

Introduction

Joshua 20-21 certain cities throughout Israel that were set aside for specific purposes. These cities highlight the mercy of God. God provided cities for **refuge** (protection) and cities for **intercession**.

What significance does this have for those in the New Covenant? God has not provided us **places** of refuge or intercession. Instead, God has provided us with a **person** of refuge and intercession.

Cities of Refuge

Purpose of refuge

[Joshua 20:1–6](#) “1 Then the Lord said to Joshua, 2 “Say to the people of Israel, ‘Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, 3 that the manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood. 4 He shall flee to one of these cities and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and explain his case to the elders of that city. Then they shall take him into the city and give him a place, and he shall remain with them. 5 And if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unknowingly, and did not hate him in the past. 6 And he shall remain in that city until he has stood before the congregation for judgment, until the death of him who is high priest at the time. Then the manslayer may return to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled.’””

(20:3) What was the purpose of the cities of refuge? The cities of refuge were intended for protecting those who unintentionally killed someone. This does not include those who attacked someone or planned murder. [Num 35](#) describes the cities of refuge in more detail. It specifies that if you **intended** harm, an appointed person (avenger of blood) was responsible for killing him. However, if you dropped a stone or pushed him without malice and he died, you could flee for refuge.

(20:5) What was the city’s responsibility for the person who took refuge in them? The city was supposed to protect the person until they could stand trial. It was not a permanent home.

(20:6) When did the time of refuge end? The time of refuge ended under three circumstances. First, [Num 35:26](#) states that if the person leaves the city, he leaves their protection. Second, their refuge will end when they stand trial. If they are found guilty, they will die. If they are found innocent, they are legally protected from the avenger.

Third, the time of refuge ends when the high priest dies. This does not mean that they no longer have protection; rather, they are legally protected from the avenger.

Division of cities

[Joshua 20:7-9](#) describes the location of the cities of refuge. There was a city in Naphtali, Ephraim, Judah, Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh.

Why were the cities scattered throughout the nation? The cities were scattered so that someone fleeing from vengeance would be able to reach the city safely.

Levite cities

[Joshua 21:1-3](#) “1 Then the heads of the fathers’ houses of the Levites came to Eleazar the priest and to Joshua the son of Nun and to the heads of the fathers’ houses of the tribes of the people of Israel. 2 And they said to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, “The Lord commanded through Moses that we be given cities to dwell in, along with their pasturelands for our livestock.” 3 So by command of the Lord the people of Israel gave to the Levites the following cities and pasturelands out of their inheritance.”

(21:2) Why did Levi have cities and pastureland in the other tribes rather than their own region? Because of their faithfulness to God in [Exod 32](#), the Levites inherited **ministry** before the Lord and the **offerings** that were brought to the tabernacle/temple.

[Joshua 21:4-8](#) summarizes what we will read in the rest of the chapter.

Aaron

[Joshua 21:9-12](#) “9 Out of the tribe of the people of Judah and the tribe of the people of Simeon they gave the following cities mentioned by name, 10 which went to the descendants of Aaron, one of the clans of the Kohathites who belonged to the people of Levi; since the lot fell to them first. 11 They gave them Kiriath-arba (Arba being the father of Anak), that is Hebron, in the hill country of Judah, along with the pasturelands around it. 12 But the fields of the city and its villages had been given to Caleb the son of Jephunneh as his possession.”

(21:10) From what clan had Aaron descended? Aaron was from the clan of Kohath. Aaron was the first high priest of Israel. He was Moses’ brother. His descendants served as priests.

(21:11-12) With whom did Aaron’s family share the city of Hebron? In [Josh 14](#), Caleb fought against the Anakim at Hebron. The city was given to the descendants of Aaron. Caleb received the fields and villages around the city.

