

JOSHUA 20

THE CITIES OF REFUGE

Although the children of Israel now had their territorial allotments, as detailed in Joshua 14–19, there remained one demographic that needed to be accounted for: marginalized or otherwise disenfranchised persons, specifically persons in compromising legal situations. Their allotment is described in chapter 20, which regulates cities of refuge. The Lord had already commanded Moses to establish such cities once the Israelites were settled in the land of Canaan (see Numbers 35:9–34; Deuteronomy 19:1–13), but it fell upon Joshua to constitute the practice.

Joshua 20 is structured broadly in two parts: verses 1–6 detail the protocols for those who flee to a city of refuge after committing involuntary manslaughter, while verses 7–9 specify which cities were set apart as places of refuge. According to the instructions given in verses 1–6, someone who committed involuntary manslaughter could seek asylum in one of the six cities described in verses 7–9 to have their case adjudicated. The “avenger of blood,” the deceased’s next of kin who was responsible for exacting vengeance, could not harm the accused if they reached one of the cities. If the high priest died before the case could be resolved, the accused party was cleared of any wrongdoing and could return home.

In order to have an effective distribution of refuge cities, three towns were allotted on both sides of the Jordan—Kedesh, Schechem, and Kirjatharba (or Hebron) on the west side, and Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan on the east. All six of these cities were Levitical cities (that is, cities allotted to the Levites per Joshua 21:1, 11, 27, 32, 36, 38), probably to maintain impartiality or neutrality. The cities of refuge were also a place for aliens in the land of Canaan to seek judicial oversight or refuge (20:9).

That these cities of refuge were established immediately after the allotment of Israel's own inheritances showed the clear moral emphasis the covenant people placed on matters of the law and justice. It also demonstrated the need to watch over those that might be socially disadvantaged, especially aliens who might not have any other judicial recourse.

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