

## 13.12 Cities of Refuge (Numbers 35:1–34; Joshua 20:1–9; 21:1–45; 1 Chron. 6:54–81)

✓ “*Check*” it out; opinion, inference, supposed conversation, or fact one can verify follows.

[. . .] indicates a remark to the teacher that should not be read aloud. It also indicates answers to questions.

### Visuals and Tools:

- Pictures and other visuals found at the end of this lesson. Please give credit to the sources of pictures.
- Check “Activities” and “Handwork” found below for additional needed materials.

**Bible Time Tips and Terms to Teach:** Tips and terms are enlarged for flashcards at the end of this lesson. Print, cut out, and glue to card stock, or just print on colorful cardstock.

- *manslayer*: a person who unintentionally kills someone else
- *axe head*: the metal part of the axe that does the cutting
- *refuge*: place of safety
- *revenge*: payback for a wrong done to someone
- *avenger of blood*: a close family member who would pay back for his relative’s death, even if the death was accidental

### Scripture: (ESV)

Numbers 35:1 The Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, 2 “Command the people of Israel to give to the Levites some of the inheritance of their possession as cities for them to dwell in. And you shall give to the Levites pasturelands around the cities. 3 The cities shall be theirs to dwell in, and their pasturelands shall be for their cattle and for their livestock and for all their beasts. 4 The pasturelands of the cities, which you shall give to the Levites, shall reach from the wall of the city outward a thousand cubits all around. 5 And you shall measure, outside the city, on the east side two thousand cubits, and on the south side two thousand cubits, and on the west side two thousand cubits, and on the north side two thousand cubits, the city being in the middle. This shall belong to them as pastureland for their cities.

6 “The cities that you give to the Levites shall be the six cities of refuge, where you shall permit the manslayer to flee, and in addition to them you shall give forty-two cities. 7 All the cities that you give to the Levites shall be forty-eight, with their pasturelands. 8 And as for the cities that you shall give from the possession of the people of Israel, from the larger tribes you shall take many, and from the smaller tribes you shall take few; each, in proportion to the inheritance that it inherits, shall give of its cities to the Levites.”

9 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 10 “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, 11 then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. 12 The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgment. 13 And the cities that you give shall be your six cities of refuge. 14 You shall give three cities beyond the Jordan, and three cities in the land of Canaan, to be cities of refuge. 15 These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there.

16 “But if he struck him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. 17 And if he struck him down with a stone tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. 18 Or if he struck him down with a wooden tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. 19 The avenger of blood shall himself put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. 20 And if he pushed him out of hatred or hurled something at him, lying in wait, so that he died, 21 or in enmity struck him down with his hand, so that he died, then he who struck the blow shall be put to death. He is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put

the murderer to death when he meets him.

22 “But if he pushed him suddenly without enmity, or hurled anything on him without lying in wait 23 or used a stone that could cause death, and without seeing him dropped it on him, so that he died, though he was not his enemy and did not seek his harm, 24 then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood, in accordance with these rules. 25 And the congregation shall rescue the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he had fled, and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. 26 But if the manslayer shall at any time go beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge to which he fled, 27 and the avenger of blood finds him outside the boundaries of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood. 28 For he must remain in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest, but after the death of the high priest the manslayer may return to the land of his possession. 29 And these things shall be for a statute and rule for you throughout your generations in all your dwelling places.

30 “If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses. But no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness. 31 Moreover, you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death, but he shall be put to death. 32 And you shall accept no ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the high priest. 33 You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. 34 You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.”

Joshua 20:1 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.’”

7 So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. 8 And beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they appointed Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland, from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. 9 These were the cities designated for all the people of Israel and for the stranger sojourning among them, that anyone who killed a person without intent could flee there, so that he might not die by the hand of the avenger of blood, till he stood before the congregation.

21:1 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. . . .

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.

**Introduction/Review:**

Although God, through Joshua and Israel, had made significant inroads in conquering the Promised Land, the takeover was incomplete. However, Joshua, Eleazar the high priest, and tribal leaders divided the land by casting lots, thus leaving individual tribes to complete the conquest of their own territories.

