

The 12 Tribes of Israel

Abraham begot Isaac. Isaac begot Jacob. To be an Israelite by blood, a person must be a descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob begot 12 sons who are listed herein. The 12 sons of Jacob are the patriarchs of the 12 Tribes of Israel. For example, Jacob's son Benjamin is the patriarch of the Tribe of Benjamin. Jacob's son Reuben is the patriarch of the Tribe of Reuben. And so forth. The Promised Land [Canaan], plus an area on the east side of the Jordan River, was allocated among the 12 Tribes. [Num. 33.54; Num. 36.3-9] As the priestly Tribe, Levi was given no land. [Num. 18.20, 18.24] Instead of land, God gave Levi the tithes of the people of Israel. Jacob's son Joseph had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. By Jacob's command [Gen 48.5], Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, were regarded as de facto "Tribes" of Israel. Thus, the land allocations of Joseph and Levi were given instead to Ephraim and Manasseh, preserving *twelve* as the number of tribes. [Josh 14.3-4]

Well-known descendants of certain Tribes

Tribe of Benjamin - King Saul, Paul the apostle [a.k.a. Saul of Tarsus]

Tribe of Levi - Moses, Aaron

Tribe of Judah - King David, King Solomon, many other kings; Lord Jesus, the Messiah

The *twelve tribes (clans) of Israel* derive from the *twelve sons of Jacob*, aka "Israel." These sons/tribes were, in order of birth, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. Levi became the priest tribe, not one of the twelve. Jacob elevated the descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh (the two sons of Joseph and his Egyptian wife Asenath) to the status of full tribes in their own right, replacing the tribe of Joseph.

You can find when each of the 12 sons was born in Gen 29:31-30:24 Gen 35:16-18

The 12 Sons/Tribes	Name Means	Mother
1. Reuben	"behold a son"	Leah
2. Simeon	"God hears"	Leah
3. Levi	"joined"	Leah
4. Judah	"let him [God] be praised"	Leah
5. Dan	"judge"	Bilhah
6. Naphtali	"my wrestling"	Bilhah
7. Gad	"good fortune"	Zilpah
8. Asher	"happy"	Zilpah
9. Issachar	"man of hire"	Leah
10. Zebulun	"dwelling"	Leah
11. Joseph	"may God add"	Rachel
12. Benjamin	"son of the right hand"	Rachel

Reuben - So Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben; for she said, "The LORD has surely seen my affliction. Now therefore, my husband will love me." Gen 29.32

Simeon - Then she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also." And she called his name Simeon. Gen 29.33

Levi - She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore his name was called Levi Gen 29.34

Judah - And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Now I will praise Yahweh." Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she stopped bearing. Gen 29.35

Dan - Then Rachel said, "God has judged my case; and He has also heard my voice and given me a son." Therefore she called his name Dan. Gen 30.6

Naphtali - Rachel said, "With great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and indeed I have prevailed." So she called him Naphtali. Gen 30.6

Gad - Then Leah said, "A troop comes!" So she called his name Gad. Gen 30.11

Asher - Then Leah said, "I am happy, for the daughters will call me blessed." So she called his name Asher. Gen 30.13

Issachar - Leah said, "God has given me my hire [wages] because I have given my maid to my husband." So she called his name Issachar. Gen 30.18

Zebulun - Leah said, "...now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons." So she called his name Zebulun. Gen 30.20b

Joseph - So she called his name Joseph, and said, "The LORD shall add to me another son." Gen 30.24

Benjamin - As her soul was departing (for she died), she called his name Ben-Oni [son of my sorrow]; but his father called him Benjamin. [son of my right hand] Gen 35.18

***Note: Jacob and Leah also had a daughter named Dinah (Gen 30:21).

Joseph is easily the best known of the 12 sons (and was the favorite of Jacob: Gen 37:3-4), being mentioned in 16 chapters in Genesis (between Ch. 30-50). Levi was important because it was from him that the priestly line of the Levites descended. Jesus was descended from the tribe of Judah (Heb. 7:14) (Rev 5:5).

There are several stories from these sons that read like a "soap opera." For example:

Reuben, slept with Bilhah (Jacob's concubine) (Gen 35:22) (Gen 49:3-4), the mother of his two brothers Dan and Naphtali (Gen 30:3-8) (Gen 35:25). Because of this, he lost his birthright as the firstborn, with his father Israel giving it instead to the two sons of Joseph (1 Chr. 5:1-2).

