

The Cities of Refuge and the Messiah

It is frightening today to think of living in a society where terrorism is on the increase but perhaps more pertinent to South Africa, where crime has spiralled out of control. We live in a world that offers no place of safety, protection, security, asylum, or refuge.

In *Num. 35*, Moses was commanded by God to appoint cities of refuge. These were not havens for burnt-out ministers or retirement complexes but a place where those who had committed unpremeditated murder could flee until their case could be investigated. As charming as the term sounds, the cities of refuge are concerned with murder and manslaughter. The fact that God ordained these cities underlines the fact that he understands the law of the jungle. He has observed it since the very beginning. It wasn't long after Adam and Eve disobeyed God that their son Cain murdered his brother Abel in a fit of jealous rage. Even though the life of Abel was sacred, it was destroyed without cause. This kind of lawless activity has been going on ever since and has, in fact, become a hallmark of the human race.

In *Numbers 35:33-34*, God commanded Israel, **“You shall not pollute the land in which you are; for blood pollutes the land and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. ‘And you shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord am dwelling in the midst of the children of Israel.’”**

However, God took pains in *Exodus 21*, *Numbers 35*, and *Deuteronomy 19* to explain that a distinction was to be made between premeditated murder, and manslaughter or a crime of passion - the unpremeditated killing of another person. If the death was indeed unpremeditated, or if a person had killed someone by accident, the slayer could seek refuge in the sanctuary of the tabernacle, physically grasping the altar as a place of safety and protection. For the truly guilty, however, another law prevailed. God said through Moses in *Exodus 21:12-14*: **“He who strikes a man so that he died shall surely be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint you a place to which he may flee. If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbour, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die.”** If the culprit was guilty of premeditated, violent murder, no amount of hanging on to the altar would help even if the killer were the high priest himself.

This worked well during the forty years that the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness, and even during the seven years of military conquest in Canaan. The people had not yet spread out across the land and were thus physically close to the tent of meeting. This meant that any Israelite could flee into the tabernacle and find refuge there. But once the tribes were settled throughout Canaan in their respective tribal inheritances, they needed easier access to places of refuge. God anticipated this and ordained six cities of refuge where anyone who had killed another person unintentionally could flee.

Deut.19:1-13: - **“When the Lord your God shall cut off the nations whose land the Lord your God is giving to you, and when you dispossess them, and live in their cities, and in their houses, you shall separate three cities for you in the midst of your land, which the Lord your God is giving you to possess it. You shall prepare the way for yourself, and shall divide into three parts the border of your land which the Lord your God shall cause you to inherit, so that every manslayer may flee there. And this is the case of the manslayer who shall flee there, that he may live: whoever strikes his neighbour**

unawares, and has not hated him yesterday and the day before; even he who goes into the forest with his neighbour to cut wood, and his hand brings a stroke with the axe to cut down the tree, and the iron head slips from the wood and finds his neighbour so that he dies; he shall flee to one of these cities, and shall live; that the avenger of blood not pursue the manslayer when his heart is hot, and shall overtake him because the way is long, and shall strike him so as to die, and he had no sentence of death, for he did not hate him yesterday or the day before. On account of this I am commanding you, saying, You shall separate to yourself three cities. And if the Lord your God shall enlarge your border, as He has sworn to your fathers, and shall give to you all the land which He has spoken to give to your fathers, if you will keep these commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God, and to walk in His ways forever, then you shall add to yourself another three cities to these three.

“And innocent blood shall not be shed in the midst of your land, which the Lord your God giving to you as an inheritance, and there be blood on you. And if a man hates his neighbour, and lies in wait for him, and rises up against him, and strikes his life from him, so that he dies, and flees to one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and bring from him there, and give him into the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die. Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall put away the innocent blood from Israel, and it shall be well with you.”

The Avenger of Blood

In ancient Israel there was no police force to investigate crimes. It was therefore the moral obligation of the family member closest to the victim to investigate and avenge the murder. In the Biblical text he is called the avenger of blood. The Hebrew word is *go'el* which also means “redeemer.” But God knew human nature. He knew that the avenger’s emotional subjectivity, grief, and anger at the loss of a family member might prove overwhelming. In his desire for revenge, the *go'el* might not want to bother investigating whether the death was an accidental killing or whether it was in fact premeditated murder. The avenger’s passion might drive him to kill someone who wasn;t guilty of a capital crime. Hence the need for cities of refuge.

The slayer or manslayer could immediately flee to the gate of one of these cities, and there he would be protected from the avenger of blood until the elders of the community could investigate the circumstances in a preliminary hearing. The passages cited above make it clear that if the fugitive was found guilty of premeditated murder, either in the preliminary investigation or in the full, formal public hearing before the entire congregation, then the elders would sentence the perpetrator to death. That way the family of the victim would be satisfied and justice would be served.

