joshua 20:9 extended the right to seek refuge in these places to Israelites and foreigners. Similarly, the forgiveness offered in Christianity is accessible to everyone, irrespective of their background, Galatians 5:6.

Listing of Cities

Joshua 20:7-8 provides us with which cities were designed as *cities of refuge*. They comprise prominent strategic hubs such as Shechem and Hebron, offering asylum seekers convenient and easily accessible refuges, ensuring maximum security against potential avengers of blood. West of the Jordan was Kedesh Naphtali, Shechem, and Hebron. East of the Jordan, Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan were selected.



Joshua 21: Land for the Levites

In Numbers 35:1-8, Moses had directed that the Levites would be given cities throughout the tribal areas of Israel. The Levites approached Eleazer and Joshua at Shiloh, seeking permission to settle in cities. They were allocated forty-eight towns, suggesting that these teachers of the law and religious leaders were intended to be easily accessible to all God's people. The tribe of Levi was divided into three branches: the Gershonites, Kohathites, and Merarites, Numbers 1-4. Each of these received their cities, the location of which was determined by lot and hence by God. The descendants of Aaron were placed in the tribal regions of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin, positioning the priests in proximity to Jerusalem, which God later chose as the site for His temple.

The allotment was done *as the LORD had commanded*. In verses 3 and 8, this statement frames the proceedings and emphasizes the fulfillment of the divine instructions of Numbers 35:1-5. The forty-eight towns of the Levites are carefully organized and listed. There are headings and summaries at the

beginning and end of each subsection, as there are for the whole list. The numbers of towns allocated are included with each summary. Specific notes remind the reader of those towns that are towns of refuge and of the two names of Hebron/Kiriath Arba and its occupation by Caleb (see the discussion at 14:6–15). In many ways, the organization of this list is like administrative documents found in the palace archives of West Semitic cities such as Alalakh and Ugarit. Like them, copies of this document may have kept track of the Levites and thus ensured that their essential roles as priests, teachers, and spiritual leaders of the people of Israel were fulfilled.

21.43-45: The Completeness of the Victory

This text highlights the fulfillment of God's promises and the complete victory that he has granted to the Israelites. Throughout the book of Joshua, we see God fulfilling his promise to the patriarchs that the land would belong to their descendants. He also promised them rest from their enemies, reiterating this promise three times in the book. The emphasis is on the complete defeat of Israel's enemies, which was possible because God had promised it. As a result of this victory, Israel now possesses all the land God promised them.

Was the Conquest Ever Completed?

The section on allotments that started in chapter 13 has concluded. However, there is a problem with the claim that the whole land was taken. In Joshua 13.1-7 and 12.22, God points out that the land's conquest was incomplete. Except for Hebron, which Caleb conquered, there is no evidence that Israel occupied any of the areas mentioned in chapter 13. Commentators have traditionally differentiated between God's faithfulness and the people's lack of faithfulness. Therefore, although they didn't destroy all the inhabitants, the truth of God's promises remained true. Israel initiated the dispossession under God, but the nation's failure to complete it was disobedience to God. This text shows the tension between the power of God's word to accomplish his will and the existence of sin and suffering in the world.

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. What significance can be drawn from the fact that the cities of refuge were strategically located near tribal borders, suggesting an intention to preserve faith and culture in Israel?
2. In the ancient Near East, the concept of avenger of blood was present in various societies. How does the Israelite practice of having a family member seek justice compare to other cultures, especially considering the decentralized nature of the avenger of blood in Israel?

3. According to the lesson, the high priest's death served as symbolic compensation, satisfying the avenger of blood. How does this process foreshadow the Christian belief in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the permanent removal of sin and guilt?
4. The cities of refuge mentioned in Joshua 20.7-8 are located strategically for maximum security. What role does the selection of these specific cities play in providing refuge for unintentional killers, and how does it relate to justice and safety?
5. God's instructions allocated the Levites forty-eight towns. What significance can be attributed to the distribution of these towns among the Gershonites, Kohathites, and Merarites, and how does it reflect their roles as teachers of the law and religious leaders?
6. The organization of the list of towns for the Levites is compared to administrative documents found in West Semitic cities. In what ways does this organization reflect the importance of the Levites' roles as priests, teachers, and spiritual leaders in Israel?
7. The text in Joshua 21.43-45 emphasizes the completeness of God's promises and the victory granted to the Israelites. How does this victory play a role in fulfilling God's promises to the patriarchs, and what significance does it hold for the Israelites?
8. Despite the completion of the allotments in Joshua, there is a claim that the conquest of the land was incomplete, Joshua 13.1-7, 12.22. How do you reconcile the tension between God's faithfulness and the people's failure to complete the land's dispossession?
9. The lesson mentions a distinction between premeditated murder and unintentional killing, with different consequences for each. How does this legal distinction reflect the principles of justice and accountability in ancient Israel?
10. How does the concept of redemption of property and people, as seen in the ancient Near East and mentioned in the lesson, align or differ with the biblical principles outlined in the Pentateuch?

³² Exodus 21.12-14; Numbers 35.19, 21, 24-25, 27; Deuteronomy 4 and 19.6, 12; Joshua 20.3, 5, 9.

³³ Wisley, L. G. "Avenger of Blood." *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.