[Joshua 21:13–19](#) “13 And to the descendants of Aaron the priest they gave Hebron, the city of refuge for the manslayer, with its pasturelands, Libnah with its pasturelands, 14 Jattir with its pasturelands, Eshtemoa with its pasturelands, 15 Holon with its pasturelands, Debir with its pasturelands, 16 Ain with its pasturelands, Juttah with its pasturelands, Beth-shemesh with its pasturelands—nine cities out of these two tribes; 17 then out of the tribe of Benjamin, Gibeon with its pasturelands, Geba with its pasturelands, 18 Anathoth with its pasturelands, and Almon with its pasturelands—four cities. 19 The cities of the descendants of Aaron, the priests, were in all thirteen cities with their pasturelands.”

(21:13) Notice that Hebron was a Levite city and a city of refuge.

Notice that all of Aaron’s cities were in the tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin. This was the region known as Judah when the nation divided after Solomon’s death. This will be significant much later in Israel’s history. Eventually, David will move the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. Later, Solomon will build the temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, in Judah, would become the center of worship and atonement.

Kohath

[Joshua 21:20–26](#) “20 As to the rest of the Kohathites belonging to the Kohathite clans of the Levites, the cities allotted to them were out of the tribe of Ephraim. 21 To them were given Shechem, the city of refuge for the manslayer, with its pasturelands in the hill country of Ephraim, Gezer with its pasturelands, 22 Kibzaim with its pasturelands, Beth-horon with its pasturelands—four cities; 23 and out of the tribe of Dan, Elteke with its pasturelands, Gibbethon with its pasturelands, 24 Aijalon with its pasturelands, Gath-rimmon with its pasturelands—four cities; 25 and out of the half-tribe of Manasseh, Taanach with its pasturelands, and Gath-rimmon with its pasturelands—two cities. 26 The cities of the clans of the rest of the Kohathites were ten in all with their pasturelands.”

(21:20) *Who were the Kohathites?* The Kohathites were the descendants of one of Levi’s three sons. The Kohathites carried the furniture of the tabernacle in the wilderness.

[Num 4](#) explains that the descendants of Kohath, ages 30-50 would serve in the tabernacle.

(21:21) Notice that Shechem was also a city of refuge.

Gershon

[Joshua 21:27–33](#) “27 And to the Gershonites, one of the clans of the Levites, were given out of the half-tribe of Manasseh, Golan in Bashan with its pasturelands, the city of refuge for the manslayer, and Beeshterah with its pasturelands—two cities; 28 and out of the tribe of Issachar, Kishion with its pasturelands, Daberath with its pasturelands,

29 Jarmuth with its pasturelands, En-gannim with its pasturelands—four cities; 30 and out of the tribe of Asher, Mishal with its pasturelands, Abdon with its pasturelands, 31 Helkath with its pasturelands, and Rehob with its pasturelands—four cities; 32 and out of the tribe of Naphtali, Kedesh in Galilee with its pasturelands, the city of refuge for the manslayer, Hammoth-dor with its pasturelands, and Kartan with its pasturelands—three cities. 33 The cities of the several clans of the Gershonites were in all thirteen cities with their pasturelands.”

(21:27) *Who were the Gershonites?* Gershon was a son of Levi. The descendants of Gershon were responsible for the manual labor around the tabernacle, including carrying the tent pieces as they traveled.

(21:27, 32) Notice that Golan and Kedesh are cities of refuge.

Merari

[Joshua 21:34–40](#) “34 And to the rest of the Levites, the Merarite clans, were given out of the tribe of Zebulun, Jokneam with its pasturelands, Kartah with its pasturelands, 35 Dimnah with its pasturelands, Nahalal with its pasturelands—four cities; 36 and out of the tribe of Reuben, Bezer with its pasturelands, Jahaz with its pasturelands, 37 Kedemoth with its pasturelands, and Mephaath with its pasturelands—four cities; 38 and out of the tribe of Gad, Ramoth in Gilead with its pasturelands, the city of refuge for the manslayer, Mahanaim with its pasturelands, 39 Heshbon with its pasturelands, Jazer with its pasturelands—four cities in all. 40 As for the cities of the several Merarite clans, that is, the remainder of the clans of the Levites, those allotted to them were in all twelve cities.”

(21:34) *Who were the Merarites?* Merari was another son of Levi. The Merarites were also responsible for manual labor around the tabernacle, including carrying pieces of the tent.

