



Joshua - Chapter Twenty One

III Joshua 13:1-21:45 - Dividing the Land (continues/concludes)

III.c Joshua 20:1-21:45 - A land of justice and worship (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Twenty One

From the beginning of the division of the land, this section in which the Levites receive their inheritance has been anticipated. The Levites receive no designated territory as such but they are given forty eight cities and towns to live and surrounding pasture land for their flocks and herds.

The chapter concludes with a broad summary statement of all that the Lord has done for Israel.

III.c.ii Joshua 21:1-45 - Cities Allotted to the Levites

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Then the heads of the families of the Levites came to the priest Eleazar and to Joshua son of Nun and to the heads of the families of the tribes of the Israelites; ² they said to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, 'The Lord commanded through Moses that we be given towns to live in, along with their pasture lands for our livestock.' ³ So by command of the Lord the Israelites gave to the Levites the following towns and pasture lands out of their inheritance.

⁴ The lot came out for the families of the Kohathites. So those Levites who were descendants of Aaron the priest received by lot thirteen towns from the tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin.

⁵ The rest of the Kohathites received by lot ten towns from the families of the tribe of Ephraim, from the tribe of Dan, and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

⁶ The Gershonites received by lot thirteen towns 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.

⁷ The Merarites according to their families received twelve towns from the tribe of Reuben, the tribe of Gad, and the tribe of Zebulun.

⁸ These towns and their pasture lands the Israelites gave by lot to the Levites, as the Lord had commanded through Moses.

⁹ Out of the tribe of Judah and the tribe of Simeon they gave the following towns mentioned by name, ¹⁰ which went to the descendants of Aaron, one of the families of the Kohathites who belonged to the Levites, since the lot fell to them first. ¹¹ They gave them Kiriath-arba (Arba being the father of Anak), that is Hebron, in the hill country of Judah, along with the pasture lands around it. ¹² But the fields of the town and its villages had been given to Caleb son of Jephunneh as his holding.

¹³ To the descendants of Aaron the priest they gave Hebron, the city of refuge for the slayer, with its pasture lands, Libnah with its pasture lands, ¹⁴ Jattir with its pasture lands, Eshtemoa with its pasture lands, ¹⁵ Holon with its pasture lands, Debir with its pasture lands, ¹⁶ Ain with its pasture lands, Juttah with its pasture lands, and Beth-shemesh with its pasture lands – nine towns out of these two tribes. ¹⁷ Out of the tribe of Benjamin: Gibeon with its pasture lands, Geba with its pasture lands, ¹⁸ Anathoth with its pasture lands, and Almon with its pasture lands – four towns. ¹⁹ The towns of the descendants of Aaron – the priests – were thirteen in all, with their pasture lands.

²⁰ As to the rest of the Kohathites belonging to the Kohathite families of the Levites, the towns allotted to them were out of the tribe of Ephraim. ²¹ To them were given Shechem, the city of refuge for the slayer, with its pasture lands in the hill country of Ephraim, Gezer with its pasture lands, ²² Kibzaim with its pasture lands, and Beth-horon with its pasture lands – four towns. ²³ Out of the tribe of Dan: Elteke

