

The Levites had no inheritance within the borders of the promised land as the other tribes were gifted as God's tenants. Instead, this tribe were given various cities to house their people which were scattered throughout the entire land. In addition to these were added six specific cities of refuge which were evenly distributed three on the west bank and three on the east bank of the river Jordan.

Each city of the Levites was to be surrounded by suburbs of a specific size. On every side of the city a measuring of two thousand cubits was to be determined so the area allocated was always the same, four million square cubits. Their animals were expected to be contained within these boundaries, so there was a limit to their largess, they were not to expand without any limits, but an optimum size was specified to contain them.

Earlier, in Leviticus 25v33,34 there is the prescription that such property was not allowed to be sold off. It was a tribal inheritance not a private inheritance, and as such was a reward for serving the community in spiritual matters. *"And if a man purchase of the Levites, then the house that was sold, and the city of his possession, shall go out in the year of jubilee, for the houses of the cities of the Levites are their possession among the children of Israel. But the field of the suburbs of their cities may not be sold: for it is their perpetual possession"*.

This institution benefited the rest of the tribes also as it meant that the Levites were unable to expand their immediate territory into the surrounding area as the clear marker stones set the boundary at a specific distance from each Levite city. This did not prevent the Levites become property tycoons with other people's assets elsewhere but if they did so they could not carry on regardless of their spiritual status as the two aspects of their roles would clash with the location specific element of their inheritance. It was set up to focus the Levites on their primary responsibilities in a geographical location overseen by God in the allocation of each city to that Tribe. Moving about at a whim was not part of this divine structure.

The second dimension given in this chapter also limited the size of each city of the Levites as the boundary had to be set at one thousand cubits from the walls, so the city could not expand and push out the boundaries further because of the conjunction between the two measurements. An absolute restriction meant that the spiritual responsibilities of this tribe were not to be compromised by excessive economic considerations. The Levites were to live off the tithes of the nations not to seek to further their own comfort by pursuing separate material goals. No other cities in the promised inheritance were subject to size restrictions and the record in Ezekiel expands the size of the future city/temple at Jerusalem to three thousand cubits squared which is over twice the size of these cities including their suburbs.

The Levites were to receive a total of forty-eight cities which is an average of four cities per each other tribe. However, it was not a straight split but *"from them that have many ye shall give many; but from them that have few ye shall give few"*. This sets out the basic appeal to fairness and equity, so that the division was not made on the basis of mere identity but rather on the practicalities of coverage. Larger population and area tribes needed correspondingly more Levites to fulfil their spiritual roles in their midst, so it is logistically sensible to allocate on such a basis.

The Levites were to allocate six cities of refuge from these forty-eight cities. It does not say that God specified which cities the Levites were to be given but it does say that God through Moses severed three cities of Refuge on the east side of Jordan in Deuteronomy 4v41-43, namely Bezer from the Reubenites, Ramoth Gilead from the Gadites, and Golan in Bashan from the Manassites. In Joshua 20v7-9 it says, "*they appointed*" the cities of Refuge, so there does seem to be an element of agency, using the children of Israel as God specified through Joshua, "*Appoint out for you*" verse 1&2.

In Joshua 21v3,4 it states that these cities were determined by lot, 13 for the Priests, 10 for Kohath, 12 for Merari, and 13 for Gershon.

Out of these allocations the specific Cities of refuge are

Hebron from Judah from the Priests.

Shechem from Ephraim from Kohath.

Kadesh from Naphtali from Gershon.

Bezer from Reuben from Merari.

Ramoth from Gad from Merari.

Golan from Manasseh from Gershon.

All thirteen Priestly cities were in the south from Judah, Simeon and Benjamin. They were to be settled near the temple as it makes no sense to have them living at the furthest sections of the land. God knows what He is doing and has planned ahead, which mankind is largely incapable of doing.

The purpose of these cities of refuge was not to circumvent appropriate justice but for those guilty of manslaughter (an accident or act of carelessness) but not murder (pre-meditated) were permitted to flee from their normal life and circumstance and remove themselves onto the national protection for those who had acted "*at unawares*". Thereby reinforcing the idea in the divine understanding that actions are less than intent. Under the Law of Moses sins of ignorance had a sacrificial offering to atone for them, but sins not of ignorance had no offering possible, only the sacrifice of Christ can atone for that never a mere animal.

There was also the issue in law of a revenger of blood. A person in isolation without family or friends had no witnesses to the crime of their death. Under the law of Moses there was no prosecution for anything worthy of the death penalty without two or three witnesses attesting to the crime. Putting your self into isolation was therefore in itself a dangerous thing to do.

The congregation was to judge between the slayer and the revenger of blood. This congregation were the citizens of the city of refuge not people from the original scene of the crime. Their responsibility was to ascertain whether the claims of the slayer that he had acted without malice and forethought were justified. If they disagreed then the slayer would be handed over to the revenger of blood, who would have the responsibility to exact a life for a life. Someone had to step up and slay the slayer. It was not left to some neutral person; people had to invest themselves into this system of justice.

Much has been said about these cities of refuge, and I have chosen to focus on the less expounded areas so that there is more food for thought. Every time we return to such considerations there is always more to discover and glean for those keen to search out the treasures. However, the importance of the death of the High Priest in this scheme being the only way in which the slayer can return to his normal life outside the city of refuge must not be forgotten. As the death of the high priest under Jesus Christ has ceased this opportunity for any Aaronic representative to fulfil this in future, the nature of the redemption is vested solely in him. His unique death because of obedience and not as the punishment for sin in disobedience makes those with blood on their hands free in him because his blood has been shed first for himself then for the people, and his revenger of blood has exacted the judgment under the Law for those responsible both Jews and gentiles.

There is also a universal principle emphasised in this chapter “*The land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein but by the blood of him that shed it*”, this is often overlooked by those who believe in blanket forgiveness of a god of unjust love. This is still just as true today as it was three and a half thousand years ago.