(21:38) Notice that Ramoth was a city of refuge.

Conclusion

[Joshua 21:41–45](#) “41 The cities of the Levites in the midst of the possession of the people of Israel were in all forty-eight cities with their pasturelands. 42 These cities each had its pasturelands around it. So it was with all these cities. 43 Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. 44 And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. 45 Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.”

(21:41) *Where were the cities of the Levites?* Their cities were scattered throughout all of Israel. The Levites were intercessors for Israel, especially the priests. After Israel settled in the land, the Levites' roles transitioned from carrying the tabernacle to leading music ([1 Chr 6:31-32](#)) and teaching ([2 Chr 17:9](#)).

(21:44) *What had God given Israel?* God had given Israel rest. This does not mean that **every** enemy had been defeated. Later in Joshua and Judges, specific cities and areas still had inhabitants. However, the larger forces were defeated so that there would no longer be a large army that could fight against Israel.

New covenant

Summary

[Joshua 12-19](#) describes the division of the land as an inheritance to 12 tribes of Israel. [Joshua 20-21](#) list the cities that were an exception to that division. Here are some important details about the cities. First, the cities were **scattered** throughout the nation, not in one part of Israel. Second, some of the cities were set apart for people to flee for **refuge**. Third, some of the cities were set apart for those who served in ministry to God and **interceded** to God for the people.

As we read the Old Testament, it is important to remember that the promises and covenants are fulfilled in Jesus. We should not read the OT as allegory. Allegory means that we can take any story and spiritualize it in any way we choose.

The right way to read the OT is to first interpret it in the context in which it was written. The goal of this step is to understand the purpose, not just the details. For example, [Joshua 20-21](#) is not just about how cities are divided. The cities have a purpose.

Second, we should try to understand how the purpose of the passage is fulfilled in Christ. Sometimes the NT quotes a passage and gives us insight; other times we have to interpret carefully.

These are not allegorical interpretations. **Allegory** can have endless interpretations; allegory is based on the imagination of the interpreter. **Typology** has one correct interpretation; the interpreter is responsible for discovering it. Thankfully, Scripture gives us direction, pointing us to Christ as the fulfillment of all of God's revelation.

Refuge

[Joshua 20](#) describes the cities of refuge, where someone could flee to await a trial. It was a place of safety from vengeance. *What is the New Covenant significance of a place of refuge?* In the New Covenant, we have a **person** of refuge, not a place of refuge. The cities of refuge **did not bypass justice**. Those who were found guilty were condemned.

The cities were a place of both **mercy** and **justice**. [Romans 3:25–26](#) “25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be **just** and the **justifier** of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Both **mercy** and **justice** are fulfilled in Christ. Jesus is our person of refuge.

The time of refuge was **temporary**. They stayed until they stood trial or until the high priest died. Our refuge in Christ is **eternal** because He is an eternal high priest and He has removed our condemnation. [Hebrews 7:24](#) “24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.” [Hebrews 9:12](#) “12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.”

Intercession

[Joshua 21](#) describes the cities of the Levites. The Levites **interceded** for the people of Israel. *What is the New Covenant significance of appointed intercessors?* In the New Covenant, we have a single intercessor, Jesus. Jesus intercedes forever. [Hebrews 7:23–25](#) “23 The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” [Romans 8:33–34](#) “33 Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” [1 John 2:1](#) “1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” We do not have a human intercessor

Conclusion

In [Exod 33](#), God told Moses that He would not go with Israel into the land. [Exodus 33:1–3](#) “1 The Lord said to Moses, ‘Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’ 2 I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 3 Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.’” [Exodus 33:13–15](#) “13 Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” 14 And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I

will give you rest.” 15 And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.”

The New Covenant is the ultimate blessing of God. God’s rest is not in a place - it is an omnipresent person. Refuge from trouble is not in place - it is in an omnipresent person (cf. [Heb 4:16](#)). Intercession for our sin and our needs (our prayers) is not in a place - it is in an omnipresent person.

If you are facing trouble, you can go home tonight and seek refuge in Christ. If you are in need or have sin to confess, you can pray tonight and know that Christ intercedes for you.