

# God's Provision for Church Government

## Joshua 21:4-42

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, August 18th 2024

Last week we started to look at chapter 21, a passage that preachers often studiously avoid. And I can see why. It's a long listing of all kinds of cities and pretty hard to put into sermonic form. But there *are* a number of things that we *can* learn from the passage. I'll start with a bit of review, then a broad overview of the chapter as a whole, and then I will dive down into some of the details.

### I. Significance of the Levites - Summary of last week's introduction

Last week we saw that the Levites were the teaching elders of the Mosaic period. And since the Old Testament prophesied that God would take Levites from among the Gentiles to be the New Covenant teachers, there must be some core similarity between the office of Levites and what New Testament officers do. For example, Isaiah 66:21 says of Gentiles in our age, "And I will also take some of them for priests and Levites" - or as the Targum renders it, "Levitical priests." There is no "and" in the Hebrew, so Young's Literal just has priests [comma] Levites. It refers to the teaching priests rather than the Aaronic priests who sacrificed. These priests were not allowed to sacrifice. It's the teaching priests that are the main focus.

Now, I can't be a literal Levite since I'm not a Jew, but the passage I just read *calls* me a Levite. Isaiah 66:21 compares Gary and me to a Levitical priest. It indicates that pastors today fulfill at least some core function that a Levite performed in the Old Testament. And that function was teaching, pastoring in the local synagogues, and performing the sacraments. 2 Chronicles 15:3 says, "For a long time Israel has been without the true God, without a teaching priest, and without law."

So last week we saw that the Levites and the ruling elders formed an identical church structure in the Old Testament synagogues as we find in the New Testament church structure. And indeed, the New Testament calls the church a synagogue. The Jewish synagogue system was Presbyterian in its structure.

So last week I gave an introduction to this chapter that showed that there have been teaching pastors and ruling elders in every age from Genesis to Revelation. And I examined eight different views of church office and we saw that only Presbyterianism meets every detail of what God set up in the Old Testament *and* the New Testament. God was seeking to make sure that every community in Israel had a one-on-one shepherding ministry of ruling elders as well as a preacher who would work jointly together with those ruling elders.

## A. God turned a curse into a blessing

But we also saw that both Simeon and Levi had been cursed by God in Genesis 49 because of their anger and cruelty. The curse was clearly that both tribes would be scattered throughout Israel.

But even though both brothers were cursed, God turned the curse against *Levi* into a blessing, whereas the curse against Simeon was not removed. And I want to comment a bit more on why there was that difference. Why is Levi given such blessings in this chapter?

The difference was that the Levites repented, rejected the sins of their ancestors, cut those sins off, and devoted themselves to be faithful to the Lord and to serve God with all their heart. And Exodus 32 gives one description of that clear-cut stand for the Lord that the Levites made. The people had made a golden calf and were worshiping it. When Moses came down from the mountain, God was about to destroy the entire nation. Moses interceded for them, but he also tested Israel to see who would take a stand against this idolatry by bearing the sword against the idolators (who deserved the death penalty). The entire tribe of Levi stood with Moses and engaged in that slaughter, killing 3000 idolators on one day. The point is that the tribe of Levi proved to be super-faithful. And they were consecrated on that day to be His pastors. They took over the role of the firstborn, who previously had been the pastors in the clans.

So even though the scattering of the Levites among Israel couldn't be removed, God turned the scattering into an incredible blessing for them and that in turn became a blessing for all of Israel. Indeed, God produced some of the greatest leaders out of the tribe of Levi, including Moses, Aaron, Phinehas, Eli, Ezra, and even John the Baptist.

This should be an encouragement to you and me. Sure we have all messed up in our past. Who of us does not have regrets from the past? I do. But if we admit our past sins, repent of our past, and ask God to turn the pain into something beautiful, He will do so. That's the encouragement that I get. Sure there may still be scars there - just like with Levi. Levi never did get its borders, and we might not get back everything that we could have had. But God can still open up new doors of ministry in our lives and produce something beautiful out of our lives. But this turning of the curse into a blessing can only happen when there is repentance and a complete embracing of the Lord's plan for our lives.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Boice made a neat application, saying, "What an encouragement this should be to us! In the scattering of Levi we see God's righteous judgment on sin. But we also see judgment turned to blessing. If you are suffering from what others have done—perhaps from the sin of a parent, as the descendants of Simeon and Levi suffered for the sin of their parents—do not think you are excluded from God's favor or that it is impossible for you to gain God's favor again by godly living. God punishes children for the sin of the fathers "to the third and fourth generation of those who hate [him]" (Exod. 20:5), but he also "repents" of evil and brings blessing where he sees repentance (Exod. 32:14; Jer. 18:8; 26:3, 13; Joel 2:13). Do not despair even if you are suffering for your own sins. I have on my desk a card containing a spiritual quotation from American writer Washington Irving. He said, "It lightens the stroke to draw near to him who handles the rod." That is true. If you