If it could be established, however, that the person had committed the crime by accident or in a fit of passion, then he would be given the right of asylum in the city, safe from any threat from the avenger of blood. But there was a catch. He was required to stay within its precincts even though he had been declared innocent of premeditated murder. He was still guilty of manslaughter, and as long as the incumbent high priest lived, he was to remain within the walls of the city of refuge to which he had fled. The lifespan of the high priest in office at the time dictated the length of his sentence. It could be of short duration or an extremely long time. Basically, the slayer was in large measure forfeiting his freedom in order to save his life.

The cities of refuge are so important to God that they are mentioned three times in the *Tenach* (Hebrew Scriptures). When the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan to conquer Canaan, two and a half tribes elected to return and settle on the east side of the Jordan. Moses decreed that three of the six cities of refuge would be located in their territory. It may seem strange that there should be as many in the land allotted to the two and a half tribes as in the territory of the nine and a half tribes in Canaan proper. What in fact happened was that Moses separated three cities beyond Jordan, and Joshua later separated three in the land of Canaan opposite them. Joshua 20:7 lists the three cities west of the Jordan from north to south, while verse 8 lists the three cities east of the Jordan from south to north. They were situated like two rows in a vineyard.

Gill's commentary records: "Hebron in Judea was located opposite Bezer in the wilderness; Shechem in Mount Ephraim was opposite Ramoth in Gilead; Kadesh in Mount Naphtali was opposite Golan in Bashan; and the three were so disposed, that there was as much space from the south (of the land of Israel) to Hebron as from Hebron to Shechem; and as much from Hebron to Shechem as from Shechem to Kadesh; and as much from Shechem to Kadesh as from Kadesh to the north beyond Jordan; The territory of the tribes east of the Jordan extended in length as far as the land of Canaan, and was equal to it, running along it; so that those in the land of Canaan could soon and easily get over Jordan to the cities of refuge there, if there was a need; besides that as we have seen in *Deut. 19:8*, if their territory should be enlarged, they were to add three cities more in the land of Canaan."

According to the rabbis, those three cities will be added in the days of the Messiah. For those of us who believe in Yeshua, we know that the Messiah has come already, and that the cities of refuge point to him. On a more immediate note, what the geographic detail tells us is that it required an average day's run to reach the nearest city of refuge.

Features of the City

This highlights the first feature of the cities of refuge. They had to be strategically located so that there would be easy access to them for anybody seeking refuge. As you no doubt know, the land of Israel approximates the Kruger National Park in size, so nobody could ever have been very far away from a city of refuge. In *Deuteronomy 19:3* God commanded the Israelites to build highways, not just foot paths, to the cities of refuge.

According to the *Mishnah*, it was extremely important to maintain these highways so that nobody was ever hindered in reaching the cities. The Israelites had to build bridges across every ravine traversed by a highway so that the person running for refuge would not have to waste time climbing to the bottom of the ravine and then up the other side. The highways had to be rebuilt every spring after the heavy winter rains so that the road surface would be smooth and easy to run on. At every crossroads or intersection, there were to be bold signs pointing the way with the words "*Mekelet, Mekelet, REFUGE, REFUGE*" in large letters. Not only were the directions to be clear, but the slayer would not have to lose any time slowing down to read the sign.

The second feature is that the gates of the cities of refuge were never to be locked. If someone had run for 60km or so to get to the city and reached the city in the middle of the night, they could still be killed by the avenger of blood if the gates were shut.

The third feature is that the city was to be well stocked to provide for any fugitives who came to stay, possibly for a period of years. It was not only a place of guaranteed legal protection,

but also of material provision. The rabbinic writings give explicit detail concerning these matters.

The fourth feature is found in Scripture itself. *Exodus 21, Numbers 35, and Deuteronomy 19* make it clear that apart from the tabernacle and the cities of refuge, there was no other place of guaranteed safety. If the slayer at any time strayed outside the city while the presiding high priest still lived, the city could do nothing to protect him from the avenger of blood.

The fifth feature is that the cities were designated for all the people of Israel, but also for the stranger sojourning among them [the Gentiles]. This meant that any one who killed a person without intent could flee there and be protected from the avenger of blood till he stood before the congregation to be tried.

Everybody was welcome in these cities, even non-Jews who were permanent residents of the land. The same justice, the same protection and provision, the same atoning grace were free to all. Our western legal system finds its roots in this Biblical teaching that says a person is innocent until proven guilty.

The Death of Abner

An incident related to these matters is found in *2 Samuel 2:18-24*. Abner had been King Saul's Commander-in-chief. As David's army grew in size there was continuous war between the followers of Saul and the followers of David. On one occasion a pitched battle ensued between Saul's army and David's men. The fighting was in David's favour and Abner found himself being pursued by a man named Asahel, the younger brother of Joab, David's general. Abner tried to reason with Asahel, but the hotheaded Asahel was not in a mood to listen. Abner was forced to kill him in self defence. Abner later changed sides and joined David's army to the anger of Joab.

