

# CITIES OF REFUGE

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In Numbers chapter 35, God commanded the children of Israel through Moses to appoint cities of refuge when they took possession of the land of Canaan. The Lord said, "*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*" (Num 35:6). When the Israelites had conquered Canaan under Joshua, "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 the hand of 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" (Josh 20:1-3).

## **Purpose of the cities of refuge**

As seen above, the purpose for the cities of refuge was to protect those who were guilty of accidentally killing someone. Joshua 20:9 says, "These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourneth among them, *that whosoever killeth any person at unawares might flee thither, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood, until he stood before the congregation.*" Numbers 35:22-25 defined for Israel what we refer to in our land as involuntary manslaughter: "But if he thrust him suddenly without enmity, or have cast upon him any thing without laying of wait, or with any stone, wherewith a man may die, seeing him not, and cast it upon him, that he die, and was not his enemy, neither sought his harm: then the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the revenger of blood according to these judgments: and the congregation shall deliver the slayer out of the hand of the revenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to the city of his refuge, whither he was fled: and he shall abide in it unto the death of the high priest, which was anointed with the holy oil." Killing with intent and motive was defined as murder, and examples of such were given in Numbers 35:16-21. Under the law of Moses, the punishment for murder was death.

## **Laws for the cities of refuge**

There were several laws provided by God to govern cases of involuntary and accidental killing.

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(continued)

- 1) A man guilty of involuntary manslaughter had to first flee to one of the six cities of refuge and enter the gate of the city and “declare his cause in the ears of the elders of that city” (Josh 20:4).
- 2) When a man did that, the elders of the city were obligated to “take him into the city unto them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them” (Josh 20:4).
- 3) “And if the avenger of blood pursue after him, then they shall not deliver the slayer up into his hand; because he smote his neighbor unwittingly, and hated him not beforetime” (Josh 20:5).
- 4) “And he shall dwell in that city, until he stand before the congregation for judgment” (Josh 20:6,9).
- 5) He must also remain in the city of refuge “until the death of the high priest that shall be in those days” (Josh 20:6).
- 6) Then shall the slayer return, and come unto his own city, and unto his own house, unto the city from whence he fled” (Josh 20:6).
- 7) If the man left the city of refuge before the death of the high priest, then he could legally be killed (Num 35:26-28).
- 8) These laws applied to the Israelites as well as the strangers that dwelt among them (Josh 20:9).

## **A reflection of God’s fairness**

Since it was legal under Moses’ law for someone to avenge murder, it was very important that there be these cities of refuge to enable someone who was innocent of murder to have the opportunity to save their life. Through Moses, God had instructed Israel to appoint six cities of refuge, three on each side of the Jordan river (Num 35:13-14). This is precisely what Joshua did in Joshua chapter 20. On the west side of Jordan, “they appointed Kedesh in Galilee in mount Naphtali, and Shechem in mount Ephraim, and Kirjath-arba, which is Hebron, in the mountain of Judah” (Josh 20:7). “And on the other side Jordan by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer in the wilderness upon the plain out of the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead out of the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan out of the tribe of Manasseh” (Josh 20:8). Thus, we see there was an even distribution of the cities of refuge throughout the land of Israel, to give everyone a reasonable opportunity to reach one of them if the need arose.