

Joshua 21 The Levitical Cities

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Birth

Leah, Gen 29:34 “And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, ‘Now this time will my husband be joined unto me, because I have born him three sons.’ Therefore was his name called Levi [joining].” The names of her first four sons show the longing of her heart:

- Reuben: God has seen and given a son.
- Simeon: God has heard.
- Levi: joined to her husband.
- Judah: praise.

Blessing

Jacob, Gen 49:5-7

Joined with Simeon in the curse of scattering.

Reason: With Simeon, guilty for the slaughter of the people of Shechem, Gen 34:25.

Moses, Deut 33:8-11

By now the two tribes have bifurcated. There is no mention at all of Simeon in Deut 33, but Moses devotes four verses to Levi. Three important themes to this text.

8b-9, History

Verses 8b and 9 refer to four incidents in which the tribe’s willingness to stand for the Lord against the rebellion of the people is tested:

8b, Massah and Meribah

These two incidents show them as the *recipients* of the wrath of the people against God.

- “Meribah” refers primarily to Num 20:1-13, where the people strove with the Lord through his representatives Moses and Aaron (brothers, both of the tribe of Levi).
- “Massah” takes us back to the first incident with the rock, Exod 17:7, where the demand “give” in v.2 is plural, “give ye,” showing that here also the objection was leveled at Moses and Aaron together.

They were certainly tested in being set against the nation at large; but note the significant failure of Moses at Meribah! While Moses praises them for their virtue, it does not explain why God favored them, for it was faulty. God’s election is of his grace!

9, Disowning Family

Also refers to two incidents, this time emphasizing them as the *channels* of God's wrath against the people.

- Exod 32:26-29, executing God's judgment on the people after the sin of the golden calf.
- Num 25:1-13, Phinehas bringing judgment on the Israelite man cohabiting with a Midianite woman.

But again, their distinctive service is tinged with human failing; it was Aaron who had made the golden calf in the first place! Once again, their virtue is not the sole or main cause of their distinguished position, which must be traced to God's grace.

11, Blessing

Levi, unlike Simeon, will enjoy prosperity. However, Jacob's prophecy continues in effect; Levi's temporal holdings are distributed throughout the nation, not gathered in one place.

8a, 10, Prophecy

Identifies three functions for the tribe. *Application:* There is a sense in which all believers are priests (1 Pet 2:5, 9), and so these are functions that we may expect to fill. No longer restricted to a limited class or family.

8a, Urim and Thummim

"Lights and perfections," the sacred lots, used throughout the Old Testament to discern the will of the Lord. Levi holds Israel's most concrete mechanism for hearing from the Lord. This message has to be requested; the Urim and Thummim are silent until they are queried.

Application: We can call on the Lord for guidance, acc. to James 1:5. This is the essence of "walking in the spirit," Gal 5:16, 25. The last instance of casting lots in the Bible is Acts 1, in selecting a replacement for Judas, just before the day of Pentecost. After the new-covenant coming of the Spirit, lots are no more necessary.

10b, Sacrifice

The focus here is on worship (incense and holocaust), though they also offered the sin offerings.

Application: So we have a responsibility to offer sacrifices to the Lord. Not offerings for sin; these are complete with the Lord Jesus. But sacrifices of worship and praise.

- Our bodies for God's service, Rom. 12:1,2
- Praise, good works, charitable giving, Heb. 13:15, 16.

10a, Teaching

The verb "teach" comes from the same root as "law," "Torah." Given from God through Moses to the people, Deut 31:9, 26; the priests' responsibility from then on was to read and interpret it to the people. Cf. Ezra's role in 7:10.

Contrast this ministry that of other significant figures in the OT.

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	Heads (Princes)	Priests	Wise Men, Ancients	Prophets
Jer 18:18		Law <i>torah</i>	Counsel	Word
Ezek 7:26		2. Law <i>torah</i>	3. Counsel	1. Vision
Micah 3:11	Judgment	Teaching <i>yrh</i>		Divination

Start with Jer 18:18, and follow its order:

The Priest instructs on the basis of a deposit of law, given once. *Application:* This is the place of Bible study and teaching.

The Prophets speak a new word from the Lord on the basis of a direct communication.

Application: There were prophets in the early days of the NT, but Eph 4:11 suggests that their place has now been taken by the “pastors and teachers.” The combination of the NT canon and the internal witness of the Spirit leaves much less need for separate prophets.

The Ancients tell what the Lord has taught them through the experience of life. *Application:* This is the place of the elder, who conveys to others what he has learned through experience.

Mic 3:11 brings in another class of distinguished people, the “heads.”

The Heads (at different periods, judges or kings) are responsible for enforcing these lessons by issuing judgment.

Application: We can see the traces of three of these four ministries in the pastor-elder-overseer:

- In his role as Pastor, he feeds the flock from the Word of God; the emphasis is on Bible teaching.
- In his role as Elder, he guides from experience and godly wisdom.
- In his role as Overseer, he renders judgment and guides the life of the assembly.