Let's contrast that with Simeon. Apparently Simeon and his ancestors didn't repent. Exodus shows that Simeon did not take that stand for the Lord. Perhaps they were driven by peer pressure, or didn't want to offend their parents or family, or perhaps pride kept them from repentance, or there may have been some other reason. But whatever the reason for their lack of repentance, they continued the course set by their ancestors for many generations. And as a result they stood on the sidelines and they never amounted to much of anything - until Revelation 7:7, when God, by His sovereign grace, took 12,000 Simeonites and made them devoted to Christ just like the Levites had been. And at that point God turned even the Simeonites into something beautiful by His grace.

In any case, I want to point out that there are Christians who do the same thing as Simeon did at the time of Moses. They know they shouldn't be continuing the same patterns of sin that have been passed down from their ancestors, but they decide somehow that it's not worth it to be different. Perhaps it's not worth the effort for them. Or perhaps they don't want to stand out like a sore thumb. So they just try to blend in rather than radically standing for the Lord. If that is you, eventually your family will disappear into nothingness. Yes, you will go to heaven, but your life won't count for much down here below.

That's the way it is in the Christian life. Those who admit that they have messed up badly are often the ones who are *most* used by God. He exalts the humble and humbles the proud. So be like Levi; don't be like Simeon.

### B. Levites = teaching elders/shepherds

But let me briefly compare and contrast the teaching elders and the ruling elders. The Levites became the teachers, theologians, counselors, judges, and preachers in their new society. They became indispensable parts of the kingdom.

### C. Elders (20:4; cf. 7:6; 8:33) = ruling elders/shepherds

The elders that are mentioned in chapter 20:4, and even earlier in chapter 7:6 and 8:33, were equivalent to the modern ruling elders who also helped to shepherd the sheep within the church of Jesus Christ. And what I discovered as I was studying the commentaries this past week is that the organization of the ruling elders in Exodus 18 into four levels of church government - local session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly, is the same four levels of government that the preachers in this chapter were organized into. And hopefully I can explain it fairly clearly.

I've already mentioned that the Levites were the preachers of the Bible. They were the skilled theologians. As one commentary worded it, "the priests and Levites were to teach it [the Word] to all, and the elders to administer communities by it."<sup>2</sup> In other words, he is

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are suffering from sin, draw near to God and find that he is far more ready to transmute the punishment than you are to come to him." James Montgomery Boice, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 114.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1987), 161.

saying that in this chapter the ruling elders and teaching elders shepherded the church jointly, and this chapter gives hints of that same Presbyterian structure. Let me first of all go through verses 4-42 in a bird's eye fashion, and then we will dive down into the details.

## II. Significance of four houses of Levi binding the twelve tribes together (vv. 4-8; cf. Lev. 25:32-34; Josh 21:17 with Judges 19; etc.)

In verses 4-8 we have a summary statement of the four houses of Levi binding the twelve tribes of Israel together. Let me read those verses again and then comment on them. Verses 4-5 deal with the first two houses that came from the one line of Kohath. Verse 4 deals with the first house - the Kohathites who were the children of Aaron. These were the ones who did the sacrifices, and they pointed forward to Jesus. Their office did not continue after Jesus. The text says,

Josh. 21:4 Now the lot came out for the families of the Kohathites. And the children of Aaron the priest, who were of the Levites, had thirteen cities by lot from the tribe of Judah, from the tribe of Simeon, and from the tribe of Benjamin.

These Aaronic priests were the ones who would perform the sacrifices in the tabernacle and later in the temple, and even though the temple was not constructed yet, God made sure that they would settle in an area that was very close to where the future temple would be.<sup>3</sup> This was because the Aaronic priests would take turns leaving their homes and ministering in cycles at the temple. But they all had to be fairly close to the temple.

