

Deuteronomy 19

Verses 1 – 3

“When the Lord your God cuts off the nations whose land the Lord your God is giving you, and you dispossess them and settle in their cities and in their houses, ² you shall set aside for yourself three cities in the midst of your land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess. ³ You shall prepare the roads for yourself, and divide into three regions the territory of your land which the Lord your God will give you as an inheritance, so that anyone who commits manslaughter may flee there.

When the Lord your God cuts off the nations whose land the Lord your God is giving you

The Israelites will have to fight numerous battles against the Canaanites to take the land but it will be the Lord that will make it possible for them to do so.

God will intervene in dramatic ways just as he did when He brought Israel out of Egypt.

God brought them success because He was judging the nations of Canaan and fulfilling His promises to the patriarchs.

You shall set aside for yourself three cities in the midst of your land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess

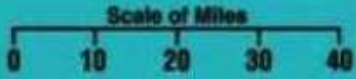
3 cities of refuge had already been chosen east of the Jordan River (chapter 4) and when the Land of Canaan is taken, 3 more cities will be chosen.

You shall prepare the roads for yourself, and divide into three regions the territory of your land which the Lord your God will give you as an inheritance, so that anyone who commits manslaughter may flee there.

God wanted innocent people to be saved from death. To ensure this, there had to be good roads leading to the cities of refuge. Also, the cities had to be spaced in such a way that the distance would not be a hindrance.

See pic 1905

Cities of Refuge



Verses 4 – 7

⁴“Now this is the case of the one who commits manslaughter, who may flee there and live: when he kills his friend unintentionally, not hating him previously—⁵ as when a *person* goes into the forest with his friend to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down the tree, and the iron *head* slips off the handle and strikes his friend so that he dies—he may flee to one of these cities and live.⁶ Otherwise, the avenger of blood might pursue him in the heat of his anger, and overtake him because the way is long, and take his life, though he was not sentenced to death since he had not hated him previously.⁷ Therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall set aside for yourself three cities.’

Now this is the case of the one who commits manslaughter, who may flee there and live: when he kills his friend unintentionally, not hating him previously—

Under the avenger of blood system any homicide gave the next of kin the right to seek out the manslayer and kill him. In fact, it was considered a solemn duty for him to do so.

The cities of refuge were not designed to interfere with that arrangement except in cases where the killing was accidental.

But there were still some consequences in the case of manslaughter. There would still be a trial to determine if he was innocent of murder. If he was found to be innocent of murder, he was still guilty of manslaughter and had to live in the city of refuge until the High Priest died.

One can imagine all the hardships that this could cause. Could his family maintain their home and income? Depending on how long the High Priest lived, the kids could grow up without a father except for some visits from time to time.

Verses 8 – 10

“And if the Lord your God enlarges your territory, just as He has sworn to your fathers, and gives you all the land that He promised to give your fathers—⁹ if you carefully follow all of this commandment which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God, and to walk in His ways always—then you shall add three more cities for yourself, besides these three.¹⁰ So innocent blood will not be shed in the midst of your land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and guilt for bloodshed will *not* be on you.

And if the Lord your God enlarges your territory

God's promise to enlarge their borders was conditional. He would do this IF they remembered to keep all of God's commandments.

During the time of David and Solomon the area under their control increased and those areas were made tributary to the monarchy but it was never settled by the Jews.

Then you shall add three more cities for yourself, besides these three

Moses instructed the people to set up three more cities of refuge in addition to the six already commanded. But as was just mentioned, the additional territory was populated by foreigners so there was no need for the additional cities.

Verses 11 – 13

¹¹ “But if there is a person who hates his neighbor, and waits in ambush for him and rises up against him and strikes him so that he dies, and he flees to one of these cities, ¹² then the elders of his city shall send *men* and take him from there, and hand him over to the avenger of blood, so that he may die. ¹³ You shall not pity him, but you shall eliminate the guilt for the bloodshed of the innocent from Israel, so that it may go well for you.

A person guilty of murder might run to one of these cities of refuge but it would not do him any good. He would be taken back to the city of the victim and the avenger of blood along with the people of the town would kill him.

The murderer should not be pitied but rather die for his crime.

Verse 14

You shall not displace your neighbor’s boundary marker, which the ancestors have set, in your inheritance which you will inherit in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess

The penalty for this crime is not mentioned but we can assume it was in line with other forms of stealing.

The ancient landmarks will remain as boundaries for the Israelites.

Verses 15 – 21

¹⁵ “A single witness shall not rise up against a person regarding any wrongdoing or any sin that he commits; on the testimony of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed. ¹⁶ If a malicious witness rises up against a person to testify against him of wrongdoing, ¹⁷ then both people who have the dispute shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who will be *in office* in those days. ¹⁸ And the judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness *and* he has testified against his brother falsely, ¹⁹ then you shall do to him just as he had planned to do to his brother. So you shall eliminate the evil from among you. ²⁰ And the rest of *the people* will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you. ²¹ So you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, *and* foot for foot.

On the testimony of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed

A single witness leads to he said, she said.

The law demands more proof of a crime, at least two witnesses.

And the judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness *and* he has testified against his brother falsely, ¹⁹ then you shall do to him just as he had planned to do to his brother.

Judges become very skilled in detecting a false witness.

They know how to grill and cross-examine witnesses to expose false witnesses

So you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, *and* foot for foot.

This punishment was part of the law in order to make things right.

See Lev. 24:19–21

Some commentators believe this was not taken literally but rather the value of an eye, tooth, or hand was to be paid by the guilty party.

In either case, the false witness would suffer the same penalty that the accused person would have been liable for if he had been found guilty of the crime.

And the rest of *the people* will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you

In chapter 17, anyone who refused to listen to the Supreme Court was put to death.

Here the false witness was punished to prevent future cases of fraud.

Some argue that such laws had been around for a long time before God gave this law to the Hebrew people.

Even if that was the case, this deterrent either came from God or it was approved of by Him.