

Joshua 21:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then came near the heads of the fathers of the Levites unto Eleazar the priest, and unto Joshua the son of Nun, and unto the heads of the fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel;

Analysis

Then came near the heads of the fathers of the Levites unto Eleazar the priest, and unto Joshua the son of Nun, and unto the heads of the fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel; And they spake unto them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, saying, The LORD commanded by the hand of Moses to give us cities to dwell in, with the suburbs thereof for our cattle.

The Levites' petition demonstrates proper initiative within divine order. Rather than passively waiting for others to remember their needs, the Levitical heads "came near" and respectfully reminded leadership of God's command (Numbers 35:1-8). The verb *nigash* (נִגַּשׁ, "came near") suggests formal approach to authorities, combining humble posture with legitimate claim based on divine promise. This models how God's people should seek fulfillment of His promises—neither demanding nor passive, but actively claiming what He has pledged.

The Levites appealed to "the LORD commanded by the hand of Moses," grounding their request not in need or preference but in revealed divine will. This exemplifies faithful hermeneutics and application—knowing Scripture and advocating for its implementation. The contrast with earlier complaints (17:14) is striking: the Joseph tribes complained based on self-perceived greatness; the Levites requested based on God's explicit command. Reformed Christianity emphasizes Scripture as foundation for all church practice—what God has commanded must be implemented; what He hasn't commanded must not be imposed (regulative

principle).

The petition's setting "at Shiloh" before Eleazar (high priest) and Joshua (civil leader) illustrates proper church-state cooperation. The Levites addressed both spiritual and civil authorities since their request involved both religious duty (priestly service) and civil allocation (city assignments). This models how distinct spheres (ecclesiastical and civil) should cooperate within their respective jurisdictions—neither usurping the other's authority nor operating in isolation.

Historical Context

The Levitical cities arrangement (48 cities distributed among the tribes) served multiple purposes. Religiously, it dispersed priestly teaching throughout Israel—every tribe had access to trained Levites for instruction in the law (Deuteronomy 33:10; 2 Chronicles 17:7-9). Judicially, Levites administered justice in complex cases and maintained the six cities of refuge. Culturally, Levitical presence throughout the land constantly reminded Israel of their covenant obligations and God's presence among them.

The "suburbs" (migrash, מִגְרָשׁ) were pasture lands surrounding each city, extending approximately 1000 cubits (500 meters) in all directions (Numbers 35:4-5). These provided grazing for the livestock Levites owned despite not having territorial inheritances. The arrangement balanced the Levites' calling (dependence on God and tithes) with practical provision (enough land for subsistence agriculture and herding). This shows that spiritual calling doesn't require absolute poverty—Levites could own property and livestock, just not tribal territorial allotments.

The Levitical cities weren't exclusive Levitical residence—other Israelites lived there too. Rather, these cities were guaranteed to have Levitical families, ensuring their presence throughout Israel. Some Levitical cities (like Hebron and Shechem) were major urban centers; others were smaller towns. This distribution created a network effect—as Levites taught the law in their localities, knowledge of God's word spread organically through Israel's territory, ideally preventing the regional apostasies that later characterized the divided kingdom.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does the Levites' respectful but persistent request based on God's command model proper advocacy for biblical priorities?
2. What does the distribution of Levites throughout Israel teach about the importance of dispersed Christian witness rather than isolated religious enclaves?
3. How should the cooperation between Eleazar (priestly) and Joshua (civil) inform our thinking about church-state relations?

Interlinear Text

וַיָּשׁוּׁ	וְכָאֵשׁׁ יׁ	אָב וְ	הַלְוִיִּם	אֶל	
Then came near	and unto the heads	of the fathers	of the Levites	H413	
H5066	H7218	H1	H3881		
אֶלְעָזָרׁ	הַכֹּהֵןׁ	וְאֶל	יְהוֹשֻׁעַׁ	לְבָנֵיׁ יׁ	נ וְ
unto Eleazar	the priest	H413	and unto Joshua	of the children	of Nun
H499	H3548		H3091	H1121	H413
				H5126	
וְכָאֵשׁׁ יׁ	אָב וְ	הַמִּטּוֹתׁ	לְבָנֵיׁ יׁ	יִשְׂרָאֵל׃	
and unto the heads	of the fathers	of the tribes	of the children	of Israel	
H7218	H1	H4294	H1121	H3478	

Additional Cross-References

Joshua 14:1 (References Israel): And these are the countries which the children of Israel inherited in the land of Canaan, which Eleazar the priest, and Joshua the son of Nun, and the heads of the fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel, distributed for inheritance to them.

Joshua 17:4 (Parallel theme): And they came near before Eleazar the priest, and before Joshua the son of Nun, and before the princes, saying, The LORD commanded Moses to give us an inheritance among our brethren. Therefore according to the commandment of the LORD he gave them an inheritance among the brethren of their father.

Joshua 19:51 (References Israel): These are the inheritances, which Eleazar the priest, and Joshua the son of Nun, and the heads of the fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel, divided for an inheritance by lot in Shiloh before the LORD, at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. So they made an end of dividing the country.

From KJV Study • kjevstudy.org