Way back in the book of Genesis, Jacob/Israel had prophesied before he died, “Simeon and Levi are brothers; . . . in their anger they killed men. . . .Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce. . . . *I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel*” (Genesis 49:5–7, emphasis added).

## Story:

### *Simeon and Levi*

In fulfillment of Jacob’s curse, Simeon’s land was situated within the borders of Judah, and ✓its cities were scattered throughout the territory.\* We read very little about Simeon after the book of Deuteronomy. Evidently, ✓its influence and achievements seem minimal; they were “divided in Israel.”

Levi, however, became a blessing through Jacob’s curse, for it was the priestly tribe. Although Levites were scattered throughout the whole land, they did possess forty-eight cities with half a mile of land on every side of each city for farming and grazing. These forty-eight cities were spread throughout Israel for an important reason: the Levites were to serve God ✓by teaching the people around them and, of course, by serving at the tabernacle.

### *Manslaughter story*

Now I’m going to tell you the story about how God provided for cases of unintentional murder, called manslaughter. In those days if someone murdered someone else, his close relative was supposed to slay the killer—“an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” The relative was called the avenger of blood, the one who got revenge or who paid back for the death of his relative. He was the one who was supposed to bring about justice. But what happened if someone killed a relative accidentally? Here’s a story to tell how God provided for this situation.

[Teacher, either read the story with various voices and expression or print copies for students to read in a readers’ theater fashion.]

(Setting: Jerry and Mac are carrying axes and are walking together.)

**Jerry:** Hey, Mac. Let’s go chop some wood for our fires.

(Both chop . . . chop.) Whoa! What happened to my axe head? It’s suddenly gone! Where did it go?

**Mac:** (Mac falls to the ground.)

**Jerry:** Mac, Mac! What’s wrong? Oh, no! My axe head hit him in the head. Mac, Mac! Look! He’s not moving! He’s dead! My axe head slipped from its handle, hit him, and killed him. I didn’t mean to kill him. Oh, no! What shall I do? His brother will come after me and kill me. “Eye for an eye” is what the law says. I know what I can do! I’ll run to Shechem, one of the six cities of refuge, a city where I will be protected. (Runs away. Comes to Shechem after about a day or less.)

Here I am at the gate of the city. I see the men, the elders, who rule this city. Hey there, men, elders of Shechem!

**Elders:** Come on into our city. What has happened?

**Jerry:** My friend, Mac, and I were chopping wood in Ephraim Woods when my axe head flew off my axe handle and hit Mac in the head, killing him. We were friends. I didn’t mean to kill him.

**Elders:** You are protected in this city. After your trial, if you are found innocent of murder, you may live here until the high priest dies. You must not leave this city. If Mac’s brother, the avenger of blood, comes, we will not let him come after you. He can’t hurt you because, even though you killed Mac, you didn’t do it on purpose. If you leave the city, however, and Mac’s brother finds you, he has every right to avenge his

brother by slaying you. So stay in the city. The high priest is pretty young right now; so you might die before he does. But if the high priest dies, you will be free to go back to your home in Ephraim. Until then, this city will be your refuge—your place of safe protection. (End of story.)

### ***Explanation of cities of refuge***

So you see, students, the purpose of a city of refuge was to protect the innocent. God had told Moses that the people should select six cities—three on the east side of the Jordan River and three west of the Jordan—to be cities of refuge. They were to be evenly distributed throughout the whole country so that they would be accessible [refer to “Cities of Refuge” map below] within one day’s journey to all citizens and sojourners.

Just as in our story, a person who had accidentally put someone to death could flee to a city of refuge and be protected. Did the leaders of the city just automatically believe someone who claimed innocence? No. The manslayer had to be put on trial before the congregation. The congregation had to judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood. If the congregation judged the manslayer to be innocent, he could be rescued from the avenger of blood and stay in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest. But if the manslayer went beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge at any time and the avenger of blood found him outside that city’s boundaries, the avenger of blood could kill the manslayer without being guilty.