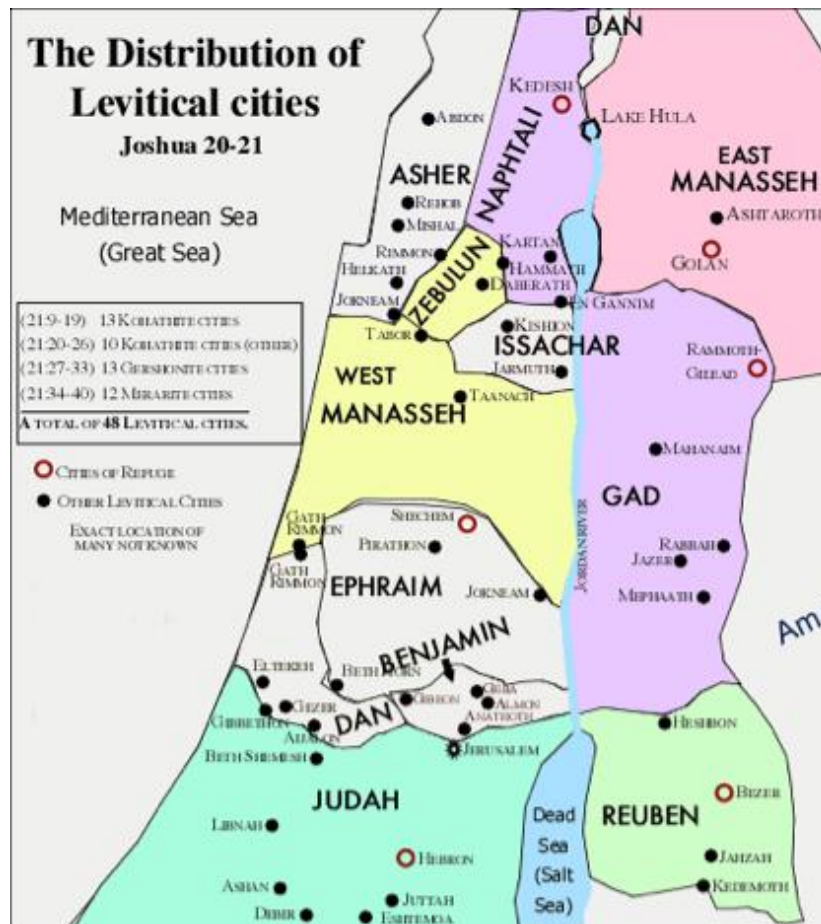
with its pasture lands, Gibbethon with its pasture lands, ²⁴ Aijalon with its pasture lands, Gath-rimmon with its pasture lands – four towns. ²⁵ Out of the half-tribe of Manasseh: Taanach with its pasture lands, and Gath-rimmon with its pasture lands – two towns. ²⁶ The towns of the families of the rest of the Kohathites were ten in all, with their pasture lands.

²⁷ To the Gershonites, one of the families of the Levites, were given out of the half-tribe of Manasseh, Golan in Bashan with its pasture lands, the city of refuge for the slayer, and Beeshterah with its pasture lands – two towns. ²⁸ Out of the tribe of Issachar: Kishion with its pasture lands, Daberath with its pasture lands, ²⁹ Jarmuth with its pasture lands, En-gannim with its pasture lands – four towns. ³⁰ Out of the tribe of Asher: Mishal with its pasture lands, Abdon with its pasture lands, ³¹ Helkath with its pasture lands, and Rehob with its pasture lands – four towns. ³² Out of the tribe of Naphtali: Kedesh in Galilee with its pasture lands, the city of refuge for the slayer, Hammoth-dor with its pasture lands, and Kartan with its pasture lands – three towns. ³³ The towns of the several families of the Gershonites were in all thirteen, with their pasture lands.

³⁴ To the rest of the Levites – the Merarite families – were given out of the tribe of Zebulun: Jokneam with its pasture lands, Kartah with its pasture lands, ³⁵ Dimnah with its pasture lands, Nahalal with its pasture lands – four towns. ³⁶ Out of the tribe of Reuben: Bezer with its pasture lands, Jahzah with its pasture lands, ³⁷ Kedemoth with its pasture lands, and Mephaath with its pasture lands – four towns. ³⁸ Out of the tribe of Gad: Ramoth in Gilead with its pasture lands, the city of refuge for the slayer, Mahanaim with its pasture lands, ³⁹ Heshbon with its pasture lands, Jazer with its pasture lands – four towns in all. ⁴⁰ As for the towns of the several Merarite families, that is, the remainder of the families of the Levites, those allotted to them were twelve in all.

⁴¹ The towns of the Levites within the holdings of the Israelites were in all forty-eight towns with their pasture lands. ⁴² Each of these towns had its pasture lands around it; so it was with all these towns.

Joshua 21:1-42



Mention of the priest Eleazar, Joshua, and the heads of the families of the tribes of the Israelites in v.1, as well as the location at Shiloh (v.2), indicate that this final allocation took place at the same time and place as the general distribution of Chapters 18-19.