Verse 5 deals with the rest of the Kohathites. They were further away. It says,

5 The rest of the children of Kohath had ten cities by lot from the families of the tribe of Ephraim, from the tribe of Dan, and from the half-tribe of Manasseh.

These Kohathites were previously responsible for taking down and setting up the tabernacle, but since the tabernacle wouldn't be traveling anymore, that function was no longer needed. So from this time on, most of their ministry was a preaching ministry in the synagogues in the areas that they lived in. They had been teaching before in *addition* to their jobs, but now this was going to be almost their exclusive vocation.

Verse 6 deals with the house of Gershon.

6 And the children of Gershon had thirteen cities by lot from the families of the tribe of Issachar, from the tribe of Asher, from the tribe of Naphtali, and from the half-tribe of Manasseh in Bashan.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Waltke says, "God gave the priests towns from Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin, that is, those areas closest to Jerusalem, where the temple would be located." Bruce K. Waltke, "Joshua," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 256.

The Gershonites were previously responsible for putting up the coverings and curtains whenever the tabernacle would move. They wouldn't need to do that anymore, so what remained was their preaching ministry. Verse 7 deals with the house of Merari.

7 The children of Merari according to their families had twelve cities from the tribe of Reuben, from the tribe of Gad, and from the tribe of Zebulun.

And then verse 8 summarizes it all by saying,

8 And the children of Israel gave these cities with their common-lands by lot to the Levites, as the LORD had commanded by the hand of Moses.

So why do I say that these four orders of the Levites bound Israel together? Well, God made sure that they were thoroughly mixed up among the people. And that was true even in the cities. Commentators point out that it wasn't just *Levites* who lived in these towns. God ensured that the Levites were not only spread out, but that other *Israelites* lived within the Levitical cities to be positively influenced by their ministry. Indeed, way back in Leviticus 25 God expected others to be in each of the Levitical cities and He expected at least some of the Levites to rent out their homes and to live in other areas of Israel. Let me read you Leviticus 25:32-34.

Lev. 25:32 Nevertheless the cities of the Levites, and the houses in the cities of their possession, the Levites may redeem at any time. 33 And if a man purchases a house from the Levites, then the house that was sold in the city of his possession shall be released in the Jubilee; for the houses in the cities of the Levites are their possession among the children of Israel. 34 But the field of the common-land of their cities may not be sold, for it is their perpetual possession.

This provision expected that for convenience sake, many Levites would lease their land to non-Levites for anywhere up to 49 years, after which time it would revert to the family of the Levites (often the next generation). And there are other ways in which the law of God itself made provision for non-Levites to live in the Levitical cities close to Levites, and for Levites to move to new areas as they pastored new synagogues. But God didn't want them leasing their land out to others for more than 49 years because he wanted to make sure that Levites (who had no tribal borders) would at least have houses and land that could provide some security, income, and inheritance for them. That provision kept the poor decisions of a Levitical parent from impoverishing the next generation.

But let's dig into this more. One commentary explains:

From the instruction given in Lev. 25:32–34, as well as the record of Biblical history, it is evident that these cities were not exclusively inhabited by the Levites. In view of the purpose of the distribution of the Levites, this would hardly be God's plan. God intended the Levites to be in the midst of Israel and not to be isolated from the people whom they were to instruct and guide. Hence the cities of the Levites were also inhabited by Israelites from other tribes. Gibeah of Benjamin, here given to the Levites (Joshua 21:17), was also peopled by the Benjamites, as appears from the history of the Levite whose wife was so horribly

abused by them (Judges 19). Saul dwelt there also. David and his court spent years at Hebron, another city of the Levites. The Levites probably were merely given the right to as many houses as they needed for living quarters in these cities. If they should sell, which they seemingly had a right to do (Lev. 25:32–34), they would perpetually have the right to redeem the property. The rest of the dwellings were occupied by the members of the tribe to which the country belonged. Outside the city was the pastureland for their cattle, extending up to 2,000 cu. beyond the city limits. This land was theirs for use but not for selling. It was permanently considered the Lord's property.<sup>4</sup>

The point is, God knew that Levites (as pastors) would both need land and the flexibility to be able to move to wherever they were needed to teach the people in the synagogues.