Now, what about someone who actually murdered (intentionally killed)? What if he fled to a city of refuge and claimed to be innocent? Again, the avenger of blood would follow him. The man would be tried before the congregation with at least two or three witnesses. When he was found guilty of actual murder, he would forfeit his life for the life he had taken. He did not qualify for safety in the city of refuge; in fact, he had to die.

### ***Summary of conquest***

The Bible gives us a fine summary of Joshua and Israel’s subduing of the Promised Land. We read, “The Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. They settled there, and the Lord gave them rest on every side. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass” (Joshua 21:43–45). God had done it. Praise His name.

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\*“[A]s for the tribe of Simeon, that had not a distinct part by itself in the land of Canaan, but had their inheritance out of the portion, and within the inheritance of the tribe of Judah, (Joshua 19:1-9) and their cities did not join to one another, as Aben Ezra observes, but lay scattered up and down in the tribe of Judah; and when they were increased and straitened for room, many of them went without the land, to the entrance of Gedor, where they of Ham, or the Egyptians, had dwelt, and others to Mount Seir in Edom, (1 Chronicles 4:39, 42) and it is a notion which prevails with the Jews, and which Jarchi takes notice of, that a great many of this tribe were scribes and teachers of the law, and even teachers of children”  
(<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/genesis-49-7.html>).

### **Lessons from this lesson:**

- We see Jesus:

“[Refuge] intimates what God’s spiritual Israel have and shall have, in Christ and heaven, not only rest to repose themselves in, but refuge to secure themselves in. . . .

“Some observe a significancy in the names of these cities [of refuge] with application to Christ our refuge. . . . Kedesh signifies holy, and our refuge is the holy Jesus. Shechem, a shoulder, and the government is upon his shoulder. Hebron, fellowship, and believers are called into the fellowship of Christ Jesus our Lord. Bezer, a fortification, for he is a strong-hold to all those that trust in him. Ramoth, high or exalted, for him hath God exalted with his own right hand. Golan, joy or exultation, for in him all the saints are justified, and shall glory ( <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew->

henry-complete/joshua/20.html).

### Activities:

- Play dough: city; axe; trees
- Snack: “Comfort food” like, perhaps, a small serving of macaroni and cheese
- Have students count the cities of refuge on the map below. Also, point out the cities of refuge.
- Sword drill on *refuge*. Psalm 46:1, 7, 11; Deuteronomy 33:27; 2 Samuel 22:3; Psalm 9:9; Hebrews 6:18.
- Review questions: (Game: For each correct answer, a student will place a star or other sticker on a city of refuge on one of the maps below.)
  1. Jacob prophesied that two tribes would be scattered in Israel. Which two tribes were they? [Simeon and Levi.]
  2. What is a manslayer? [A person who unintentionally kills someone else.]
  3. What is an avenger of blood? [A close family member who was to pay back for his relative’s murder, even if the death was accidental.]
  4. What is a city of refuge? [A place where a manslayer could go for safety until he was tried in court. If found innocent, he had to live there.]
  5. How many cities of refuge were there? [Six.]
  6. How long did the manslayer need to stay in a city of refuge? [As long as the high priest lived.]

### Memory Verse[s]:

- . Joshua 24:14–17 (or any portion thereof): [Joshua said,] “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. 15 And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” 16 Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, 17 for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed.”

### Handwork:

- Print on cardstock one copy for each student of the city gate and wall clipart found below. (If the picture is printed in black and white, students may color it.) Cut out the gate opening. Fold back the sides of the picture so that the wall stands by itself. For each student, print on cardstock and cut out two of the running men found as clipart below. Leave about an inch of paper at the feet of each runner. Fold this extra space at so that the figure stands alone. Students may playact the story using the figures.

