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## Merarites

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# LEXHAM BIBLE DICTIONARY

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**MERARITES** (מֵרָרִית, *merariy*). Descendants of Merari, son of Levi; one of the groups responsible for taking care of the tabernacle.

### **Function**

The Merarites were part of the Levites, together with the Gershonites and the Kohathites. These three groups descended from the three sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (Gen 46:11; Exod 6:16; Num 3:17; 1 Chr 6:1).

The task of the Merarites was to take care of certain parts of the tabernacle: “the frames of the tabernacle, its crossbars, its posts, its sockets, its utensils, plus all the service connected with these things, and the pillars of the courtyard all around, with their sockets, their pegs, and their ropes” (Num 3:36–37 NET). Each Merarite had a responsibility to carry specific items. When the Israelites camped in the desert, the Merarites set their camp on the north side of the tabernacle (Num 3:35).

Scholars debate the details of the tabernacle-caretaking assignments of the Merarites. On the basis of a close study of the terms for different Levitical assignments, Milgrom argues that the Merarites (as well as Gershonites) were assigned “packing work,” whereas the “porterage work” was assigned to Kohathites (Milgrom, *Studies*, 64). Cody maintains that the difference between the kind of work assigned to the Merarites and Gershonites, respectively, is more theoretical than actual (Cody, *History*, 162). For their service, the Merarites were given four carts and eight oxen (Num 7:1–8). Ithamar, the son of Aaron the priest, supervised the Merarites (Num 4:32–33).

### **Biblical History**

#### *Merari and His Descendants*

Merari is mentioned as one of the sons of Levi in Gen 46:11, Exod 6:16, and Num 3:17. According to Exodus and Numbers, Merari had two sons, Mahli and Mushi (Exod 6:19; Num 3:20); in First Chronicles, however, Mahli seems to be the son of Mushi (1 Chr 6:47). From Mahli and Mushi descended the families of the Mahlites and the Mushites (Num 3:20, 33). The Merarites were led during the exodus generation by Zuriel, son of Abihail (Num 3:35).

There were 6,200 male Merarites (at least one month old; Num 3:34). When the scope was limited to men 30–50 years old assigned to work with the tent of meeting, they numbered 3,200 (Num 4:42–44).

#### *The Cities of the Merarites*

According to Joshua 21, the Merarite clans were allotted 12 cities and their pasturelands: Jokneam, Kartah, Dimnah, and Nahalal from the tribe of Zebulun; Bezer, Jahaz, Kedemoth, and Mephaath from the tribe of Reuben; Ramoth in Gilead, Mahanaim, Heshbon, and Jazer from the tribe of Gad (Josh 21:34–40; compare 1 Chr 6:63). A similar list in 1 Chronicles names only two cities within Zebulun’s territory: Rimmono and Tabor (1 Chr 6:77–81).

#### *Merarites in the Time of David*

Led by Asaiah, 220 Merarites were among the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant to the place established by King David (1 Chr 15:1–15). The musicians in the procession included a Merarite—Ethan, son of Kushaiah (1 Chr 15:17, 19).

David's organized the Levites into divisions, including the sons of Merari (Mahli and Mushi) and their descendants. Mahli had two sons, Eleazar and Kish, and Mushi had three sons, Mahli, Eder, and Jeremoth (1 Chr 23:21–23; 24:28–30). Other Merarites named in David's Levitical organization include Jaaziah and his sons, Beno, Shoham, Zaccur and Ibri (1 Chr 24:27). The list of gatekeepers includes 14 Merarites: Hosah, who guarded the west gate of Shalleketh, and 13 of his sons and brothers (1 Chr 26:10–11, 16).

#### *Merarites after David*

Later in Israel's history, Merarites are mentioned in connection with temple restorations and the return from exile. When Hezekiah became king and set out to restore and consecrate the temple, two Merarites were among the Levites: Kish, son of Abdi, and Azariah, son of Jehallelel (2 Chr 29:1–12). Under the restoration of King Josiah, two Merarites, Jahath and Obadiah, served as supervisors in the repair of the temple (2 Chr 34:12). In the time of Ezra, Merarites were among the exiles who traveled back to Jerusalem from Babylon (Ezra 8:18–20). Shemaiah, a descendant of Merari, was among the first exiles to resettle in Jerusalem (1 Chr 9:2, 14).

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