

# 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, תְּנַוְּךָ לְךָם) makes this a corporate responsibility—the entire nation must designate these cities. The term 'cities of refuge' (arei miklat, עָרִים מִקְלָטִים) 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, גּוֹלֵךְ הָדָם)—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

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**James 2:17** — Faith and works

**Hebrews 11:1** — Definition of faith

## Study Questions

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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

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אַתָּה לְכָם תִּנְאַתֵּן וְאֶל דְּבַר רְתִי

**Speak** H413 **to the children** H1121 **of Israel** H3478 **saying** H559 **Appoint out** H5414 H0 H853

H1696

H1121

H3478

H559

H5414

H0 H853

עָרִים בְּיַד אֶלְيָכָם דְּבַר רְתִי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִקְלָת

**for you cities** H5892 **of refuge** H4733 **Speak** H834 **unto you by the hand** H3027

H1696

H1696

H3027

מִשְׁרָה:

**of Moses**

H4872

## Additional Cross-References

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**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.

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