

The Twelve Tribes of Israel

by Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D.

In the [Hebrew Bible](#) (the Christian Old Testament), the [Israelites](#) are described as descendants of the *twelve sons of Jacob* (whose name was changed to *Israel* in Gen 32:28), the *son of Isaac*, the *son of Abraham*.

The phrase "Twelve Tribes of Israel" (or simply "Twelve Tribes") sometimes occurs in the Bible (OT & NT) without any individual names being listed (Gen 49:28; Exod 24:4; 28:21; 39:14; Ezek 47:13; Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; Acts 26:7; and Rev 21:12; cf. also "Twelve Tribes of the Dispersion" in James 1:1). More frequently, however, the names are explicitly mentioned.

The Bible contains two dozen listings of the twelve sons of Jacob and/or tribes of Israel. Some of these are in very brief lists, while others are spread out over several paragraphs or chapters that discuss the distribution of the land or name certain representatives of each tribe, one after another. Surprisingly, however, each and every listing is slightly different from all the others, either in the order of the names mentioned or even in the specific names used (e.g., the two sons of Joseph are sometimes listed along with or instead of their father; and sometimes one or more names is omitted for various reasons). A few of the texts actually have more than 12 names! Upon closer analysis, one can discover several principles for the ordering and various reasons for the omission or substitution of some of the names, as explained in the notes below the following tables. In some cases, however, the reasons are not so obvious, leaving us to wonder about the many variations.

Jacob's twelve sons are first mentioned in the order of their births (to four different mothers) in the Book of Genesis (29:31–30:24 & 35:16-20). For easier analysis, they are distinguished by colored highlighting in the table below:

- **Leah** (elder wife): 1) Reuben, 2) Simeon, 3) Levi, 4) Judah; later also 9) Issachar and 10) Zebulun - (shades of **red**)
- **Bilhah** (Rachel's slave): 5) Dan, 6) Naphtali - (light **blue**)
- **Zilpah** (Leah's slave): 7) Gad, 8) Asher - (light **green**)
- **Rachel** (younger wife): 11) Joseph, 12) Benjamin - (shades of **yellow**)
[Manasseh & Ephraim, sons of Joseph, are often listed separately; in some later texts, the half-tribe of Manasseh is further divided into its eastern and western halves.]

Gen 29-30, 35	Gen 35:22-26	Gen 46:8-27	Gen 49:1-27	Exod 1:1-5	Num 1:5-15	Num 1:20-54	Num 2:3-29	Num 7:1-88	Num 10:11-28	Num 13:4-15	Num 26:5-50	Num 34:19-28
Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	E: Judah	[Levi]	Judah	Reuben	Reuben	[Reuben]
Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	E: Issachar	Judah	Issachar	Simeon	Simeon	[Gad]
Levi	Levi	Levi	Levi	Levi	Judah	Gad	E: Zebulun	Issachar	Zebulun	Judah	Gad	[Manasseh-E]
Judah	Judah	Judah	Judah	Judah	Issachar	Judah	S: Reuben	Zebulun	[Levi-G+M]	Issachar	Judah	Judah
Dan	Issachar	Issachar	Zebulun	Issachar	Zebulun	Issachar	S: Simeon	Reuben	Reuben	Zebulun	Issachar	Simeon
Naphtali	Zebulun	Zebulun	Issachar	Zebulun	Ephraim	Zebulun	S: Gad	Simeon	Simeon	Manasseh/Js	Zebulun	Benjamin
Gad	Joseph	Gad	Dan	Benjamin	Manasseh/Js	Js/Ephraim	[Mid: Levi]	Gad	Gad	Ephraim	Js/Manasseh	Dan
Asher	Benjamin	Asher	Gad	Dan	Benjamin	Manasseh	W: Ephraim	Ephraim	[Levi-K]	Benjamin	Ephraim/Js	Manasseh-W
Issachar	Dan	Joseph	Asher	Naphtali	Dan	Benjamin	W: Manasseh	Manasseh	Ephraim	Dan	Benjamin	Ephraim
Zebulun	Naphtali	Benjamin	Naphtali	Gad	Asher	Dan	W: Benjamin	Benjamin	Manasseh	Asher	Dan	Zebulun
Joseph	Gad	Dan	Joseph	Asher	Gad	Asher	N: Dan	Dan	Benjamin	Naphtali	Asher	Issachar
[Benjamin]	Asher	Naphtali	Benjamin	Joseph	Naphtali	Naphtali	N: Asher	Asher	Dan	Gad	Naphtali	Asher
.	.	.	.	.	omit: Levi	[Levi]	N: Naphtali	Naphtali	Asher	omit: Levi	omit: Levi	Naphtali
.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Naphtali	.	.	omit: Levi

