

# JOSHUA—WEEK 13

## GOD'S JUSTICE SYSTEM



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*Joshua, Week 13 — God's Justice System*  
*The Cover Picture is by Jean Fouquet (1420–1477)*  
*On display in Paris at the Bibliotheque nationale de France.*

As commanded in chapter 35 of Numbers, Joshua allocates a network of cities, along with their surrounding pasture land, for the Levites. This includes six sanctuary cities that are designated for people fleeing avengers after committing accidental homicide.

These cities, for Israelites and strangers, constitute a criminal justice system.

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1 Joshua 20:1–4

*The LORD also spoke to Joshua, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, that the slayer who kills a person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there; and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood. And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city as one of them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them.’ ”*

Here the LORD sets up a unique judicial system. Why? What for? Why are these cities needed? And what is an avenger of blood anyway?

This all traces back to chapter 35 of Numbers. While accidental homicide is not a capital crime—that’s the point of this system—murder is a capital crime. The closest male relative of a murder victim is expected to hunt the murderer down.

*The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him. — Numbers 35:21b*

This system would work just fine if people weren’t sinful and didn’t make mistakes.

*“However, if he pushes him suddenly without enmity, or throws anything at him without lying in wait, or uses a stone, by which a man could die, throwing it at him without seeing him, so that he dies, while he was not his enemy or seeking his harm, then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood according to these judgments.” — Numbers 35:22–24*

These passages show something profound. Designating whole cities to this function is surprising. The nation of Israel is commanded to go to extraordinary lengths to handle one specific thing. Why is this so important?

When accidents happen, people don’t see things the same. They can disagree on who did what and why. Next thing you know, they’ll be feuding like the Hatfields and the McCoys. That nightmare must be avoided.

It would be anything but glorifying to God.

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This is a part of Israel’s identity as God’s people. Now that they’re going to be a geographic nation, not just an ethnic nation, their representation as God’s chosen people will be more explicit and more visible.

So, the last thing they need is violent squabbles between families. Thus, they are commanded to set up this network of sanctuary cities, where cases will be heard and adjudicated carefully and openly.

This is a beautiful example of justice done right and a beacon of light to the world.

More on that tomorrow.

2 Joshua 20:5–6

“ ‘Then if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not deliver the slayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unintentionally, but did not hate him beforehand. And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the slayer may return and come to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled.’ ”

The “manslayer” who makes it to a sanctuary city before the avenger catches up to him isn’t out of danger just yet. The next step is that *he stands before the congregation for judgment*.

Importantly, this judgement is not done in private. The hearing is conducted *before the congregation*. Everyone hears all the details. That’s essential, not just to the justice but to how it glorifies God.

No process is perfect. Errors will be made. Some of those errors will be uncovered later.

But in all cases the problem will be human error. The process won’t be to blame.

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But this passage contains a head-scratching twist. What does this have to do with *the death of the one who is high priest*? That’s completely out of the blue. How can there be any connection?

In many areas (e.g., Bible, physics, art) the most incongruous things are the most worth serious study. When something in a painting is impossible or doesn’t make sense, look for symbolic meaning. Many artists paint in hidden messages by using out-of-place things.

Since the timing of the High Priest’s death doesn’t seem to fit literally, maybe it’s figurative. Hmmm.

*Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.* — Hebrews 4:14

A figurative understanding makes more sense than anything else I’ve found, and it’s supported by some of the ancients.

Ambrose (ca. 339 – 397) wrote, “*There remains ... what Scripture says concerning the death of the chief priest, ‘that the homicide shall be in the city of refuge even to that time, until the high priest dies.’ In this passage the literal interpretation causes difficulty. First, the period of flight is limited by chance rather than by any consideration of fairness; further, in like cases the result is unlike. ... However, what is the meaning beneath the uncertainty? And so, because the letter causes difficulty, let us search for spiritual meanings. Who is that high priest but the Son of God, the Word of God?*” — Flight from the World 2.13

Jerome (ca. 347 – 420) adds, “[*He*] is ordered to flee to a city of refuge and remain in that place until the death of the high priest, that is to say, until he is redeemed by the blood of the Savior.” — Defense Against the Pelagians 1.33

This interpretation has its own problems though. The Israelites would have interpreted this rule literally.