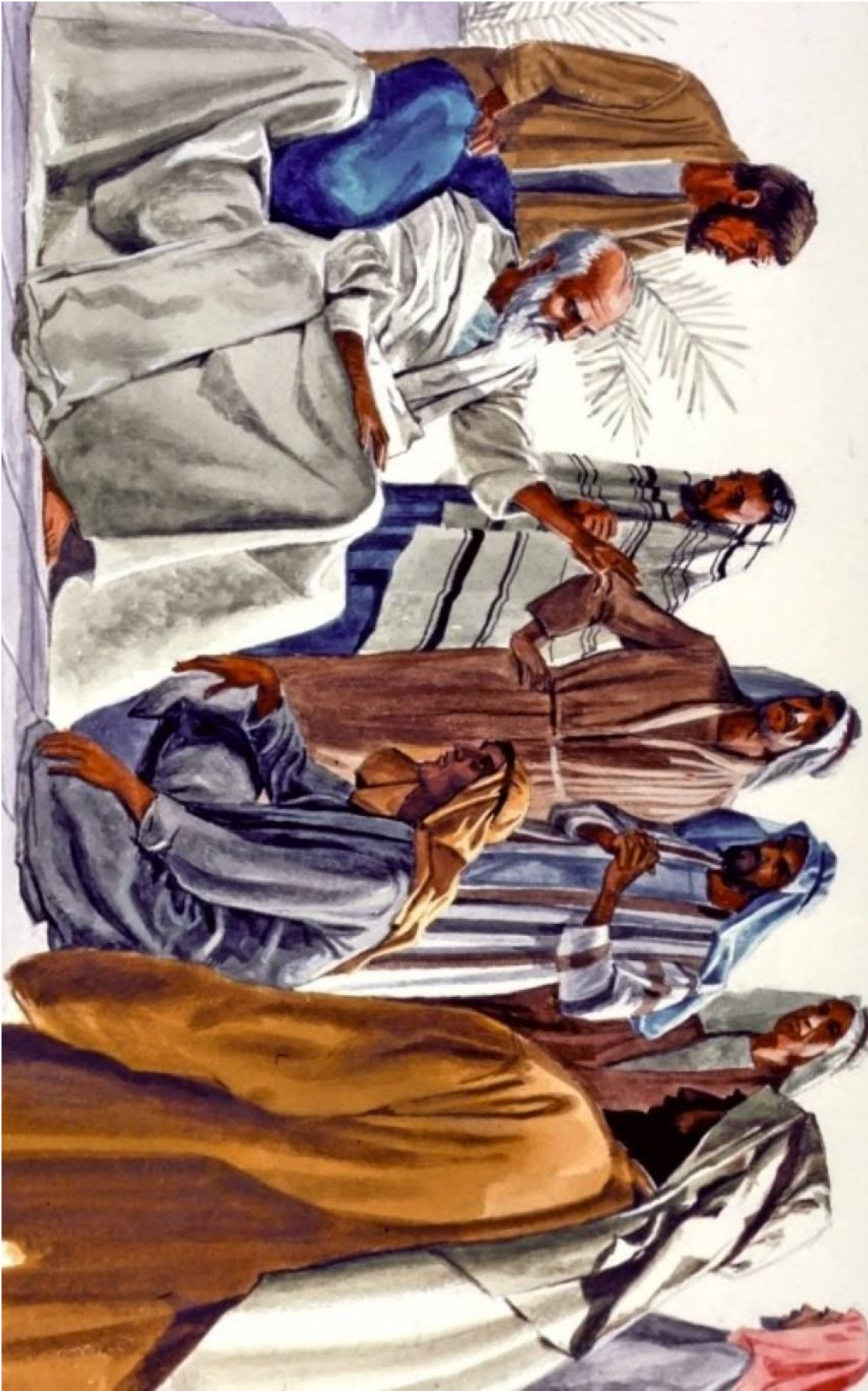
manslayer

axe head

refuge

revenge

avenger of blood



<https://biblebase.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/jacobs-blessings-over-reuben-simeon-and-levi.jpg>