Deut 27:12-13	Deut 33:1-29	Josh 13–19	Josh 21:4-8	Judg 5:12-22	1 Chr 2:1-2	1 Chr 2–7	1 Chr 12:24-38	1 Chr 27:16-22	Ezek 48:1-29	Ezek 48:30-34	Rev 7:5-8
BI-Simeon	Reuben	Reuben	Judah	Ephraim	Reuben	Judah	Judah	Reuben	Dan	N: Reuben	Judah
BI-Levi	Judah	Gad	Simeon	Benjamin	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Asher	N: Judah	Reuben
BI-Judah	Levi	Manasseh-E	Benjamin	Machir/Manasseh	Levi	Reuben	Levi	Levi	Naphtali	N: Levi	Gad
BI-Issachar	Benjamin	Judah	Ephraim	Zebulun	Judah	Gad	Benjamin	Aaron !	Manasseh	E: Joseph	Asher
BI-Joseph	Joseph	Ephraim	Dan	Issachar	Issachar	Manasseh-E	Ephraim	Judah	Ephraim	E: Benjamin	Naphtali
BI-Benjamin	Zebulun	Manasseh-W	Manasseh-E	Reuben (neg.)	Zebulun	Levi	Manasseh-W	Issachar	Reuben	E: Dan	Manasseh
Cr-Reuben	Issachar	Benjamin	Issachar	Gad/Gilead (neg.)	Dan	Issachar	Issachar	Zebulun	Judah	S: Simeon	Simeon
Cr-Gad	Gad	Simeon	Asher	Dan (neg.)	Joseph	Benjamin	Zebulun	Naphtali	[Levi]	S: Issachar	Levi
Cr-Asher	Dan	Zebulun	Naphtali	Asher (neg.)	Benjamin	Dan	Naphtali	Ephraim	Benjamin	S: Zebulun	Issachar
Cr-Zebulun	Naphtali	Issachar	Manasseh-W	Naphtali	Naphtali	Naphtali	Dan	Manasseh-WE	Simeon	W: Gad	Zebulun
Cr-Dan	Asher	Asher	Reuben	.	Gad	Manasseh-W	Asher	Benjamin	Issachar	W: Asher	Joseph
Cr-Naphtali	.	Naphtali	Gad	omit: Judah	Asher	Ephraim	Reuben	Dan	Zebulun	W: Naphtali	Benjamin
.	.	Dan	Zebulun	omit: Simeon	.	Asher	Gad	omit: Gad	Gad	.	.
.	omit: Simeon	omit: Levi	omit: Levi	omit: Levi	.	omit: Zebulun	Manasseh-E	omit: Asher	.	.	omit: Dan

Notes on Each Passage:

- **Genesis 29:31–30:24 and 35:16-20** - the births of the first eleven sons are mentioned in chronological order, along with the meanings of their names; the last son, Benjamin, is born significantly later.
- **Gen 35:22-26** - briefly lists the names of the 12 sons of Jacob, grouped by their respective mothers: Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah.
- **Gen 46:8-27** - lists the 70 members of Jacob's extended family who went to live in Egypt: Jacob's sons (grouped by their mothers: Leah, Zilpah, Rachel, Bilhah), along with their sons and even a few grandsons; aside from the mothers, only three other women are named (Leah's daughter Dinah, Asher's daughter Serah, and Joseph's Egyptian wife Asenath); the total is 70, "not counting the wives of Jacob's sons" (46:26)
- **Gen 49:1-27** - just before dying, Jacob blesses his twelve sons with various words, in a slightly different order than the previous lists.

