

Hymns: 20 Mansion Over the Hilltop  
33 When the Roll is Called Up Yonder 34 When We All Get to Heaven

Scripture: Psalm 19:1-6; 8; 148  
Big idea: Who are the Levites?

Our scripture text for today is: **Joshua 21:1-45**

### **Introduction**

In an article published just two months ago by *U.S. News and World Report* entitled “The Hottest Housing Markets in the U.S.,” Raleigh came in as having the strongest housing market in the nation followed by Denver, Durham tied for third with Austin TX, Richmond, and Phoenix.

Over the past few years, the real estate market rocketed to new heights. This was caused by people transitioning to work at home and by unnaturally low interest rates. The Triangle benefits from a desirable climate, business-friendly government, good infrastructure, and a plentiful and growing job market – resulting in an influx of demand for housing.

You may recall, we’ve been traveling through the book of Joshua. In that book, we’ve seen lots of fighting, miraculous victories, taking possession of real estate, and most of that area settled. But there still remains assignment and settlement for one last tribe of Israel.

Today we’re going to examine how the LORD provided a place to live for this special tribe. That was the tribe of Levi. While the Levites did not own land, they were given allotments to live on and for partially supporting their families. Let’s get started.

Joshua 21

*[1] 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;*

So the leaders of the Levites approached the leaders of the nation of Israel.

*[2] And they sp[o]ke [ ]to 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.*

Recall they moved their headquarters from Gilgal (near Jericho) to Shiloh (20 miles north of Jerusalem). Their headquarters was the tabernacle – the portable worship area. The land of Canaan was the Promised Land where the Canaanites had lived -- located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

*[3] And the children of Israel gave unto the Levites out of their inheritance, at the commandment of the LORD, these cities and their suburbs.*

Twelve tribes of Israel had received their land allocations in the Promised Land as well as just east of the Jordan River. Each gave about four cities including suburbs to the Levites. The allocations flowed

to the four groups of Levites in the following way:

Recall Levi had three sons: Kohath, Gershon, and Merari. The LORD separated the sons of Aaron the first high priest into a special group.

Sons of Aaron (priests):

*[4] And the lot came out for the families of the Kohathites: and the **children of Aaron** the priest, which were of the Levites, had by lot out of the tribe of **Judah**, and out of the tribe of **Simeon**, and out of the tribe of **Benjamin**, thirteen cities.*

This was the southern area near Jerusalem.

Rest of the Kohathites (non-priests):

*[5] And **the rest of the children of Kohath** had by lot out of the families of the tribe of **Ephraim**, and out of the tribe of **Dan**, and out of the **half tribe of Manasseh**, ten cities.*

These cities were north of Judah in a more central area.

Children of Gershon:

*[6] And the **children of Gershon** had by lot out of the families of the tribe of **Issachar**, and out of the tribe of **Asher**, and out of the tribe of **Naphtali**, and out of the **half tribe of Manasseh** in Bashan, thirteen cities.*

This area covered from the Sea of Galilee to the north.

Children of Merari

*[7] 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.*

These cities were mainly central on the east side of the Jordan River.

*[8] And the children of Israel gave by lot unto the Levites these cities with their suburbs, as the LORD commanded by the hand of Moses.*

Now before we go any farther, let's take a breath and ask ourselves who were these people we call Levites?

The story of the Levites starts with Isaac sending Jacob to his uncle Laban to take a wife from one of his daughters. Jacob met Rachel at a well, fell in love with her, and served Uncle Laban seven years in exchange for Rachel as his wife. Laban tricked Jacob and gave him his homely daughter Leah instead. Jacob pledged to serve Laban seven more years to receive his cousin Rachel as his second wife.

The LORD gave Leah children with Jacob but prevented Rachel from bearing children since Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. Leah bore Jacob four sons (Genesis 29:32-35):

1. Ruben
2. **Simeon**
3. **Levi**
4. Judah

After a pause, Leah bore to Jacob (Genesis 30:17-21):

1. Issachar
2. Zebulun
3. **Dinah**

While not all children of Jacob had the same mother, notice particularly Simeon, Levi, and Dinah did. This likely bonded them closely to each other. The plot thickens.