This ministry is one to which every believer may aspire, men in the context of assembly office (1 Tim. 3:1), and women in less structured but more intimate contexts such as the home and social contacts (Titus 2).

Divisions of the Family, Num 3-4

3:1-10, only Aaron’s descendants can be *priests*. The others are *Levites*, but not priests, thus the expression, “the priests and [the rest of the] Levites”.

3:11-13, 39-50; the entire tribe fulfills the Lord’s claim of Israel’s firstborn because of sparing them at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, Exod 13:11-13. When they were numbered at Sinai, there were more firstborn sons than Levites, so the remainder had to pay a monetary redemption price.

Levi had three sons, as detailed in Exod 6:16-20. Kohath is further divided into Amram (father of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam) and the others. The individual families have distinct responsibilities, outlined in ch. 3.

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Family	Encampment	Duties
Gershon	23, West of (behind) Tabernacle	25-26, Coverings
Kohath less Amram	29, South of Tabernacle	31, Furniture
Merari	35, North of Tabernacle	36-37, Framework
Aaron (Amram of Kohath, Exod 6:16-20)	38, East (in front) of Tabernacle	4:1-20, the only ones permitted actually to see the furniture and use it in ministry.

When the temple was built, these roles were no longer necessary. As part of his preparation for the temple, David defined five new roles for them, 1 Chr 23:24-32.

- 1 Chr 24:1-19, the Aaronites (the *priests*) were divided into 24 groups or courses, which served by turn in the temple. 2 Kings 11:9 shows that they “changed the guard” each sabbath. Cf. Luke 1:5, which traces Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, back to the eighth course (Abijah, v.10).
- 1 Chr 25, other Kohathites became *singers and musicians*, and were also divided into 24 courses.
- 1 Chr 26:1-19, sons of Korah (from Kohath’s Izhar) and Merari were *porters*. In this case families were assigned not to periods of time (courses), but to specific gates.
- 1 Chr 26:20-28, the Gershonites were prominent in responsibility for the temple *treasury*.
- 1 Chr 26:29-32, other Kohathites served as *judges*. (The territory assigned to them in v.32 suggests that by this time the Gershonites and Merarites, originally assigned to levitical cities in Transjordan, were not longer effective there.)

Application: Whenever closely related people have different roles, there is the risk of jealousy and rivalry. In fact, this actually happened among the Levites on at least two occasions:

1. Num 12, Miriam and Aaron complain against Moses’ priority within the family of Amram.
2. Num 16, Korah of the other segment of Kohath, together with two men of Reuben, protest against the priority of Amram.

These protests are completely inappropriate; their roles were given them by the Lord, and their ministry is only what he gave them to do. This assignment exactly mirrors the NT teaching about spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12 and Eph. 4.

- Believers do have different roles in the body of Christ.
- These roles are his sovereign appointment, not the result of our ambition.
- They should lead us not to jealousy toward one another, but to gratitude to the Lord for his gifts to the church.

Territory, Josh 21

Jacob’s curse takes two very different directions with its objects. Simeon was “scattered” by receiving a few cities in Judah. Levi is distributed across the entire nation, and the burden of Josh 21 is to show how. 4-7 is summary, 9-39 is details. The bottom line:

- There are about four levitical cities per tribe (exceptions in Judah, Simeon, and Naphthali).
- The priestly families are closer to Jerusalem.
- Two cities of refuge are appointed to each of the three main branches (Kohath, Gershon, Merari).

	Aaronites (priests)	Rest of Kohath	Gershon	Merari
Judah	*8			
Simeon	1			
Benjamin	4			
<i>Summary, v.4</i>	13			
Ephraim		*4		
Dan		4		
West Manasseh		2		
<i>Summary, v.5</i>		10		
East Manasseh			*2	
Issachar			4	
Asher			4	
Naphthali			*3	
<i>Summary, v.6</i>			13	
Zebulun				4
Reuben				*4
Gad				*4
<i>Summary, v.7</i>				12

Revisit the question of gift and assignment, in the light of the three responsibilities from the blessing of Moses in Deut 33. While only the priests had the ephod with Urim and Thummim and the role of sacrifice in the sanctuary, all of the Levites were “Bible teachers,” expounding the law of God. By being scattered throughout the land in this way, they all shared in the privilege of guiding God’s people.

Note that the cities include an assignment of grazing-land, the “suburbs” (Josh 21:2). This means that the Levites (all of them, including the priests) bore some responsibility for their own livelihood! They were not in general supported by the “laity,” except while they were on duty at the temple or tabernacle. (Contrast Matthew Henry’s comment on vv.1-8: “The Levites waited till the other tribes were provided for, before they preferred their claim to Joshua. They build their claim upon a very good foundation; not their own merits or services, but the Divine precept. The maintenance of ministers is not a thing left merely to the will of the people, that they may let them starve if they please; they which preach the gospel should live by the gospel, and should live comfortably.”)