

Joshua 20:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The LORD also spake unto Joshua, saying,

Analysis

The LORD also spake unto Joshua, saying, Speak to the children of Israel, saying, Appoint out for you cities of refuge, whereof I spake unto you by Moses: That the slayer that killeth any person unawares and unwittingly may flee thither: and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood.

The cities of refuge fulfill legislation from Numbers 35:9-34 and Deuteronomy 19:1-13, demonstrating Joshua's continued obedience to Mosaic law. The Hebrew term arei miklat (עָרִים מִקָּלָת, "cities of refuge") designates sanctuaries where those guilty of accidental homicide could find protection from goel hadam (גּוֹלֵד הַדָּם), "avenger of blood"—the deceased's nearest kinsman responsible for executing justice. This institution balances two crucial values: justice (life for life) and mercy (distinguishing intentional murder from accidental death).

The phrase "unawares and unwittingly" (bishgagah uveli-da'at, בִּשְׁגָגָה וּבְלִידָעָת) describes death caused without premeditation or malice. Ancient Near Eastern law codes (Hammurabi, Hittite laws) recognized similar distinctions, but Israel's system uniquely provided sanctuary until proper trial could occur. This prevented vigilante justice while ensuring that unintentional killers faced legal process. The requirement for cities rather than merely altars (as in Exodus 21:13-14) indicated that temporary sanctuary wasn't sufficient—permanent refuge was needed until the high priest's death (Numbers 35:25-28).

Typologically, cities of refuge point to Christ as ultimate refuge from divine justice. Just as accidental killers fled to designated cities for protection, sinners flee to Christ for protection from God's wrath. The parallel isn't perfect—we're guilty, not

innocent—but the principle of divinely appointed refuge where justice and mercy meet finds fulfillment in Christ, who both satisfies divine justice and provides merciful sanctuary for all who flee to Him (Hebrews 6:18-20). The cities' accessibility (distributed throughout Israel, roads maintained clear, signposted) illustrates that God's refuge in Christ is readily available to all who seek it.

Historical Context

Six cities were designated as refuge cities, distributed to ensure accessibility throughout Israel's territory: Kedesh (Naphtali, northern region), Shechem (Ephraim, central region), Hebron (Judah, southern region), Bezer (Reuben, Transjordan south), Ramoth (Gad, Transjordan central), and Golan (Manasseh, Transjordan north). This geographical distribution meant no Israelite was more than 30 miles from a refuge city—approximately one day's journey. Jewish tradition held that roads to these cities were maintained in excellent condition and clearly marked with signs reading "Refuge" to facilitate rapid flight.

All six refuge cities were also Levitical cities (Joshua 21), placing them under trained priests who could administer justice impartially and provide spiritual counsel. The presence of Levites ensured that cases would be properly adjudicated according to law rather than emotion or family pressure. This demonstrates how Israel's legal system integrated judicial and spiritual dimensions—law wasn't merely civil statute but covenant obligation administered by those trained in God's Word.

The requirement that refuge lasted until the high priest's death (Numbers 35:25) served multiple purposes. Practically, it allowed time for vengeance passions to cool. Theologically, the high priest's death atoned for the land's bloodguilt (Numbers 35:33), even for accidental homicides. This points toward Christ's high-priestly death that definitively atones for all sin, releasing believers from any condemnation.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How do the cities of refuge illustrate the balance between justice and mercy that characterizes God's nature?
2. In what ways does Christ function as our "city of refuge" from divine judgment?
3. What does the careful provision and accessibility of refuge cities teach about God's desire that people find sanctuary in Him?

Interlinear Text

לֹאמֶר: יְהוָה עַל יְהוּדָה אָל יְהוָה הָיָה שָׁמְרֵן
also spake The LORD H413 unto Joshua saying
H1696 H3068 H3091 H559

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