### III. The significance of the four concentric circles of distribution

But let me also comment in more detail on the four concentric circles of distribution that were given to them. I'll be repeating myself a little bit because God does. And I can't think of a better way of explaining this than to quote from a commentary at length. Francis Nichol says,

It has been suggested that each of the four divisions of the house of Levi became a bond to cement 3 of the 12 tribes together. In the case of the Gershonites the two sides of Jordan are bound together, two on the west of Jordan united to one on the east. The Merarites were used to connect two tribes on the east of Jordan with one tribe on the west, and the southeast of the Israelitish territory with the north. Thus they were all knit together that they might grow up together in God. The Levites were divided in Israel, but in their division they became a bond of union, bringing the tribes of Israel together and joining all of them to their God.

When not engaged in performing the religious duties which were apportioned among them, the Levites were the teachers of the young; the readers, transcribers, and expounders of the law; the annalists and chroniclers who preserved the memory of great events and distinguished personages. They were to bring religion into everyday life, mutually helping one another and their neighbors to realize the unseen, and to attain God's standard.<sup>5</sup>

And most commentaries agree with Nichol's analysis here. God wanted the pastors scattered throughout Israel, but he also wanted them to have some inheritance that they could pass on from generation to generation.

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<sup>4</sup> Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary, vol. 2* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1976), 282.

<sup>5</sup> Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary, vol. 2* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1976), 283.

But then in the rest of the chapter God backs up and gives more detail to each of these four groupings. And this is why I said that I have to repeat myself.

### **A. God first allocates cities for the Levites who would minister as priests in his palace-temple - the priestly Kohathites' inheritance (vv. 9-19).**

God first of all allocates cities for the Levites who would minister as priests in His palace-temple. Verses 9-19 deal with the priestly Kohathites's inheritance once again. Let's read through it. Verses 9-19:

Josh. 21:9 So they gave from the tribe of the children of Judah and from the tribe of the children of Simeon these cities which are designated by name, 10 which were for the children of Aaron, one of the families of the Kohathites, who were of the children of Levi; for the lot was theirs first. 11 And they gave them Kirjath Arba (Arba was the father of Anak), which is Hebron, in the mountains of Judah, with the common-land surrounding it. 12 But the fields of the city and its villages they gave to Caleb the son of Jephunneh as his possession. Josh. 21:13 Thus to the children of Aaron the priest they gave Hebron with its common-land (a city of refuge for the slayer), Libnah with its common-land, 14 Jattir with its common-land, Eshtemoa with its common-land, 15 Holon with its common-land, Debir with its common-land, 16 Ain with its common-land, Juttah with its common-land, and Beth Shemesh with its common-land: nine cities from those two tribes; 17 and from the tribe of Benjamin, Gibeon with its common-land, Geba with its common-land, 18 Anathoth with its common-land, and Almon with its common-land: four cities. 19 All the cities of the children of Aaron, the priests, were thirteen cities with their common-lands.

You will notice once again that the lands given to the Aaronic priests were clustered close to each other, and each of those cities were themselves very close to the future temple. And this makes sense. The Aaronic priests would need to travel to the temple more than any of the others because they were responsible for the sacrificial system. Did they also teach at the temple? Yes. There were actually several synagogues in the temple and other synagogues scattered throughout Jerusalem that Levites pastored. But most of them would have had full-time jobs within the temple helping people with all of its rituals.

But this also shows that the casting of the lots was not blind chance. God was directing its every toss. If it had been random, you could have had the priestly cities scattered anywhere in Israel, but there is an arrangement and order that only God's providence could have arranged and anticipated.

### **B. The non-priestly Kohathites inheritance (vv. 20-26)**

Next comes the non-priestly Kohathites who had responsibility for the ark and its sacred furniture. Though they would not have as much work as the Aaronic priests, they would still have special functions that would require them to be somewhat near to the temple, so theirs is the next ring of cities. Verse 20:



Josh. 21:20 And the families of the children of Kohath, the Levites, the rest of the children of Kohath, even they had the cities of their lot from the tribe of Ephraim. 21 For they gave them Shechem with its common-land in the mountains of Ephraim (a city of refuge for the slayer), Gezer with its common-land, 22 Kibzaim with its common-land, and Beth Horon with its common-land: four cities; 23 and from the tribe of Dan, Eltekeh with its common-land, Gibbethon with its common-land, 24 Aijalon with its common-land, and Gath Rimmon with its common-land: four cities; 25 and from the half-tribe of Manasseh, Tanach with its common-land and Gath Rimmon with its common-land: two cities. 26 All the ten cities with their common-lands were for the rest of the families of the children of Kohath.

I'll comment on their one city of refuge in a bit, but first let's go through each of the rings.

