

Joshua 13:14

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Only unto the tribe of Levi he gave none inheritance; the sacrifices of the LORD God of Israel made by fire are their inheritance, as he said unto them.

Analysis

Only unto the tribe of Levi he gave none inheritance; the sacrifices of the LORD God of Israel made by fire are their inheritance, as he said unto them.

Levi's unique position—receiving no territorial inheritance—reiterates the arrangement established in Numbers 18:20-24. The Hebrew construction emphasizes the exception: "Only" (raq, רק) unto Levi "none" (lo, לו) inheritance. This double negative construction highlights the distinctiveness of Levitical calling. While other tribes received land to cultivate and pass to descendants, Levi received God Himself as their portion. The phrase "the LORD is their inheritance" appears repeatedly (13:33; 14:3-4; 18:7; cf. Numbers 18:20; Deuteronomy 10:9; 18:1-2), establishing this as fundamental to Levitical identity.

The "sacrifices of the LORD God of Israel made by fire" (ishei Yahweh Elohe Yisrael, אֲשֵׁי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) refers to portions of offerings allocated to priests (Leviticus 6-7). Rather than land producing crops and livestock, Levites received their sustenance from the altar—portions of grain offerings, meat from peace offerings, firstfruits, and tithes. This arrangement created mutual dependence: Levites depended on others' faithful giving; other tribes depended on Levites' faithful service. Neither could function independently—a picture of the church's interdependent body life (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

Theologically, Levi's landlessness represents the highest calling: God Himself as inheritance. While other tribes measured wealth in acres and flocks, Levites measured wealth in relationship with God. This anticipates Jesus' teaching that those who forsake earthly possessions for the kingdom will receive "an hundredfold" (Mark 10:29-30). Reformed theology emphasizes that spiritual privileges far exceed material blessings. Levites received 48 cities throughout Israel (Joshua 21), dispersing them among the tribes rather than isolating them, ensuring every tribe had access to priestly teaching and ministry—a model for church leadership distributed throughout communities.

Historical Context

The practical arrangements for Levitical support involved multiple mechanisms: tithes of produce and livestock (Numbers 18:21-24), portions of sacrifices (Leviticus 6-7), cities with pastureland for their herds (Joshua 21), and redemption money from firstborn consecration (Numbers 18:15-16). This elaborate system ensured sustainable support while maintaining priestly dependence on the community's faithfulness. When Israel grew apostate and withheld tithes, Levites suffered economically (Nehemiah 13:10; Malachi 3:8-10).

The 48 Levitical cities distributed throughout Israel's territory served strategic purposes. They created networks of teaching centers where Levites could instruct communities in the law (Deuteronomy 33:10; 2 Chronicles 17:7-9). They provided refuge cities (six of the 48 were cities of refuge, Joshua 20), ensuring trained Levites administered justice in cases of accidental manslaughter. And they represented God's presence throughout the land—no tribe was distant from priestly ministry, symbolizing God's accessibility to all His people.

The Levitical model influenced New Testament church leadership patterns. Elders/pastors receive financial support from the congregation (1 Corinthians 9:13-14; Galatians 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:17-18), though Paul sometimes waived this right for missional reasons (1 Corinthians 9:12). The principle remains: those devoted to spiritual ministry should be materially supported by those receiving spiritual benefit, creating mutual dependence and accountability that builds healthy church community.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How does Levi's inheritance being "the LORD" rather than land challenge materialistic definitions of blessing and success?
2. What does the mutual dependence between Levites (serving) and other tribes (supporting) teach about healthy church community?
3. In what ways can contemporary Christians cultivate the Levitical mindset that God Himself is our greatest treasure?

Interlinear Text

בִּקְ	לֵשׁ בֶּט	הֵלֹא י	לֹא	נָתַן	נְחֻלָּתָם
H7535	Only unto the tribe	of Levi	H3808	he gave	are their inheritance
	H7626	H3878		H5414	H5159
אֵשׁ י	יְהוָה	אֱלֹהֵי	יִשְׂרָאֵל	הוּא	נְחֻלָּתָם
made by fire	of the LORD	God	of Israel	H1931	are their inheritance
H801	H3068	H430	H3478		H5159
כַּאֲשֶׁר	דִּבֶּר	לֹא:			
H834	as he said	H0			
	H1696				