



The 12 Tribes of Israel

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Jacob fathered 12 sons who later became the ancestors of the Tribes of Israel, and the ones for whom the tribes are named.

The Eastern Tribes

Judah

Judah was the fourth son of Jacob and father of the Eastern Tribe of Judah. His name originates from the Hebrew word for “gratitude.” Leah gave birth to Judah and said “*Now I will praise God*” (Genesis 30:35). It was Judah’s idea to sell his brother Joseph to a Midianite slave trader rather than leave him to die in the pit (Genesis 37:27). He later became the spokesman for his father Jacob and his brothers when they traveled to Egypt during the famine in Canaan. He married Shua, a Canaanite woman, and had three sons named Er, Onan, and Shelah. Only Shelah had descendants, as Er and Onan died childless in Canaan both cursed by God.

Judah also knew Tamar and gave birth to twin sons with her named Perez and Zerach. The tribe of Judah inhabited Jerusalem during the reign of Kings David and Solomon.

Issachar

Issachar was the ninth son of Jacob and father of the Eastern tribe of Issachar. One interpretation of his name is “man of reward”, which is the Hebrew meaning of “shcar”. Issachar was the product of the mandrake root (remedy for infertility) skirmish (explained in the Holy Book of Genesis 30:9-18) and

was involved in the plot to sell his brother Joseph into slavery. Issachar settled in Egypt after the famine in Canaan and had four sons named Tolah, Puvvah, Yov and Shimron. He receives a blessing from his father Jacob that he “*bends his back to the load, working like a slave*” (Genesis 49:14-15). The descendants of Issachar are “men of learning” according to Jewish tradition.



Jacob

Zebulun

Zebulun was the tenth son of Jacob, sixth of Leah and the father of the Eastern tribe of Zebulun). He was part of the plot to sell Joseph into slavery, and later one of the group that was sent to Egypt to buy corn. He later lived in Egypt with his three sons named Sered, Elon and Jahleel. Zebulun received the blessing from Jacob of: “*Zebulun shall settle the seashores; he will be a harbour for ships; his border shall reach Sidon*” (Genesis 49:13). Sidon was a seaport 50 miles northwest of the Sea of Galilee in what is now Lebanon.

Zebulun’s tribe settled around the forested hills of southern Galilee somewhere close to Nazareth, later the hometown of the Lord Jesus Christ.

They as prophesized by Jacob managed to extend their tribal borders to the Mediterranean Sea.

The Southern Tribes

Reuben

Rueben was the firstborn son of Jacob and Leah and



father of the Southern Tribe of Reuben. His name comes from the Hebrew word meaning “look, a son”. He appears in the story of the mandrakes as the one giving them to his mother (Genesis 30:14). Reuben had relations with Jacob’s concubine Bilhah, angering Jacob and which probably contributed to the curse of Reuben on Jacob’s deathbed (Genesis 49:4). He succeeded in convincing his brothers not to kill Joseph but to trap him inside of a pit instead (Genesis 37:22). The Tribe of Reuben settled west of the Jordan River and agreed to join the other tribes in the war against the Philistines.

Simeon

Simeon was the second son of Jacob and Leah and the father of the Southern Tribe of Simeon. The Hebrew meaning of his name means “God has heard that I was unloved” (Genesis 29:33). Simeon and his brother Levi destroyed the entire village of Shechem in retribution for the rape of their sister Dinah (Genesis 34). Simeon was a part of the plot to sell his brother Joseph into slavery. After the family was invited to Egypt during the famine in Canaan, he was appointed as the individual to stay behind as collateral for Benjamin so that his brothers would return from Canaan. The tribe of Simeon lived in the southernmost part of the Land of Israel.

Gad

Gad was the sixth son of Jacob and the father of the Southern tribe of Gad. His mother was Zilpah, Jacob’s concubine. Gad’s name comes from the Hebrew word “troop”. Leah named him Gad, saying “A troop is coming.” He was part of the plot to sell Joseph to Egypt and later sent to Egypt to buy corn during the famine in Canaan. Gad later moved to Egypt and lived there with his seven sons. Jacob blessed Gad on his deathbed, saying: “Raiders will raid Gad, but he will raid at their

heel” (Genesis 49:19).