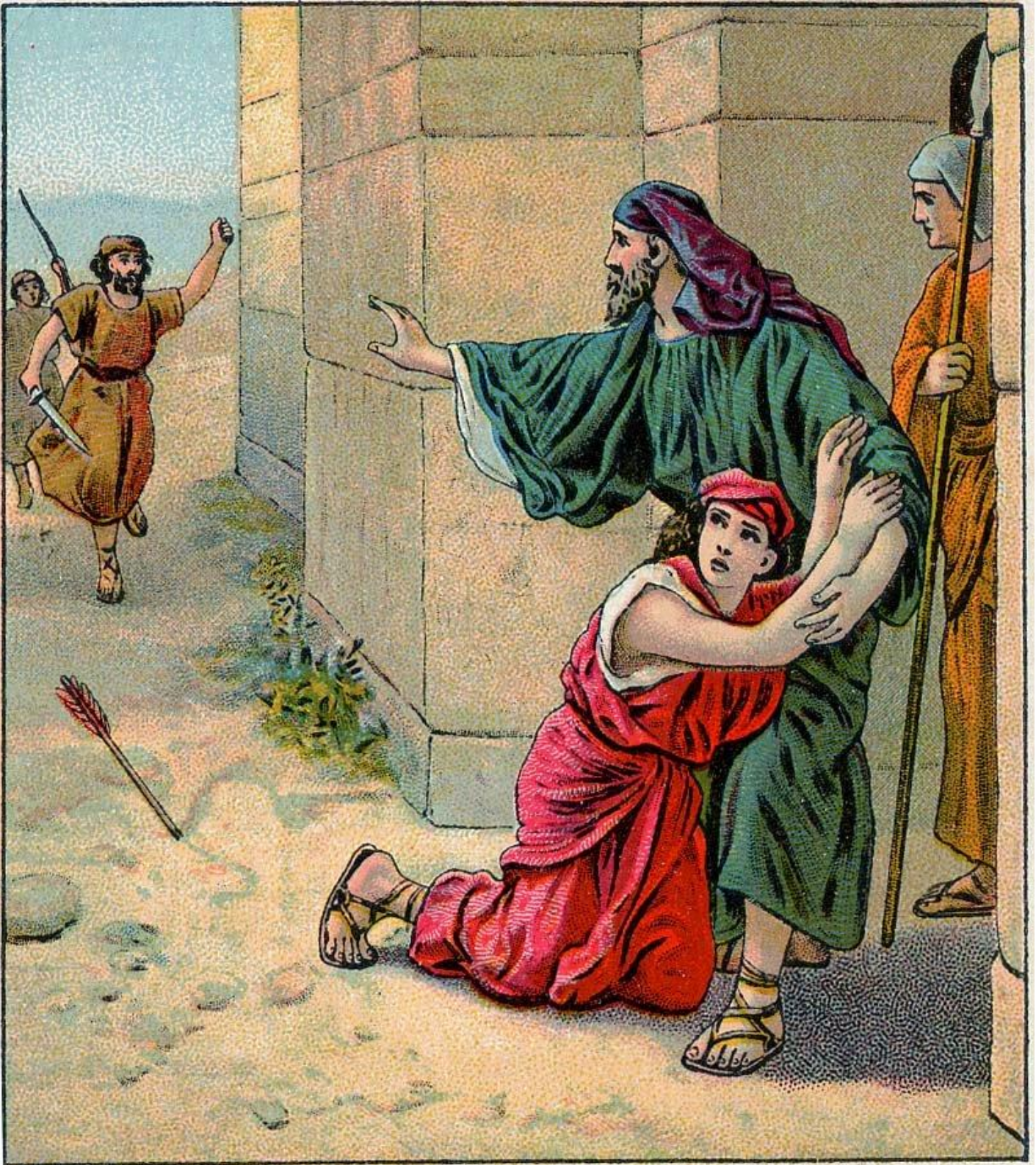


[http://www.qrbiz.com/buy\\_axe-head-sheath](http://www.qrbiz.com/buy_axe-head-sheath)





<https://www.lowimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/felling.jpg>



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# The Distribution of Levitical cities