In Genesis, chapter 34, a man named "Shechem" raped Dinah, the brother's sister. Shechem then begged his father to get her for him as a wife. When the brothers heard the father begging Jacob to give

her to Shechem for a wife, they were very angry, and came up with a plan. Shechem, as well as all of the men of their city could marry the daughters of the Israelites if they all underwent circumcision. They agreed, and on the third day after undergoing the ritual, while they were in pain and incapacitated, Simeon and Levi went to the city and killed every single male, and brought Dinah back home. Then, all of the brothers returned and plundered the city, taking everything of value with them.

Judah had two sons: Er and Onan. Er married a wife named Tamar, but God killed Er because he was wicked. Judah then told his son Onan to marry Tamar so that there would be an heir. Onan disobeyed, so God killed him too (Gen 38:6-10). Tamar then disguised herself as a prostitute and talked Judah into sleeping with her (Gen 38:14-18). She became pregnant, and gave birth to twins (Gen 38:27-30).

And, of course, the most famous story of Joseph's brothers selling him to slave traders, and then telling their dad he died. Years later, Joseph went on to become 2nd in command in all of Egypt, and save his brothers and father from starvation.

The 12 tribes of Israel - Jeffrey Kranz

The 12 tribes of Israel are (for the most part) named after the 12 sons of Jacob. Each son became the patriarch of an individual tribe as the nation grew.

The nation of Israel is central to the Bible's narrative, especially the Old Testament. But that country wasn't just a uniform people group: Israel is a mix of 12 tribes in the Bible.

And the better we understand these tribes, the better we understand some of the important (and weird) things that happen in Israel's history. Kings, civil wars, border disputes, body parts in the mail. (*Judges 19:29*) — the dynamic between the tribes is at the heart of it all.

1. Judah.

The tribe of kings, and the most preeminent of the 12 tribes in the biblical narrative. Judah "*prevailed over his brothers,*" (*1 Chronicles 5:2*), and the tribe's territory included the city of Jerusalem and the holy temple. King David was part of this tribe, and his royal line ruled in Jerusalem from around 1,000 BC until the city fell to Babylonian forces in 586 BC. Jerusalem was the capital of Israel and the capital of the Southern Kingdom after the nation divided. Jesus is of the tribe of Judah (*Matthew 1:1-2*). ***Notable tribesmen: Jesus, David, Mary, Solomon, Caleb***

1 Chronicles 5:2 The descendants of Judah became the most powerful tribe and provided a ruler for the nation, but the birthright belonged to Joseph.

Matthew 1:1-2 The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers.

2. Reuben.

Descended from Jacob's firstborn, whom Jacob said was as "*uncontrolled as water*" (*Genesis 49:4*). The tribe chose not to settle in the Promised Land, and instead asked Moses for some of the territory that they conquered east of the Jordan River. Moses agreed to this, on the condition that they assist the western tribes in conquering Canaan (*Numbers 32:28–32*). They did so, but they did not assist the other tribes in battle during the period of judges (*Judges 5:16*), and the tribe falls into scriptural obscurity.

Genesis 49:4 But you are as unruly as a flood, and you will be first no longer. For you went to bed with my wife; you defiled my marriage couch.

Numbers 32:28–32 So Moses gave command concerning them to Eleazar the priest, to Joshua the son of Nun, and to the chief fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel. And Moses said to them: "If the children of Gad and the children of Reuben cross over the Jordan with you, every man armed for battle before the LORD, and the land is subdued before you, then you shall give them the land of Gilead as a possession. But if they do not cross over armed with you, they shall have possessions among you in the land of Canaan."

Then the children of Gad and the children of Reuben answered, saying: "*As the LORD has said to your servants, so we will do. We will cross over armed before the LORD into the land of Canaan, but the possession of our inheritance shall remain with us on this side of the Jordan.*"

Judges 5:16 Why did you sit at home among the sheepfolds—to hear the shepherds whistle for their flocks? Yes, in the tribe of Reuben there was great indecision.

3. Simeon.

The man Simeon (with his brother Levi) slaughtered the men of an entire city to avenge his sister (*Genesis 34:25–31*). The tribe's portion of land was within the midst of Judah's territory (*Joshua 19:1*); however, Simeon did not grow as rapidly as Judah and seems to have dispersed across multiple territories (*1 Chronicles 4:38–43*; *2 Chronicles 15:8–9*). This is consistent with Jacob's prophecy concerning Simeon and his brother Levi: "*I will disperse them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.*"

Genesis 34:25–31 But three days later, when their wounds were still sore, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, who were Dinah's full brothers, took their swords and entered the town without opposition. Then they slaughtered every male there, including Hamor and his son Shechem. They killed them with their swords, then took Dinah from Shechem's house and returned to their camp.