The Western Tribes

Ephraim

Ephraim was the brother of Manasseh, and the son of Joseph and Asenath, Pharaoh’s daughter. He was the father of Western tribe of Ephraim. Jacob adopted the two sons as part of the Southern tribes of Simeon and Reuben. Ephraim received the blessing of the firstborn, although Manasseh was the eldest, because Jacob foresaw that Ephraim’s ancestors would be greater than his brother’s (Genesis 48:13-20).

Manasseh

Manasseh was the son of Joseph and Asnat (the Pharaoh’s daughter) and brother of Ephraim. He was the father of the Western tribe of Manasseh. Jacob adopted both Manasseh and his brother Ephraim as part of the Southern tribes of Simeon and Reuben. Although Manasseh was technically the eldest son, he did not receive the greater blessing. Ephraim did instead, as Jacob foresaw that his descendants were more worthy of the blessing than Manasseh’s (Genesis 48:13-20).

Benjamin

Benjamin was the son of Jacob and Rachel and father of the Western tribe of Benjamin. Originally named Ben-oni, or “son of my affliction,” his name was later changed to Benjamin, meaning “son of my right hand” (Genesis 48:14). Next to Joseph, he was Jacob’s favorite son. Benjamin the twelfth son of Jacob and born after Joseph was sold into slavery. After the family was invited to Egypt, Joseph sabotaged Benjamin’s sack by putting a silver cup in it and accused him of stealing. Joseph thought Benjamin would remain in Egypt but Judah offered to take his place, saying that



his father would be devastated if Benjamin did not return. Jacob later blesses Benjamin while on his deathbed, calling Benjamin “a vicious wolf, devouring the prey in the morning, and dividing the spoil at night” (Genesis 49:27).

The Northern Tribes

Dan

Son of Jacob and Bilhah (Leah’s maidservant) and father of the Northern tribe of Dan. Dan was one of the brothers involved in the plot to sell his brother Joseph into slavery. Later, Dan’s father Jacob sent him to Egypt to buy corn during the severe famine in Canaan. Dan receives a blessing from Jacob that “Dan shall judge his people” (Genesis 49:16). One explanation of the name Dan is that when Rachel was convinced that she was unable to have children, she cried out saying “God has judged me” (Genesis 30:5). The region of Dan in the Book of Judges is located in the far north of Canaan and referred to early in Genesis during Abraham’s chasing of Chedorlaomer (Genesis 14:14). The tribe of Dan also settled in the southern part of the country and since the tribal territory covered both northern and southern parts of the country the expression “from Dan to Beer-sheba” indicates the entire span of the Israelite land.

Asher

Asher was the eighth son of Jacob and the father of the Northern tribe of Asher. His mother was Zilpah, Leah’s maidservant. Leah named him Asher, saying “Happy am I” (Genesis 30:13). Asher played a role in the plot to sell his brother Joseph into slavery. Asher and his four sons and one daughter later settled in Egypt. Jacob blessed Asher on his deathbed, saying: “From Asher will come the richest food; he will provide the king’s delights” (Genesis 49:20).

Naphtali

Naphtali was the son of Jacob and Rachel’s maidservant Bilhah and the father of the Northern tribe of Naphtali. The tribe of Naphtali settled in northern Canaan and was described as brave soldiers in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:18). Naphtali’s blessing from his father called him “a running deer” (Genesis 49:21). Naphtali was given his name because Rachel said “With great wrestlings have I wrestled my sister” (Genesis 30:8).

Levi

Third son of Jacob and Leah and father of the tribe of Levi, from whom the Levites are descended. Since Leah had already given Jacob two sons, she said “Now my husband will be joined with me” (Genesis 30:34). The Levites were distinguished as servants to God because of their refusal to worship to Golden Calf (Exodus 32: 26-29). Levi’s own three sons, Gerhson, Kahath and Merari, became Temple servants. After Levi’s sister Dinah was raped by Shechem, he and his brother Simeon destroyed the entire town. Levi was later involved in the plot to sell his brother Joseph into slavery.

Joseph

Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob. He was born to Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel, in Paddan-Aram after she had been barren for seven years.✝



“I never go to Church,”boasted a wandering member. “Perhaps you have noticed that?”

“Yes, I have noticed that,” said the priest. - “Well, the reason I don’t go is that there are so many hypocrites there.” - “Oh, don’t let that keep you away,” replied the priest smiling blandly. “There is always room for one more, you know.”