Joshua 20-21

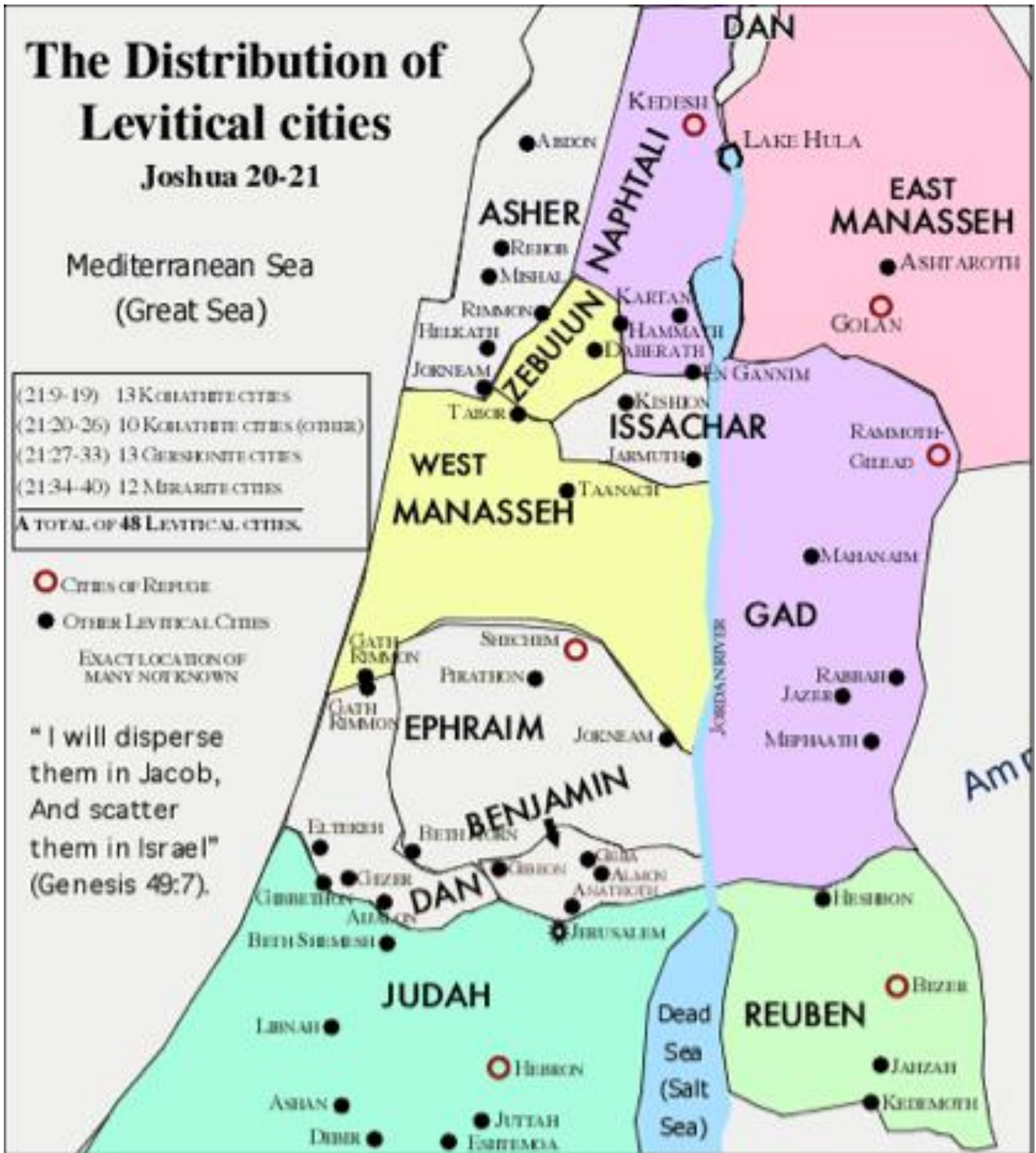
Mediterranean Sea  
(Great Sea)

(21:9-19) 13 KEBIATHITE CITIES  
(21:20-26) 10 KEBIATHITE CITIES (OTHER)  
(21:27-33) 13 GERSONITE CITIES  
(21:34-40) 12 MERARITE CITIES  
**A TOTAL OF 48 LEVITICAL CITIES.**

- CITIES OF REFUGE
- OTHER LEVITICAL CITIES

EXACT LOCATION OF MANY NOT KNOWN

"I will disperse them in Jacob, And scatter them in Israel" (Genesis 49:7).



# Cities of Refuge