Meanwhile, the rest of Jacob's sons arrived. Finding the men slaughtered, they plundered the town because their sister had been defiled there. They seized all the flocks and herds and donkeys—everything they could lay their hands on, both inside the town and outside in the fields. They looted all their wealth and plundered their houses. They also took all their little children and wives and led them away as captives.

Afterward Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have ruined me! You've made me stink among all the people of this land—among all the Canaanites and Perizzites. We are so few that they will join forces

and crush us. I will be ruined, and my entire household will be wiped out!” “But why should we let him treat our sister like a prostitute?” they retorted angrily.

Joshua 19:1 Then the second lot fell to Simeon, to the tribe of the sons of Simeon according to their families, and their inheritance was in the midst of the inheritance of the sons of Judah.

1 Chronicles 4:38–43 These were the names of some of the leaders of Simeon’s wealthy clans. Their families grew, and they traveled to the region of Gerar, in the east part of the valley, seeking pastureland for their flocks. They found lush pastures there, and the land was spacious, quiet, and peaceful.

Some of Ham’s descendants had been living in that region. But during the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah, these leaders of Simeon invaded the region and completely destroyed the homes of the descendants of Ham and of the Meunites. No trace of them remains today. They killed everyone who lived there and took the land for themselves, because they wanted its good pastureland for their flocks. Five hundred of these invaders from the tribe of Simeon went to Mount Seir, led by Pelatiah, Neariah, Rephaiah, and Uzziel—all sons of Ishi. They destroyed the few Amalekites who had survived, and they have lived there ever since.

2 Chronicles 15:8–9 Now when Asa heard these words and the prophecy which Azariah the son of Oded the prophet spoke, he took courage and removed all the detestable idols from the land Judah and Benjamin and in the towns he had captured in the hill country of Ephraim. And he repaired the altar of the LORD, which stood in front of the entry room of the LORD’s Temple.

Then Asa called together all the people of Judah and Benjamin, along with the people of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon who had settled among them. For many from Israel had moved to Judah during Asa’s reign when they saw that the LORD his God was with him.

4. Levi.

The tribe of the priesthood. The tribe of Levi stood by Moses (a Levite) during the golden calf incident at Mount Sinai (*Exodus 32:25–29*), and later took their place as ministers to the tabernacle, and later the Temple. Levi had no tribal territory—the Lord was the tribe’s inheritance (*Numbers 18:19–20*)—though they did receive pasture lands for their cattle (*Joshua 21*). Levitical duties were extensive (read *Leviticus!*), but Moses gives a brief summary of their significance in his blessing for the tribe (*Deuteronomy 33:8–11*). **Notable tribesmen: Moses, Aaron, John the Baptist, Barnabas.**

Exodus 32:25–29 Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him.

Then he said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’” The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Then Moses said, “You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and He has blessed you this day.”

Numbers 18:19–20 Yes, I am giving you all these holy offerings that the people of Israel bring to the LORD. They are for you and your sons and daughters, to be eaten as your permanent share. This is an

eternal and unbreakable covenant between the LORD and you, and it also applies to your descendants.” And the LORD said to Aaron, “You priests will receive no allotment of land or share of property among the people of Israel. I am your share and your allotment.”

Joshua Chapter 21 – Read the chapter if your interest lies in the details.

Deuteronomy 33:8–11 Moses said this about the tribe of Levi: “O LORD, you have given your Thummim and Urim—the sacred lots—to your faithful servants the Levites. You put them to the test at Massah and struggled with them at the waters of Meribah. The Levites obeyed your word and guarded your covenant. They were more loyal to you than to their own parents. They ignored their relatives and did not acknowledge their own children. They teach your regulations to Jacob; they give your instructions to Israel. They present incense before you and offer whole burnt offerings on the altar. Bless the ministry of the Levites, O LORD, and accept all the work of their hands. Hit their enemies where it hurts the most; strike down their foes so they never rise again.”

5. Zebulun.

Zebulun doesn't get very much attention in the Bible. The tribe does boast a strong, loyal fighting force during the days of the judges and King David. In fact, Zebulun had the largest presence in the army that made David king of Israel at Hebron, and they served him with “*an undivided heart*” (1 Chronicles 12:33).

1 Chronicles 12:33 From the tribe of Zebulun, there were 50,000 skilled warriors. They were fully armed and prepared for battle and completely loyal to David.