Genesis 34

*[1] And Dinah the daughter of Leah, ... , went out to see the daughters of the land.*

That is, she gathered with like young ladies – perhaps her friends.

*[2] And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw her,  
he **took her**,  
and **lay with her**,  
and **defiled her**.*

*[3] And his soul  
**clave** unto Dinah the daughter of Jacob,  
and he **loved** the damsel,  
and **sp[o]ke kindly** unto the damsel.*

*[4] And Shechem sp[o]ke unto his father Hamor, saying, Get me this damsel to wife.*

This heathen Shechem was clearly smitten by Dinah.

When Simeon and Levi found out that their blood-sister had been violated in this way, they came up

with a scheme. They told the Hivites that in order for them to unite with the Israelites, all of the males must first be circumcised. Hamor agreed to that dowry and had this surgery done.

*[25] And it came to pass on the third day, when they were sore, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's br[others], took each man his sword, and came upon the city boldly, and slew all the males.*

They then rescued their sister after killing the men, took captive the women and children and utterly plundered the city. When Jacob learned of this, he berated them and said they risked getting Jacob and his family destroyed by the Canaanites.

To his deathbed, Jacob did not forget what Simeon and Levi had done. His last words of **blessing** of his sons contained a **curse** for Simeon and Levi. What was that curse?

Genesis 49

*[1] And Jacob called unto his sons, and said, Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the last days.*

*[5] Simeon and Levi are  
**brethren;**  
**instruments of cruelty** are in their habitations.*

*[6] ... for in their anger they slew a man,  
and in their selfwill they [crippled oxen].*

*[7] Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce;  
and their wrath, for it was cruel:*

*I will **divide them** in Jacob, and  
**scatter them in Israel.***

How will this curse from Jacob on these two sons manifest itself? In short, Simeon was given a portion of Judah's allotment (Joshua 19:9) and then absorbed into Judah as Moses completely skips the tribe in his final blessing (Deuteronomy 33). Levi was scattered throughout Israel as we shall see.

But there's another key concept we don't want to miss. What is that concept? For that we must travel back to the famine that forced the Israelites to go to Egypt where Jacob's son Joseph watched over them. When Joseph died and a new Pharaoh took control, the Israelites were made slaves. After four hundred years, the LORD lifted up Moses as the leader of the Israelites and said to him:

Exodus 4

*[22] And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, **Israel is my son, even my firstborn:***

*[23] And I say unto thee, Let my **son** go, that he may serve me:  
and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy **son, even thy firstborn.***

Take note here of the repeated key words *son* and *firstborn*.

Exodus 12

*[12] For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite **all the firstborn** in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against **all the gods of Egypt** I will execute judgment: I am the LORD.*

*[29] And it came to pass, that at midnight the LORD **smote all the firstborn** in the land of Egypt, ....*

This is where the idea of the **firstborn** belonging to the LORD came from. He redeemed these Israelites from death – making the **firstborn** His. But then the LORD makes a change:

Numbers 3

*[12] And I, behold, I have **taken the Levites** from among the children of Israel **instead of all the firstborn ... therefore the Levites shall be mine;***

*[13] Because **all the firstborn are mine;** for on the day that I smote all the **firstborn** in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto me all the **firstborn** in Israel, both man and beast: mine shall they be: I am the LORD.*

With that, we now see that the LORD chose the Levites to be His special possession.

Joshua 21 Verses 9-40 proceed to enumerate the cities and suburbs and to which sub-tribe (of Levi) they were given.

*[41] All the cities of the Levites within the possession of the children of Israel were **forty and eight cities** with their suburbs.*

Now, let's try to get a handle on the **size** of these cities and suburbs and the **size** of them compared to the relative population of the Levites.

Numbers 35:2-5

Verse four seems to describe the size of the city wall as a square 1500 feet on a side. This is slightly larger than a square of three city blocks on a side or a total of nine city blocks.