- **Exodus 1:1-5** - a brief list of "the sons of Israel" who migrated to Egypt; the same order as Gen 35:22-26, except that Joseph is mentioned last, because he "was already in Egypt."
- **Numbers 1:5-15** - a brief list of leading men, one from each tribe, who are to assist Moses and Aaron in taking a census of all the Israelites; for the first time, Ephraim and Manasseh are listed separately for the descendants of Joseph; the tribe of Levi is omitted, as explained at the end of the chapter.
- **Num 1:20-46 & 47-54** - the completed census, reporting the number of fighting-age men in each tribe; curiously, Gad is now listed third, but otherwise the order is the same as the previous list; vv. 47-54 explain that the Levites were not to be included in the census, since they have a special responsibility for the Tabernacle.
- **Num 2:3-29** - the arrangement of the encampment in the desert is prescribed: three on each side (E, S, W, N), with the Levites and the meeting tent in the middle; the four camps are named after Judah, Reuben, Ephraim, and Dan, with two other tribes associated with each one, respectively.
- **Num 7:1-88** - after the Tabernacle is set up, the leaders of the twelve tribes present offerings, one each on twelve consecutive days, in the same order as listed in 2:3-29, except that the introduction mentions the Levites as the ones receiving the offerings brought by all the other tribes.
- **Num 10:11-28** - the Israelites break camp in a very orderly fashion, identical to Num 2:3-29 except for the position of the Levites: the camp of Judah (with their 2 associated tribes) goes first, then the Gershon and Merari clans of Levites carry the Tabernacle, then the camp of Reuben; at midpoint, the Kohath clan of Levites carries the sacred objects for the Tabernacle, followed by the camps of Ephraim and Dan.
- **Num 13:4-15** - twelve men, one from each tribe except Levi, are chosen to reconnoiter the land of Canaan; the order is similar to Num 1:5-15, with two minor reversals.
- **Num 26:5-50** - a second census of fighting-age men is reported in the same order as the first census (Num 1:20-46), except for the reversal of the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim, both of which are still explicitly identified as the descendants of Joseph.
- **Num 34:19-28** - after the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh are settled on the East side of the Jordan river, one leader from each of the remaining 9-1/2 tribes is to work with Eleazar (priest) and Joshua (new leader after Moses) to apportion among themselves the land of Canaan (West of the Jordan).
- **Deuteronomy 27:12-13** - Moses says that six tribes "shall stand on Mount Gerizim to pronounce blessings over the people," while the other six tribes "shall stand on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses"; the list includes both Levi and Joseph, but the order is different than any previous text.
- **Deut 33:1-29** - just before his death, Moses blesses eleven of the tribes of Israel; the order is totally unfamiliar, and curiously Simeon is omitted.
- **Joshua 13-19** - the division of the Promised Land among the twelve tribes is described in detail, beginning briefly with the 2-1/2 tribes East of the Jordan (Reuben, Gad, and 1/2 of Manasseh), followed by greater detail about the 9-1/2 tribes West of the Jordan.
- **Josh 21:4-8** - each of the tribes of Israel gives several cities to the Levites, in four divisions: the Kohathite descendants of Aaron (from Judah, Simeon & Benjamin); the other Kohathite clans (from Ephraim, Dan & half-Manasseh); the Gershonite clans (from Issachar, Asher, Naphtali & half-Manasseh); the Merarite clans (from Reuben, Gad & Zebulun).
- **Judges 5:12-22** - six tribes formed the Israelite league fighting against Sisera: Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (probably representing Manasseh), Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali (led by Barak); four tribes are chided for not participating: Reuben, Gilead (Gad), Dan, and Asher; the tribes of Judah and Simeon (more distant), and Levi (priestly) are not mentioned.
- **1 Chronicles 2:1-2** - a brief list of the 12 sons of Israel; similar to the order of Gen 35:22-26, except that Dan is placed before Joseph (why?).
- **1 Chr 2-7** - very long genealogies covering the time span from the patriarchs down to the Babylonian exile; the tribe of Judah is covered first and in greatest detail (ch. 2-3; because of King David and the Chronicler's own Judean context); ch. 4 covers the southern tribes: Judah (again!) & Simeon; ch. 5 the 2-1/2 eastern (Transjordan) tribes; 5:27-6:66 the various Levite clans; 7:1-40 most of the other northern tribes, but only briefly and omitting Zebulun (why?).
- **1 Chr 12:24-38** - thousands of soldiers from each tribe assemble at Hebron to swear allegiance to David as the new King; the tribe of Judah is first and the 2-1/2 Transjordan tribes are last, but the rest is in an order different from anything prior (why?)

- **1 Chr 27:16-22** - a brief list of 13 (!) leaders of the tribes of Israel at the time of King David; Levi and Aaron are curiously listed separately, as are the eastern and western halves of Manasseh, but Gad and Asher are omitted (why?)
- **Ezekiel 48:1-29** - an idealized division of the land among the tribes of a New Israel, with seven tribes in the north, the tribe of Levi administering a sanctuary and sacred city in the middle, and the remaining five tribes in the south.
- **Ezek 48:30-34** - the new sacred city has twelve gates named after the twelve sons of Jacob, three on each side (N, E, S, W)
- **Revelation 7:5-8** - the only list in the New Testament of the twelve tribes; John hears that 144,000 Israelites have been "sealed" for salvation, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes; this list curiously lists both Manasseh and Joseph (but not Ephraim), and omits Dan (why?).

Meanings of the Names:

Name	Meaning in Hebrew	Explanation (NRSV translation)	Ref.
Reuben	"see, a son"	Leah: "Because the Lord has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me."	Gen 29:32
Simeon	shama = "heard"	Leah: "Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also."	Gen 29:33
Levi	lawah = "joined"	Leah: "Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons."	Gen 29:34
Judah	hodah = "praise"	Leah: "This time I will praise the Lord."	Gen 29:35
Dan	"he judged"	Rachel: "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son."	Gen 30:6
Naphtali	niphtal = "wrestled"	Rachel: "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed."	Gen 30:8
Gad	"fortune"	Leah: "Good fortune."	Gen 30:11
Asher	"happy"	Leah: "Happy am I! For the women will call me happy."	Gen 30:13
Issachar	sakar = "hire; reward"	Leah: "God has given me hire because I gave my maid to my husband."	Gen 30:18
Zebulun	zabal = "honor"	Leah: "God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons."	Gen 30:20
Joseph	"he adds"	Rachel: "May the Lord add to me another son."	Gen 30:24
Benjamin	"son of the right hand"	Rachel calls the baby "Ben-oni" ("son of my sorrow"); but Jacob calls him "Ben-jamin."	Gen 35:18

	or "son of the South"		
Manasseh	"making to forget"	Joseph: "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house."	Gen 41:51
Ephraim	"to be fruitful"	Joseph: "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."	Gen 41:52