### C. The Gershonites' inheritance (vv. 27-33)

The Gershonites' inheritance is given in verses 27-33:

Josh. 21:27 Also to the children of Gershon, of the families of the Levites, from the other half-tribe of Manasseh, they gave Golan in Bashan with its common-land (a city of refuge for the slayer), and Be Eshterah with its common-land: two cities; 28 and from the tribe of Issachar, Kishion with its common-land, Daberath with its common-land, 29 Jarmuth with its common-land, and En Gannim with its common-land: four cities; 30 and from the tribe of Asher, Mishal with its common-land, Abdon with its common-land, 31 Helkath with its common-land, and Rehob with its common-land: four cities; 32 and from the tribe of Naphtali, Kedesh in Galilee with its common-land (a city of refuge for the slayer), Hammoth Dor with its common-land, and Kartan with its common-land: three cities. 33 All the cities of the Gershonites according to their families were thirteen cities with their common-lands.

### D. The Merarites' inheritance (vv. 34-40)

Then comes the inheritance of the Merarites in verses 34-40.

Josh. 21:34 And to the families of the children of Merari, the rest of the Levites, from the tribe of Zebulun, Jokneam with its common-land, Kartah with its common-land, 35 Dimnah with its common-land, and Nahalal with its common-land: four cities; 36 and from the tribe of Reuben, Bezer with its common-land, Jahaz with its common-land, 37 Kedemoth with its common-land, and Mephaath with its common-land: four cities; 38 and from the tribe of Gad, Ramoth in Gilead with its common-land (a city of refuge for the slayer), Mahanaim with its common-land, 39 Heshbon with its common-land, and Jazer with its common-land: four cities in all. 40 So all the cities for the children of Merari according to their families, the rest of the families of the Levites, were by their lot twelve cities.

What applications can we make just from the obvious scattering of the Levites all throughout the land? David Guzik points out that it models to modern ministers that they need to go out to where the people are rather than going into a monastery and expecting



people to find them in their monastery or in their study. He also said that in a way it shows God's intent was for "Christians to be sprinkled throughout the whole world, influencing people for Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup> And he makes that application because the Bible says all Christians are priests.

#### IV. The significance of the 48 cities of Levites (v. 41)

But before we dig deeper into the specifics of the text, let me read the last two verses of this section. First, verse 41.

Josh. 21:41 All the cities of the Levites within the possession of the children of Israel were forty-eight cities with their common-lands.

What a blessing these 48 cities became. We saw last week that they were the presbytery headquarters representing 48 presbyteries in the church of Israel. But there was more. E. John Hamlin points out another fact about these 48 centers. They were also the decentralized theological training centers for future generations of elders, with the best teachers actually training additional teachers as well. He said,

The levitical cities might be called Torah Centers, i.e., places where God's Teaching would be studied, interpreted, practiced, and taught. The Levites would put this Teaching in the mouths, hearts, and action of the people (Deut. 30:14; cf. Josh. 1:7-8). Such instruction by story and commandments... was the sovereign remedy for the rebellious and stubborn hearts of God's people (Deut. 31:27).<sup>7</sup>

When I started digging into this point, I found it absolutely fascinating. These commentaries pointed out that there were not only 48 presbyteries, but each presbytery had centers for training and raising up new generations of pastors. So instead of one centralized seminary (that could be much more easily taken over by Satan), there were 48 decentralized seminaries.

Over the history of Israel some of these Torah centers became compromised just as many modern seminaries have over time become liberal. That meant that conservative Levites who wanted more pure training had to travel to the more conservative Torah centers in other parts of Israel. Apparently there is nothing new under the sun. But just because seminaries *can* go bad does not negate God's plan that there *should* be seminaries, and that the seminaries should be run by the *church* rather than being independent schools.

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<sup>6</sup> David Guzik, Numbers, *David Guzik's Commentaries on the Bible* (Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik, 2004), Nu 35:6-8.

<sup>7</sup> E. John Hamlin, *Inheriting the Land: A Commentary on the Book of Joshua, International Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Edinburgh: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Handsel Press, 1983), 140.

So there were full-time Torah teaching centers at these 48 cities, but there were also occasional presbytery meetings where the ruling elders and the teaching elders would meet together.

## V. The significance of the common-lands surrounding the cities (v. 42)

Then verse 42 reiterates the presence of common lands around each of the cities.