3 Joshua 20:7–9

*So they appointed Kedesh in Galilee, in the mountains of Naphtali, Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and Kirjath Arba (which is Hebron) in the mountains of Judah. And on the other side of the Jordan, by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer in the wilderness on the plain, from the tribe of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwelt among them, that whoever killed a person accidentally might flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stood before the congregation.*

These cities are rather evenly spaced throughout Israel. This map shows them about 50 miles apart (though Shechem appears to be a bit north of Ephraim).

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve\\_Tribes\\_of\\_Israel#/media/File:12\\_Tribes\\_of\\_Israel\\_Map.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_Tribes_of_Israel#/media/File:12_Tribes_of_Israel_Map.svg)

Thus, the farthest almost anyone would have to flee would be about 25 miles. The one exception is in the wilderness of Zin in the far south. This is in the Negev desert. This is very inhospitable territory—few people would want to live there—and it's still only about 50 miles from Hebron, max.

Still, that's a pretty long donkey ride. The chase scene would be comical by modern movie standards. Remember, Rahab made the spies wait three days for the posse chasing them to give up, and Jericho is only a few miles from the Jordan river.

So fleeing to the nearest sanctuary city isn't as easy as the Von Trapp family dashing off to a nearby convent.

Then again, catching up to a fleeing manslayer and denying him a fair hearing would be incredibly bad form.

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In a way, three sanctuary cities on each side of the Jordan doesn't seem like enough. Fleeing there can be a huge journey. Not only that, but many accidental deaths are of co-workers, friends or loved ones. The manslayer may be wracked with grief or even consumed with the task of trying to save the victim's life. Must he dash off immediately so as to stay ahead of the posse chasing him?

No. This justice system, instituted by God, sets a standard. Accidental homicide is not a capital crime and everyone is supposed to get that. The designated avenger should understand that he's not obligated to exact vigilante justice without a hearing in the sanctuary city. Note also that this isn't just *for all the children of Israel*; it's also *for the stranger who dwelt among them*.

So, these sanctuary cities serve multiple functions. They act as courts. For the manslayer who is innocent of murder, they're also prisons; he can't return home and resume life.

For the murderer, they deliver justice.

4 Joshua 21:1–8

*Then the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites came near to Eleazar the priest, to Joshua the son of Nun, and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the children of Israel. And they spoke to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, saying, "The LORD commanded through Moses to give us cities to dwell in, with their common-lands for our livestock." So the children of Israel gave to the Levites from their inheritance, at the commandment of the LORD, these cities and their common-lands:*

*Now the lot came out for the families of the Kohathites. And the children of Aaron the priest, who were of the Levites, had thirteen cities by lot from the tribe of Judah, from the tribe of Simeon, and from the tribe of Benjamin. The rest of the children of Kohath had ten cities by lot from the families of the tribe of Ephraim, from the tribe of Dan, and from the half-tribe of Manasseh.*

*And the children of Gershon had thirteen cities by lot from the families of the tribe of Issachar, from the tribe of Asher, from the tribe of Naphtali, and from the half-tribe of Manasseh in Bashan.*

*The children of Merari according to their families had twelve cities from the tribe of Reuben, from the tribe of Gad, and from the tribe of Zebulun.*

*And the children of Israel gave these cities with their common-lands by lot to the Levites, as the LORD had commanded by the hand of Moses.*

The six cities of refuge aren't all the Levites get. They get another forty-two cities plus the pasture land around all of them.