Some time later Joab lured Abner into a trap and killed him to avenge the death of Asahel. What is striking about this story is the remark made by David when he mourned the death of Abner: *2 Sam. 3:33* - "**Should Abner have died like a fool?**" The reason for this strange remark is that Abner had died at the very gates of Hebron - one of the cities of refuge. It is as if David were saying, "*Abner, you died like a fool! You were right there at the gates of the refuge. All you had to do was walk right in. Nobody had you tied up! You could have been saved, but you died like a fool!*"

There are many people today dying like fools even though refuge is available to them. Because of course, there are not only legal and ethical lessons in the cities of refuge but spiritual ones. The New Testament clearly relates the atoning work of Yeshua the Messiah to the cities of refuge. *Heb. 6:8* - "...that...we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us." *Ps. 9:9* - "**The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of distress.**"

Romans 6:23 warns us that the consequences of our sin is death. "**And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved**" (*Acts 4:12*). Without the Messiah, we are sinners on the run from God's justice, fugitives apart from Yeshua.

Similarities with Messiah

There are several similarities between the features of the cities of refuge and the atoning work of the Messiah in our lives.

First similarity: There had to be easy access to the cities of refuge in terms of the highways, the placement of the cities, and the road signs. Likewise, Yeshua is totally accessible to us when we acknowledge our desperate need, and when our spirit is broken and contrite over our sin. There *is* a place of safety in a terrifying world. There is one who is completely accessible to all of us.

Second similarity: The gates of the cities of refuge were never to be locked. This is a picture of Yeshua who said, "The one coming to me I will in no way cast out" (John 6:37). The closing service at Yom Kippur is called *ne'ilah* when, according to tradition, the gates of heaven are shut. But in Yeshua the doors are always wide open for the penitent sinner.

Third similarity: The cities of refuge provided the physical resources of food and a place to stay in case the fugitive had to spend months or years there. In the same way, Yeshua is our totally sufficient refuge. While in a legal sense his death is completely adequate to meet our need for protection from the condemnation of our sin, he also provides us with continuing spiritual resources. In him we have resources to live life, to triumph, to live victoriously as fugitives who have found a place of refuge.

Fourth similarity: The only place to find protection from the avenger of blood was in the city of refuge. You could be as repentant as you wanted to be, but if you were any place else besides the city of refuge, it would not matter. The letter to the *Hebrews* compares dying outside the Torah of Moses with dying outside the safety available through Yeshua (10:28-29): **"Anyone who has set aside the Torah of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?"**

Fifth similarity: Just as the cities of refuge were open to everybody, Jew or Gentile, so Yeshua, the Jewish Messiah, is also a refuge to people of all nations. If he weren't he would not be the Messiah prophesied in the Jewish scriptures (*Isaiah 11:10; 42:6*).

Differences

However, there are also differences between these cities of refuge and Yeshua. The cities only provided protection for those who had shed blood accidentally. Yeshua is accessible even to those who are his enemies, and even to those who might be guilty of the most heinous crimes. To be in the cities of refuge was tantamount to exile and imprisonment, but for those who turn to Yeshua, there is total freedom - freedom from the power and the penalty of sin against God. It was possible that those who had fled to the cities of refuge might be found guilty and executed, but those who turn to Messiah for refuge are freely forgiven and are granted eternal life.

There is another important difference between the cities of refuge and our refuge in Yeshua. The fugitive had to stay in the city of refuge as long as the anointed high priest was alive. Only upon the high priest's death was he free to leave. It is significant that the Talmud sees a link between the death of the high priest and atonement for the sin of the perpetrator. According to the *Mishnah*, the high priest's mother would supply clothing and food to those

claiming asylum in the cities of refuge, so that they would not wish for the death of her son!
How amazing that God freely gave *his* Son.

Only when the incumbent high priest died was the fugitive free to return home and try to resume a normal life in his community and his family. *Hebrews 7:23-27* records a great truth, and again the writer is pointing back to the cities of refuge. **“And the former priests [the human high priests in Israel], on the one hand, existed in greater numbers, because they were prevented by death from continuing [the ministry of offering sacrifice, atonement], but He, on the other hand, because He lives forever, holds His priesthood permanently. Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”**

The final difference is that the *go'el* sought to avenge the blood of the slain. Our *go'el* (redeemer) not only forgives the guilty but took our punishment upon himself.

It is not only in the initial act of coming to Yeshua when we realise that we need redemption and salvation, that we find a place of refuge. From that point on there is always a place of refuge in the Messiah that we can come to as believers, where we can be continually cleansed of sin and guilt.