6. Issachar.

Issachar has even less biblical presence than Zebulun, but the tribe was loyal to Deborah and Barak (Judges 5:15). They're also remembered as “*men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do*” (1 Chronicles 12:32).

Judges 5:15 The princes of Issachar were with Deborah and Barak. They followed Barak, rushing into the valley. But in the tribe of Reuben there was great indecision.

1 Chronicles 12:32 From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take.

7. Dan.

We don't read much about the man Dan, but we do see his tribe up to no good in the book of Judges. The tribe did not secure their original portion of land (Judges 1:34; 18:1), and instead migrated northward. In the process, they took for themselves other gods (Judges 18:14–17) and set up a new priesthood (Judges 18–20). The tribe later joins Jeroboam in idolatry when the kingdom of Israel divides (1 Kings 12:28–29). **Notable tribesman: Samson**

Judges 1:34 As for the tribe of Dan, the Amorites forced them back into the hill country and would not let them come down into the plains.

Judges 18:1 In those days there was no king of Israel; and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for themselves to live in, for until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them as a possession among the tribes of Israel.

Judges 18:14–17 Then the five men who had gone to spy out the country of Laish answered and said to their brethren, “Do you know that there are in these houses an ephod, household idols, a carved image, and a molded image? Now therefore, consider what you should do.” So they turned aside there, and came to the house of the young Levite man—to the house of Micah—and greeted him. The six hundred men armed with their weapons of war, who were of the children of Dan, stood by the entrance of the gate. Then the five men who had gone to spy out the land went up. Entering there, they took the carved image, the ephod, the household idols, and the molded image. The priest stood at the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men who were armed with weapons of war.

Judges Chapters 18–20 – Read the chapters if your interest lies in the details.

1 Kings 12:28–29 So on the advice of his counselors, the king made two gold calves. He said to the people, “It is too much trouble for you to worship in Jerusalem. Look, Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of Egypt!” He placed these calf idols in Bethel and in Dan—at either end of his kingdom.

8. Gad.

Little is said of Gad, the man or the tribe. They, like Reuben, settled east of the Jordan.

9. Asher.

Jacob prophesied that Asher’s tribe would enjoy rich foods (*Genesis 49:20*), and the tribe went on to possess a region of eastern Galilee which is still known for its olive groves.

Genesis 49:20 “Asher’s food will be rich; he will provide delicacies fit for a king.

10. Naphtali.

Naphtali, with Zebulun, is mentioned by the prophet Isaiah in a passage we read often during Christmastime: “*For a child will be born to us . . .*” This promise was given concerning the land of Galilee, specifically, the “*land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.*” You can read the whole prophecy in *Isaiah 9*.

Isaiah 9:1 Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory.

11. Ephraim.

This tribe is named after Joseph’s son. Joseph received the birthright from Jacob, and instead of just one tribe, he is the ancestor of two (Manasseh is the other). After the kingdom divides, the Northern Kingdom’s capital is in Ephraim’s territory, and the prophets sometimes refer to the entire nation as “Ephraim” (*Jeremiah 31:9, Hosea 5:3*). **Notable tribesmen: Joshua, Samuel**

Jeremiah 31:9 Tears of joy will stream down their faces, and I will lead them home with great care. They will walk beside quiet streams and on smooth paths where they will not stumble. For I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is My firstborn son.

Hosea 5:3 I know what you are like, O Ephraim. You cannot hide yourself from Me, O Israel. You have left me as a prostitute leaves her husband; you are utterly defiled.

12. Benjamin.

This small tribe has played several important roles in Israel's history. Benjamin stood against the rest of Israel in a national civil war (*Judges 20:14–21:24*). Saul, the first anointed king of Israel, was from Benjamin. The tribe was also loyal to David's descendants when the northern tribes seceded (*1 Kings 12:16–24*). **Notable tribesmen: King Saul, Mordecai, Paul**

Judges 20:14–21:24 – Read the chapters if your interest lies in the details.

1 Kings 12:16–24 When all Israel realized that the king had refused to listen to them, they responded, "Down with the dynasty of David! We have no interest in the son of Jesse. Back to your homes, O Israel! Look out for your own house, O David!" So the people of Israel returned home. But Rehoboam continued to rule over the Israelites who lived in the towns of Judah. King Rehoboam sent Adoniram, who was in charge of forced labor, to restore order, but the people of Israel stoned him to death. When this news reached King Rehoboam, he quickly jumped into his chariot and fled to Jerusalem. And to this day the northern tribes of Israel have refused to be ruled by a descendant of David. When the people of Israel learned of Jeroboam's return from Egypt, they called an assembly and made him king over all Israel. So only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the family of David.