42 Every one of these cities had its common-land surrounding it; thus were all these cities.

The common-lands are mentioned 32 times in this chapter, so there must be something pretty important about them. Numbers 35:4 specifies that the common-lands would extend from the walls of the city outward 1000 cubits all around, or about 1500 feet. This was the place where extra gardens could be grown and/or where certain animals could graze. Earl Radmacher clarifies the evidence, saying,

This does not mean that the priests and Levites supported themselves by farming, for the Law is clear that they were to live on the tithes and offerings of the other tribes (Num. 18:21–32). The produce they received from the common-lands was a bonus.<sup>8</sup>

And it was not just a blessing in terms of what they could bring in for their families. God designed this greenbelt for beauty and for the refreshment of the entire city and for those who traveled there from all around. Being a pastor is a particularly stressful occupation, and there is something about green space that is relaxing and refreshing. Huffman and Ogilvie's commentary says this:

Some scholars have made interesting note that, over three thousand years later, we are waking up to the necessity to plan in our cities significant areas for trees and grass. Urban intensification must be relieved in places where people can rediscover a contact with the land.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald Barclay Allen, and H. Wayne House, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), 501.

<sup>9</sup> Jr. Huffman John A. and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Joshua, vol. 6, The Preacher's Commentary Series* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1986), 217

## **VI. The significance of the 6 cities of refuge (10:2-3; 21:13,21,27,32,38) - Kirjath Arba, Hebron, Shechem, Golan, Kedesh, Ramoth.**

Moving on to the six cities of refuge that were mentioned in this chapter, I found it interesting that each of the six cities of refuge had the beauty of this greenspace all around them as well. They were not unattractive fortresses. They were safe places for people to flee to and find not only physical sanctuary, but spiritual sanctuary as well, as they would be immersed in the theological culture of the Levites. One commentary made the application that in much the same way God calls the modern church to be a safe place for those who are experiencing severe stress. It's a place of worship, teaching, fellowship, and the living out of God's Word - however imperfectly.<sup>10</sup>

### **A. Obvious: Obviously they were cities of refuge and Levites had a role in helping to adjudicate whether the killing was accidental or not.**

But why were the cities of refuge occupied by Levites? And the first and most obvious answer is that they were the experts of the law who could help adjudicate whether the man-slayer had killed the person accidentally or not. Paul made the point that the church should be the first and best place for any conflicts to be adjudicated without going to pagan courts. After talking about all the things that God had entrusted judgment to the church on, Paul rebukes Corinth for going to secular courts against one another, and said this:

I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren. (1 Cor. 6:5)

### **B. Less obvious: These constituted the headquarters of the synods**

But what I didn't realize before was that these six cities of refuge were also intended to be the headquarters for the six synods into which the presbyteries were divided. I had no idea. Of course, it makes perfect sense that God would make headquarters for the Levites on the same level that Exodus 18 divided up the ruling elders. In any case, commentaries have pointed out that the Levites not only pastored local synagogues, but also met to deliberate on issues within 48 presbyteries, and occasionally met to deliberate in 6 synods, and then once a year (or as needed) at the General Assembly (which was at the national level).<sup>11</sup> Well, that's exactly the same breakdown of the four courts of the church in Exodus 18. And in your outline I have given a graphic that shows this.

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<sup>10</sup> Jr. Huffman John A. and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Joshua, vol. 6, The Preacher's Commentary Series* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1986), 217-219.

<sup>11</sup> My favorites are George Gillespie and Samuel Rutherford, but several Scottish Reformers wrote on the subject as well.

## VII. Interesting note about Hebron (v. 13 with 14:13-14; 15:13-14)

But there was one city of refuge that was different. Verse 13 says,

So to the descendants of Aaron the priest they gave Hebron (a city of refuge for one accused of murder)...

How do we reconcile this with the earlier chapters that gave Hebron to *Caleb*? Let me read that. Chapter 14:13-14 says,

Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. 14 So Hebron has belonged to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the LORD, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly.

And chapter 15:13-14 says something similar:

Josh. 15:13 In accordance with the LORD's command to him, Joshua gave to Caleb son of Jephunneh a portion in Judah — Kiriath Arba, that is, Hebron. (Arba was the forefather of Anak.) 14 From Hebron Caleb drove out the three Anakites — Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmai — descendants of Anak.