206.61 acres city plus acres suburb / pasture land  
51.65 acres city  
154.96 acres suburb / pasture land

Now if we compare the size of land given to the Levites to the size of all of Israel

The Levites represented about two percent of the Israelite population (Numbers 26:51,62).

The Promised Land is roughly 5600 sq. mi. (about the size of Connecticut). The land on the other side of Jordan was about 2000 sq. mi. (about the size of Delaware) for a total of 7600 sq. mi. The 48 Levite cities / suburb areas totaled about 15 sq mi. or 0.2% of Israel.

Since the Levites had such a small amount of land, they really could not produce enough to sustain

themselves or make a living. In addition the Levites had other responsibilities. We can calculate that there were roughly 150 Levite families in each of the 48 cities. That leaves them about a third of an acre for each family in the city and about an acre of pasture land which would support **either** one cow, one donkey, eight goats, or ten sheep.

The LORD's provision for them came through offerings. The Israelites gave offerings of firstfruits, firstborn, various sin offerings, plus a tenth of their income. Non-monetary offerings were specified to be **the best** of the oil, wine, and wheat (Numbers 18:11-26).

Deuteronomy 18:1-5 fills in more details

*[1] The priests ...,  
and all the tribe of Levi,  
shall have no part nor inheritance with Israel:  
they shall eat the offerings of the LORD made by fire, and his inheritance.*

So if you ever wondered what happened to all of these sacrifices to the LORD nearly all were not wasted. Much of this was used as food for the Levites.

Speaking of the priests, the LORD said

*[5] For the LORD thy God hath chosen him out of all thy tribes,  
to stand **to minister in the name of the LORD**,  
him and his sons for ever.*

In addition to standing as the LORD's minister, the Levites had other duties that prevented them from embarking on a full-time secular job. Here's a list:

Serve the high priest (Numbers 3:6-7)

Take care of the tabernacle and the instruments therein (Numbers 3:7-8).

Aaron and his offspring shall perform priestly duties (Numbers 3:10).

Gershonites take care of the tabernacle, door, hangings, and objects inside (vv. 25-26, 31-32)

They shall act as judges and enforcers of sentences (Deuteronomy 17:8-13), so they had a judicial and governmental responsibility.

When Israel has a king, they shall make a copy of the law and give it to him (Deuteronomy 17:18).

Determine truth with the Urim and Thummim (Deuteronomy 33:8).

Teach Israel the law, burn incense, and burn sacrifices (Deuteronomy 33:10).

Summing up then, with the assignment of cities to the Levites, The LORD completed all He promised to do with regard to the promise of land to Israel.

Joshua 21

*[43] And the LORD **gave** unto Israel **all the land** which he sware to give unto their fathers; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein.*

*[44] And the LORD **gave them rest round about**, according to all that he sware unto their fathers: and there stood not a man of all their enemies before them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand.*

*[45] There **failed not ought of any good thing** which the LORD had spoken unto the house of Israel; **all came to pass**.*

The LORD is faithful and this is an example that He fulfills His promises.

### Application

Applying this to Christians, Peter declares that we have that same title and function as the Levites that preceded us. It is our privilege to serve our High Priest the LORD Jesus Christ.

I Peter 2

*[5] Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an **holy priesthood**, to **offer up spiritual sacrifices**, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.*

*[9] But ye are a chosen generation, a **royal priesthood**, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that **ye should shew forth the praises** of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light:*

We are also privileged to be heirs of His great provision and blessing. Jesus said,

John 14

*[2] In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.*

And while the Triangle is a great place to live, it can't compare to the place the LORD has prepared for us. What is this place?

Revelation 21

*[10] And he ... shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,*

*[11] Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal;*

*[18] And the building of the wall of it was of jasper: and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass.*

*[19] And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones....*

*[21] And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every [] gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass.*

*[23] And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.*

*[25] And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there.*

*[27] And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defile[s], neither whatsoever work[s] abomination, or make[s] a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

**Benediction**

*Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood,  
And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for  
ever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1:5-6)*

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