*"Now among the cities which you will give to the Levites you shall appoint six cities of refuge, to which a manslayer may flee. And to these you shall add forty-two cities." — Numbers 35:6*

*"Command the children of Israel that they give the Levites cities to dwell in from the inheritance of their possession, and you shall also give the Levites common-land around the cities. They shall have the cities to dwell in; and their common-land shall be for their cattle, for their herds, and for all their animals. The common-land of the cities which you will give the Levites shall extend from the wall of the city outward a thousand cubits all around." — Numbers 35:2–4 (ESV)*

This is essential for them to administer their priestly function. While twenty-five miles may be a feasible distance for a manslayer to flee, it's a ridiculous distance for priests or worshippers to travel regularly.

Remember, that's traveling on foot or maybe by donkey or horseback—and the distance is each way.

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Thus far, I've referenced only one map of the twelve tribes—the one that seems the most comprehensive.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve\\_Tribes\\_of\\_Israel#/media/File:12\\_Tribes\\_of\\_Israel\\_Map.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_Tribes_of_Israel#/media/File:12_Tribes_of_Israel_Map.svg)

But there are many others, and they don't agree. Here's one, which splits Manasseh quite differently.

[https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/map-gallery/t/map-12\\_tribes](https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/map-gallery/t/map-12_tribes)

5 Joshua 21:9–26

*So they gave from the tribe of the children of Judah and from the tribe of the children of Simeon these cities which are designated by name, which were for the children of Aaron, one of the families of the Kohathites, who were of the children of Levi; for the lot was theirs first. And they gave them Kirjath Arba (Arba was the father of Anak), which is Hebron, in the mountains of Judah, with the common-land surrounding it. But the fields of the city and its villages they gave to Caleb the son of Jephunneh as his possession.*

*Thus to the children of Aaron the priest they gave Hebron with its common-land (a city of refuge for the slayer), Libnah with its common-land, Jattir with its common-land, Eshtemoa with its common-land, Holon with its common-land, Debir with its common-land, Ain with its common-land, Juttah with its common-land, and Beth Shemesh with its common-land: nine cities from those two tribes; and from the tribe of Benjamin, Gibeon with its common-land, Geba with its common-land, Anathoth with its common-land, and Almon with its common-land: four cities. All the cities of the children of Aaron, the priests, were thirteen cities with their common-lands.*

*And the families of the children of Kohath, the Levites, the rest of the children of Kohath, even they had the cities of their lot from the tribe of Ephraim. For they gave them Shechem with its common-land in the mountains of Ephraim (a city of refuge for the slayer), Gezer with its common-land, Kibzaim with its common-land, and Beth Horon with its common-land: four cities; and from the tribe of Dan, Eltekeh with its common-land, Gibbethon with its common-land, Aijalon with its common-land, and Gath Rimmon with its common-land: four cities; and from the half-tribe of Manasseh, Tanach with its common-land and Gath Rimmon with its common-land: two cities. All the ten cities with their common-lands were for the rest of the families of the children of Kohath.*

These cities, along with their pasture land, take up a lot of prime real estate. When we first read that the Levites didn't get a homeland of their own, it might have sounded like they're getting shortchanged.

Now it looks like they made out great.

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How the Levites "made out" is the wrong perspective. This isn't about who did best; it's about God's glory. Everything is about God's glory.

That's why the people accept the allocation without complaining. They understand that it's all about His glory.

Or not. Maybe they're in a spot where they're expected to act like they're okay with everything.

In Joshua 17:14–18, the sons of Joseph complained about their allocation and Joshua just gave them "what fer" in return. After that, everyone knew that whining would get them nowhere.

But that means that their apparent faith may not be as solid as it looks.

Unfortunately, that will prove to be the case.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What is your favorite law?
2. Have you ever found a hidden message in art?
3. How are our behaviors affected by laws?
4. Has your commute to church ever been a burden?
5. Have you ever held your tongue for God's glory?

*Items for prayer:*