Back in Numbers 35:1-8, the Lord commanded through Moses that forty eight cities or towns, including the six cities of refuge, be assigned to the Levites. The effect of taking cities and their pasturelands from each of the tribes would be to scatter the Levites throughout the whole of Israel as prophesied by Jacob in Genesis 49:7. This distribution would facilitate the Levites' fulfilling their duties.

Many of the cities were along borders – with the Philistines in the southwest; the Canaanites in the plains and coastlands to the north; eastern boundary regions in Transjordan; and so forth. The Levites were grouped according to their descent from one of Levi's three sons: <<*The children of Levi: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari*>> (Genesis 46:11).

So by command of the Lord the Israelites gave to the Levites the following towns and pasture lands out of their inheritance. The Levites received no province of land such as the other tribes did; however, they had to live

somewhere. So, each tribe gave certain cities and common-lands, land immediately surrounding the cities, to the tribe of Levi. The tribe of Levi had no allocation of land because God had declared that he would be their inheritance; refer to Joshua 13:14, and 13:33.

The Kohathites (v.4), of whom Aaron and his line descended (Exodus 6:16-20), received cities in the centre and the south of the land, while the Gershonites (v.6) and Merarites (v.7) received cities in the north and east.

The priestly city of Anathoth: <<*The king said to the priest Abiathar, 'Go to Anathoth, to your estate; for you deserve death. But I will not at this time put you to death, because you carried the ark of the Lord God before my father David, and because you shared in all the hardships my father endured'*>> (1 Kings 2:26) was the eventual home of the prophet Jeremiah: <<*The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin*>> (Jeremiah 1:1).

The striking thing about this list is that God wanted the Levites distributed throughout the entire land of Israel. He never intended there to be one state of Levi, but every tribe was to have the priestly influence and presence in their midst. In the same manner, Christians who are also designated priests according to 1 Peter 2:5 and 2:9 are to be distributed throughout the world and society, instead of heading off to make a 'Christian country' somewhere.

Perhaps it is also significant that the priests received their cities last of all the tribes and its leader Joshua. Priests are appointed to serve, not to be served, and there is something priestly about letting others go first: <<*He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all'*>> (Mark 9:35).

⁴³ Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to their ancestors that he would give them; and having taken possession of it, they settled there. ⁴⁴ And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their ancestors; not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. ⁴⁵ Not one of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

Joshua 21:43-45

Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to their ancestors that he would give them. Just as the account of the taking of the land drew to a close with generalising summaries (Joshua 10:40-42 and 11:16-23), so too the account of the dividing of the land ends with a summary section. It picks up on key motifs such as land, rest, and victory as the Lord's gifts; the word rest occurs also in

Joshua 11:23 and 14:15, but the Hebrew terminology is different. As seen later in Joshua, this section should be understood as a broad summary statement emphasising the Lord's decisive action on behalf of Israel, rather than as a comprehensive assertion that all of Israel's enemies had been eradicated from the land.

Although Israel did, in fact, take possession of the land and settled there, much work still remained to be done: <<*I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off, from the Jordan to the Great Sea in the west. The Lord your God will push them back before you, and drive them out of your sight; and you shall possess their land, as the Lord your God promised you*>> (Joshua 23:4-5). All the tribes had their land. They must go into every corner of what God has given, and take full possession, but God had provided everything necessary for them to do so. However, the key point is that the Lord has been utterly true to his good promises: none has failed, and all came to pass; the word all occurs six times in the Hebrew text of vv.43-45.

And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their ancestors. This is the point where Israel stopped commemorating Passover as if equipped to travel as described in Exodus 12:11. Now they will eat the Passover reclining at rest, as described in: <<*One of his disciples – the one whom Jesus loved – was reclining next to him*>> (John 13:23), because the Lord had given them rest in the land. God was completely faithful in regard to the land; but Israel was not. Any failure to fully possess the land was not because God had not made adequate provision, but because Israel had failed to fully follow the Lord, unlike Caleb: <<*And Moses swore on that day, saying, “Surely the land on which your foot has trodden shall be an inheritance for you and your children for ever, because you have wholeheartedly followed the Lord my God”*>> (Joshua 14:9).