

Joshua 20:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Speak to the children of Israel, saying, Appoint out for you cities of refuge, whereof I spake unto you by the hand of Moses:

Analysis

God commands Israel to establish cities of refuge, fulfilling instructions given through Moses (Numbers 35:6-34; Deuteronomy 19:1-13). The phrase 'Appoint out for you' (tenu lakhem, תָּנוּ לָכֶם) makes this a corporate responsibility—the entire nation must designate these cities. The term 'cities of refuge' (arei miklat, עֲרֵי מִקְלָט) uses miklat from the root meaning to absorb or receive, indicating places of safe reception. These cities provided asylum for unintentional manslayers, preventing blood revenge while awaiting proper trial. The system balanced justice (murderers must die) with mercy (accidental killers deserve protection). Six cities were designated—three east and three west of Jordan (verses 7-8), ensuring accessibility throughout Israel. Theologically, cities of refuge typify Christ as believers' refuge from divine judgment. Just as manslayers fled to these cities for salvation from the avenger of blood, sinners flee to Christ for salvation from divine wrath. Hebrews 6:18 uses similar imagery: we 'have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.' The cities' accessibility parallels Christ's universal availability to all who come to Him in faith.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern societies practiced lex talionis (eye for eye, life for life) and blood vengeance where family members avenged murdered relatives. Without legal protections, accidental killers faced death from 'avengers of blood' (goel hadam, גּוֹאֵל הַדָּם)—relatives obligated to execute vengeance. Cities of refuge

prevented vigilante justice while maintaining the distinction between murder and manslaughter. The six cities—Kedesh, Shechem, Hebron (west of Jordan); Bezer, Ramoth, Golan (east of Jordan)—were Levitical cities strategically located for maximum accessibility (Joshua 21:13-38). Ancient Israelite roads were maintained to these cities with clear signage (Makkot 10a in Jewish tradition), ensuring fugitives could reach safety. The manslayer remained in the refuge city until the high priest's death (Numbers 35:25-28), when he could safely return home. The high priest's death provided atonement releasing the manslayer, typologically pointing to Christ's atoning death releasing sinners from judgment. This system demonstrated Israel's sophisticated legal framework balancing justice, mercy, and communal responsibility—advanced concepts not universally present in ancient Near Eastern law.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does Christ serve as your 'city of refuge' from the judgment your sins deserve?
2. What does the accessibility of refuge cities teach about the gospel's universal availability to all who flee to Christ?
3. How does the high priest's death releasing the manslayer point to Christ's death accomplishing our redemption?

Interlinear Text

אֶת	לְכֶם	תִּנּוּ	לְאֹמֵר	יִשְׂרָאֵל	בְּנֵי יִ	אֶל	דִּבַּרְתִּי
	H853	H0	Appoint out	saying	of Israel	to the children	Speak
			H5414	H559	H3478	H1121	H1696
בְּיָד	אֵלֵיכֶם	דִּבַּרְתִּי	אֲשֶׁר	הַמִּקְלָט	עֲרֵי		
				unto you by the hand	Speak	of refuge	for you cities
				H3027	H413	H4733	H5892

מֹשֶׁה:

of Moses
H4872

Additional Cross-References

Numbers 35:6 (Parallel theme): And among the cities which ye shall give unto the Levites there shall be six cities for refuge, which ye shall appoint for the manslayer, that he may flee thither: and to them ye shall add forty and two cities.