So Caleb claimed Hebron, drove the giants out of Hebron, and lived in Hebron. Yet our passage says that Hebron was a Levitical city, and Caleb got the suburbs and farmlands around Hebron instead. What's going on? Isn't that a contradiction? Well, we know there are no contradictions in the Bible since God inspired it. But what is the explanation?

There are three explanations that I have seen that help to reconcile these two passages. A. W. Pink suggests that the city was way too big for Caleb's clan to occupy. And it was. It was way too big. So he voluntarily gave the city to the Levites, putting the concerns of the kingdom ahead of his own. We aren't told that this was the case, but that's Pink's view.

A second explanation is similar. It says that the Levites were in charge of (or had jurisdiction over) the city, whereas Caleb was in charge of (or had jurisdiction over) the surrounding towns and farms, yet *both* Levites and Calebites dwelt in the city. So on this theory the division is only dealing with jurisdiction, not with where they lived. And that is definitely possible. After all, there wasn't a single Levitical city that did not have others also living in it. So there is no reason why the Levites could not have had *jurisdiction* over the city, yet still have Calebites *living* there. Verse 11 says,

Josh. 21:11 They gave them Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron), with its surrounding pastureland, in the hill country of Judah. (Arba was the forefather of Anak.) 12 But the fields and villages around the city they had given to Caleb son of Jephunneh as his possession.

So on this second theory, all of the villages and farms beyond the greenspace were under the jurisdiction of Caleb's clan, but he and his family were also allowed to dwell within the city. And the proponents of this theory point out that this would have taken a special provision of jurisdiction since this would be one of the exceptions to the idea that most of

the cities normally had jurisdiction over the land and villages connected to the city. His clan alone had sole jurisdiction of those villages and farms. I tend to lean toward this second theory. It makes the most sense to me.

But there is a third explanation that has been proposed. And that is that the name Hebron applies to all the villages and farmland surrounding the city. In other words, Caleb's towns constituted city sprawl. We aren't told that, but that is what some commentaries think might have happened.

And maybe there is a fourth theory that explains this better.

But whichever theory is correct, studying these cities and which ones had jurisdiction over property *outside* the city and which ones did not made me suddenly realize that I shouldn't complain (like I have been) about Omaha's rules that govern those of us living in the three miles outside of Omaha - what they call "the three-mile extraterritorial jurisdiction." In other words, I'm outside the city and can't vote for my representatives, yet they have regulations on whether a person can have a bed and breakfast and what that bed and breakfast can look like,<sup>12</sup> requiring permit for incinerating waste,<sup>13</sup> how I manage my property,<sup>14</sup> building code violations,<sup>15</sup> etc. It seemed like regulation without representation. But wow, after studying these cities, it made me realize that the relationship of cities to the surrounding areas can sometimes be tricky. And there can be reasons for a city's jurisdiction to sometimes reach beyond the city because of the way those *outside* areas impact the city. And by the way, not every city in the book of Joshua had the same jurisdiction over surrounding areas, but when there were clear benefits that the walled cities provided to the villages and farms surrounding them (especially protection), there was at least some say-so-jurisdiction as well. So I learned something new this past week that I had not known. (It wasn't a serious question for me before - just something I wondered about.)

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**VIII. The significance of the “lot” (v. 4,5,6,8,10,20,40). God has the sovereign power to provide. Though the Levites asked for the cities (vv. 1-2) and though the people gave them cities (v. 3), each city was sovereignly distributed by lot (v. 4,5,6,8,10,20,40)**

There's just one more brief point that I want to make. I commented last week that the word “lot” is used eight times in the chapter, and that it refers to God's sovereignty. But as you can see by the *other* verses that I have referenced in connection with this point, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not at odds. Though the Levites asked for cities in verses 1-2 and though the people gave them the cities in verse 3 (in other words, they are very involved), it is clear from these eight verses that each city was sovereignly distributed by lot. God apportioned them. It's just one of many passages in the Bible that indicate that we *can* and *must* be responsible to do what God has called us to do - at the same time firmly believing that God is in sovereign control of every detail.

## **IX. Conclusion**

But let me make some concluding comments. I believe this chapter illustrates the fact that God was step-by-step establishing the church and nation to be able to function well in the years to come. It would be up to Israel whether they utilized God's plan well or not. And in the book of Judges you see that they sometimes did not. But God does have a good plan for civics and He has a good plan for the church, and when both church and state operate within the limited jurisdictions that God gave to them, the whole nation will prosper. And Lord willing, we will finish this chapter next week. But let's close in prayer.