

Joshua 21:40

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

So all the cities for the children of Merari by their families, which were remaining of the families of the Levites, were by their lot twelve cities.

Analysis

So all the cities for the children of Merari by their families, which were remaining of the families of the Levites, were by their lot twelve cities.

This verse totals the Merarite allocation: four cities each from Zebulun, Reuben, and Gad (twelve total). The phrase "which were remaining of the families of the Levites" (hanotarim mimishpehot haleviyim, הַנוֹּתָרִים מִמִּשְׁפָחוֹת הַלְּוִיִּם) identifies the Merarites as the final Levitical family to receive cities—not implying lesser importance but sequential allocation. The Hebrew notarim ("remaining") parallels verse 26's description of non-priestly Kohathites, emphasizing systematic distribution ensuring every Levitical family received appropriate provision.

The phrase "by their lot" (begoralam, בְּגָרְלָם) indicates divine selection through sacred lots, removing human favoritism from the distribution process. God's sovereignty operated through the casting of lots (Proverbs 16:33), ensuring each family received divinely appointed cities. This method prevented complaints about inequality—the lot fell as God determined, making the distribution His decision rather than Joshua's or the tribal leaders'. New Testament apostolic selection used similar methods (Acts 1:26) before the Holy Spirit's permanent indwelling at Pentecost provided direct divine guidance.

The Merarites' twelve cities were geographically concentrated in northern Israel (Zebulun) and Transjordan (Reuben, Gad)—regions most exposed to pagan

influence from Phoenicia, Syria, Moab, and Ammon. This placement positioned them as covenant watchmen on contested frontiers. Their historical role transporting the tabernacle's structural framework (Numbers 3:36-37) prepared them for frontier service—those who carried the physical structure of worship now maintained covenant structure in spiritually vulnerable territories.

Historical Context

The Merarites descended from Merari, Levi's youngest son (Genesis 46:11; Exodus 6:16, 19). Despite being third in birth order among Levi's sons, Merari's descendants received equitable provision—twelve cities compared to Gershon's thirteen and non-priestly Kohath's ten. This near-parity demonstrates that divine provision doesn't follow strict birth hierarchy; God distributes according to need and calling rather than mere seniority.

During wilderness wandering, Merarites received four wagons and eight oxen for transporting the tabernacle's heavy structural components (Numbers 7:8)—more vehicles than Gershonites (two wagons, four oxen) though Kohathites received none due to carrying most holy objects on shoulders. This allocation according to practical need rather than theoretical equality models biblical justice—equity doesn't mean uniformity but appropriate provision according to circumstance and calling.

Chronicles records that Merarite descendants continued serving in the temple during David's and Solomon's reigns, with some becoming temple gatekeepers (1 Chronicles 26:10-19). This evolution from transporting tabernacle boards to guarding temple entrances shows how Levitical roles adapted across Israel's history while maintaining essential service to God's worship. Faithfulness in assigned tasks opens opportunities for continued service in new contexts.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does the Merarites' acceptance of their role (neither priestly like Aaron's line nor musically prominent like Gershonites) challenge careerism and status-seeking in ministry?
2. What does allocation by lot teach about trusting God's sovereignty in determining your sphere of service rather than seeking preferred assignments?
3. In what ways might God be calling you to frontier ministry in spiritually contested areas rather than comfortable established territories?

Interlinear Text

מִמְשָׁפֶחָה וְתַּּמְכִירִי לְבָנָי עַגְּרִים כָּל
So all the cities for the children of Merari by their families
H3605 H5892 H1121 H4847 H4940

גּוֹרְלִים תִּרְיִים פְּלִיִּים בְּקוּמָרִים מִמְשָׁפֶחָה וְתַּּמְכִירִי
which were remaining by their families of the Levites were by their lot
H3498 H4940 H3881 H1961 H1486

שְׁתַּיִם עַגְּרִים עַשְׂרָה: twelve So all the cities
H6240 H8147 H5892

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