

Deuteronomy 19:1-3

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The LORD, through Moses, commanded the Israelites to set apart three cities in the Promised Land to provide asylum for unintentional homicide.

Moses told the Israelites to set aside three cities in Canaan to provide asylum for unintentional killing. It will be recalled that, after defeating the two kings of the Amorites ([Deuteronomy 3:8-17](#)), “the Israelites had already set apart three cities across the Jordan to the east, that a manslayer might flee there, who unintentionally slew his neighbor without having enmity toward him in time past” ([Deuteronomy 4:41-43](#)). The *three cities* mentioned here were Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan. In [Deuteronomy 19](#), Moses commanded the Israelites to establish three cities in the Promised Land that will be on the west side of the Jordan River. The book of Deuteronomy is a speech given by Moses to prepare the Israelites to cross the River and possess the Promised Land. This means they are to add three more cities on the west side of the Jordan, resulting in six cities of refuge in total.

This law was to be implemented *when the LORD your God cuts off the nations, whose land the LORD your God gives you*. Moses opened this section with the conjunction *when* (Hebrew “ki”) to look at the future circumstances of the Israelites in the Promised Land. In doing so, he reassured them that the *LORD* was going to *cut off the nations before* them. This refers to the anticipated crossing of the Jordan River and taking of the land, which Israel was preparing to execute.

The verb *cut off* (Heb. “kārath”) means to destroy or to eliminate something or someone. Moses told the people that the Suzerain God was the one who would destroy the Canaanites in order to make room for His vassals (Israel). This would allow the Israelites to *dispossess* (Heb. “yārash”) the Canaanites *and settle in their cities and in their houses*. God had previously stated that His rationale for this was to eliminate the corruption of the Canaanites, who exploited one another and performed child sacrifices. The *LORD* made it clear that Israel would suffer the same fate if they adopted the Canaanite practices ([Deuteronomy 9:4-5, 13-14](#)).

Once the Canaanites were gone, Moses commanded the Israelites to *set aside three cities for themselves in the midst of the land, which the LORD*

would give them to possess. This emphasizes that the Promised Land was God's gift to Israel, a statement made numerous times in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 5:16, 31; 11:9; 15:4). God granted the land to Abraham and his descendants as a reward for Abraham's faithful service, but made it clear that they would not possess the land for four hundred years (Genesis 15). The land has been granted, but it requires the obedience of the people to go in and possess their possession. This is a principle that repeats throughout scripture. God grants gifts, but obedience is required in order to experience the benefit of the gift. This is true of spiritual rebirth. God makes His people a new creation based on simple faith, enough faith to look (John 3:14-16). But in order to experience the great benefits of that new identity, the believer must abide in Christ, and walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:13-16).

Furthermore, Israel's leader commanded the people to *prepare the roads for yourself, and divide into three parts the territory which the LORD your God will give you as a possession*. To *prepare the roads* was designed so that people might have ready access to reach the cities. Dividing into *three parts the territory* of the *land* was to ensure that the cities rightly served the regions to which they were allocated. Thus, the Israelites were commanded to provide reasonable access to these cities *so that any manslayer might flee there*. By having reasonable access, the one fleeing might be able to reach the city prior to being overtaken by one seeking revenge upon him.

A *manslayer* is defined as someone who committed an accidental act of killing. The crime is commonly referred to as manslaughter. The Suzerain (Ruler) God made provisions for accidental killing and allowed the *manslayer* to flee to one of the six cities of refuge in order that he might live (Numbers 35:13-15). He had to remain there until the death of the high priest. Once the high priest died, the *manslayer* could return home safely (Numbers 35:26-28).

Biblical Text:

¹ When the Lord your God cuts off the nations, whose land the Lord your God gives you, and you dispossess them and settle in their cities and in their houses, ² you shall set aside three cities for yourself in the midst of your land, which the Lord your God gives you to possess. ³ You shall prepare the roads for yourself, and divide into three parts the territory of your land which the Lord your God will give you as a possession, so that any manslayer may flee there.