

Joshua 21:7

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The children of Merari by their families had out of the tribe of Reuben, and out of the tribe of Gad, and out of the tribe of Zebulun, twelve cities.

Analysis

The children of Merari by their families had out of the tribe of Reuben, and out of the tribe of Gad, and out of the tribe of Zebulun, twelve cities.

"The children of Merari" (livney Merari, לִבְנֵי מֶרָרִי) were Levi's third son's descendants (Exodus 6:16, 19). They received **"twelve cities"** from Reuben, Gad (both Transjordanian tribes), and Zebulun (lower Galilee). This allocation positioned Merarites on Israel's eastern and northern frontiers—Reuben and Gad beyond the Jordan, Zebulun bordering Phoenicia. These were vulnerable border territories requiring constant vigilance against external threats (Moabites, Ammonites, Arameans, Phoenicians).

The phrase **"by their families"** (lemishpechotam, לְמִשְׁפְּחוֹתָם) emphasizes clan-level distribution. Cities weren't assigned to individual Merarites but to family units, ensuring multi-generational stability. This models kingdom work as family enterprise—parents training children in godliness, multi-generational faithfulness, households serving together (Deuteronomy 6:6-9, Joshua 24:15).

Merari's twelve cities (fewer than Gershon's thirteen or Kohath's twenty-three total) weren't inferior—God sovereignly allocated according to tribal size and need. The Merarites' Transjordanian positioning was strategic: these tribes were geographically separated from western Israel by the Jordan River, making Levitical presence essential to maintain covenant unity. Without Merarites teaching Torah

east of Jordan, Reuben and Gad might have drifted from mainstream Israelite faith and practice.

Historical Context

The Merarites' eastern cities included Bezer in Reuben (a refuge city) and Ramoth-gilead in Gad (another refuge city and later a royal city, 1 Kings 22:3). Their Transjordanian position made them first to fall during foreign invasions—Assyria conquered these territories before western Israel (2 Kings 15:29). Yet during peacetime, Merarites served as covenant bonds between separated Israelite populations. The Transjordanian tribes' altar misunderstanding (Joshua 22) shows how geographical separation threatened unity; Levitical presence helped maintain cohesion. This demonstrates that God positions His servants as unifying agents, maintaining doctrinal and covenantal consistency across dispersed populations.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does family-level allocation of cities challenge individualistic Christianity, emphasizing multi-generational faithfulness and household discipleship?
2. What does the Merarites' frontier positioning teach about serving as covenant bonds between geographically or culturally separated believers?
3. How can you maintain faithful witness in vulnerable or isolated circumstances where external pressures threaten spiritual compromise?

Interlinear Text

לְבָנֵי י	מִכָּרִי י	לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם	וּמִמֵּטֵה	רְאוּבֵן		
The children	of Merari	by their families	and out of the tribe	of Reuben		
H1121	H4847	H4940	H4294	H7205		
וּמִמֵּטֵה	גָּד	וּמִמֵּטֵה	זְבוּלֹן	עָרֵי	שְׁתֵּי	
and out of the tribe	of Gad	and out of the tribe	of Zebulun	cities	twelve	
H4294	H1410	H4294	H2074	H5892	H8147	
עֲשָׂרָה:						
H6240						

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