

JOSHUA 21

CITIES ALLOTTED TO THE LEVITES

Joshua 21. Cities Allotted to the Levites

Elsewhere in the book of Joshua, the Levites were given no landed inheritance but rather were assigned to be the custodians of the tabernacle.¹ However, chapter 21 describes how certain towns were nevertheless designated as belonging to the Levites. The impetus behind this allotment was given in verses 2–3, which indicate that the Levites had been assured some kind of inheritance from Moses. Appropriately, the heads of the Levitical families came not to Joshua, the military commander, but rather to Eleazar, the priest (effectively their chief).

To resolve this issue, the Levites were assigned not their own territory but rather certain cities within the territories given to the other tribes of Israel. The division was made between three different Levitical clans: the Kohathites, the Gershonites, and the Merarites, who were assigned cities by lot within other tribal territories—specifically within Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin (verses 4–8). Importantly, all three of these territories would later be subsumed under the Southern Kingdom of Judah at the time of the divided monarchy. The implications are clear: priesthood authority remained in the south. The cities that were part of this allotment are described in verses 9–42. A total of forty-eight towns were so designated (verses 41–42), probably a deliberately symbolic number (forty-eight being a multiple of twelve). In harmony with the previous chapter, various cities were once again identified as cities of refuge (verses 13, 21, 27, 32, 38).

The postscript to this chapter, comprising verses 44–45, is somewhat difficult. As it stands, the text indicates how Israel stood unopposed in the face of its enemies by the end of the territorial allotment: “And the

¹ See Joshua 13:14, 33; 18:7.

LORD gave them rest round about, according to all that he sware unto their fathers: and there stood not a man of all their enemies before them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. There failed not ought of any good thing which the LORD had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass.” This, however, is plainly contradicted not only by the book of Judges, which picks up narratively where Joshua ends and features protracted difficulties with various Canaanite petty kings, but also by certain passages within the book of Joshua itself (for example, 15:63; 16:10). This overstatement might be an attempt at deliberate irony on the part of the author, perhaps attempting to convey what the Israelites *thought* was their situation at the time in order to ratchet up the narrative tension with what comes next in the longer trajectory of Israel’s history.

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