When Rehoboam arrived at Jerusalem, he mobilized the men of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin—180,000 select troops—to fight against the men of Israel and to restore the kingdom to himself. But God said to Shemaiah, the man of God, "Say to Rehoboam son of Solomon, king of Judah, and to all the people of Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest of the people, 'Thus says the LORD: "You shall not go up nor fight against your brethren the children of Israel. Let every man return to his house, for this thing is from Me."'" Therefore they obeyed the word of the LORD, and turned back, according to the word of the LORD.

13. Manasseh.

This tribe descended from Joseph's firstborn son, and uniquely settled on both sides of the Jordan River (*Joshua 17:5–6*). The eastern settlement is often referred to as the "half-tribe of Manasseh."

Joshua 17:5–6 Thus there fell ten portions to Manasseh, besides the land of Gilead and Bashan, which is beyond the Jordan, because the daughters of Manasseh received an inheritance among his sons. And the land of Gilead belonged to the rest of the sons of Manasseh.

Wait—13 tribes of Israel?

Kind of. Remember, Levi didn't receive tribal territory like the other tribes. Also, Joseph's sons were considered heads of their own tribes—both of which received an inheritance of land. In some lists,

Joseph is counted as one of the 12 (*Genesis 49; Deuteronomy 33*). In others, Levi isn't counted, and Ephraim and Manasseh are considered distinct tribes.

Here's the math:

12 tribes – 1 (Levi) – 1 (Joseph) + 1 (Ephraim) + 1 (Manasseh) = 12 tribes

You can see the tools I used to put this list together on the [original blog post](#). Heads up: at the time I wrote the original, I was an employee of Logos.

So, what happened to the tribes in divided kingdom?

After Solomon's reign, the kingdom of Israel divides. Some tribes remain loyal to David's bloodline (the Southern Kingdom), but most tribes rebel and form their own new nation (the Northern Kingdom).

The prophet Ahijah illustrates this by tearing his cloak into 12 pieces and giving 10 pieces to Jeroboam, who would rule the Northern Kingdom. He says that one piece (Judah) will remain with Solomon's son for the sake of God's covenant with David (*1 Ki 11:31–32*).

1 Ki 11:31–32 Then he said to Jeroboam, "Take ten of these pieces, for this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon, and I will give ten of the tribes to you! But I will leave him one tribe for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel.'

So a little more math:

12 (Israel) — 10 (Northern Kingdom) — 1 (Judah) = 1 (who's left?)

It turns out that Benjamin joined the tribe of Judah, and combined to form the Southern Kingdom. The Southern Kingdom is ruled by the house of David, who was from the tribe of Judah, so the kingdom is often just called "Judah." Since Simeon and Benjamin had been very much the junior partners in the Kingdom of Judah, it was Judah that gave its name to the identity—that of the Jews.

The tribe of Levi was also aligned with the South. Jeroboam set up a new priesthood to false gods in the North, and so because the temple of the Lord was in Judah, the Levites migrated there (*2 Chr. 11:13*).

2 Chr. 11:13-17 But all the priests and Levites living among the northern tribes of Israel sided with Rehoboam. The Levites even abandoned their pasturelands and property and moved to Judah and Jerusalem, because Jeroboam and his sons would not allow them to serve the LORD as priests. Jeroboam appointed his own priests to serve at the pagan shrines, where they worshiped the goat and calf idols he had made. From all the tribes of Israel, those who sincerely wanted to worship the LORD, the God of Israel, followed the Levites to Jerusalem, where they could offer sacrifices to the LORD, the God of their ancestors. This strengthened the kingdom of Judah, and for three years they supported Rehoboam son of Solomon, for during those years they faithfully followed in the footsteps of David and Solomon.

So the original divided kingdom looked like this:

Northern Kingdom Southern Kingdom

- Ephraim
 - Reuben
 - Simeon
 - Issachar
 - Zebulun
 - Dan
 - Asher
 - Gad
 - Naphtali
 - Manasseh
- Judah
 - Benjamin
 - Levi

However, several members of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon defected to Judah when they realized that God was with the righteous King Asa (*2 Chr. 15:9*).

2 Chr. 15:9 Then Asa called together all the people of Judah and Benjamin, along with the people of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon who had settled among them. For many from Israel had moved to Judah during Asa's reign when they saw that the LORD his God was with him.

So, that's the list of tribes, and an idea of what happened to them when the kingdom split. You can read about the divided kingdom in the summary of *1 & 2 Kings*.