

Deuteronomy 33:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Let Reuben live, and not die; and let not his men be few.

Analysis

Let Reuben live, and not die; and let not his men be few.

Moses' blessing of Reuben is notably brief and precarious compared to other tribes. The jussive verbs yechi ("let live") and al-yamot ("and not die") suggest existential threat—Reuben's survival is not guaranteed but requires divine intervention. This reflects Jacob's prophecy that Reuben would "not excel" after defiling his father's bed (Genesis 49:3-4), resulting in lost primogeniture despite being firstborn.

The phrase vimetav yehi misparo ("and let his men be his number/not few") literally reads "and let his number be a number," a Hebrew idiom for maintaining viable population. Reuben's territory east of Jordan (Trans-Jordan) was vulnerable to Moabite and Ammonite attacks. The tribe's diminished status is reflected in their absence from prominent roles in Israel's history—no judge, king, or major prophet arose from Reuben.

Despite Reuben's disgrace and decline, Moses' blessing affirms God's covenant mercy. Reuben isn't excluded from Israel's inheritance but granted preservation, demonstrating that covenant faithfulness transcends individual tribal failures. This grace foreshadows the gospel: even failing tribes/individuals remain within God's redemptive purposes when covenant community is preserved through divine mercy rather than tribal merit.

Historical Context

Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, lost his birthright through sexual immorality with Bilhah (Genesis 35:22). The tribe settled east of the Jordan in the plains formerly controlled by the Amorite kings Sihon and Og (Numbers 32). Despite numerical strength at the Exodus (Numbers 1:21: 46,500 men), Reuben declined and never achieved political prominence. By David's era, Reuben had diminished significantly, and by the Assyrian exile (734 BC), the Trans-Jordan tribes including Reuben were the first to be conquered and deported (1 Chronicles 5:26).

Moses' prayer for Reuben's survival proved prophetic—the tribe persisted but never flourished. This contrasts with Judah (vv. 7) and Joseph (vv. 13-17) who received extensive blessings. Reuben's primary biblical legacy is negative example of forfeited blessing through moral failure, yet divine mercy preventing total extinction.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does Reuben's story demonstrate both the consequences of sin and God's covenant mercy?
2. What does Moses' prayer for Reuben's mere survival teach about interceding for struggling believers or churches?

Interlinear Text

מִסְפָּר: מִתְּאֵל יְהִי יְמִתְּתָאֵל רְאֹבֶן יְמִתְּאֵל
live Let Reuben H408 and not die H1961 and let not his men be few
H2421 H7205 H4191 H4962 H4557

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 49:8 (Parallel theme): Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father's children shall bow down before thee.

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