

Ancient Jewish History: The Twelve Tribes of Israel

The Tribes of Israel are the traditional divisions of the ancient Jewish people. Biblical tradition holds that the twelve tribes of Israel are descended from the sons and grandsons of the Jewish forefather [Jacob](#) and are called "Israel" from Jacob's name given to him by God.

The twelve tribes are as follows: [Reuben](#), [Simeon](#), [Judah](#), [Issachar](#), [Zebulun](#), [Benjamin](#), [Dan](#), [Naphtali](#), [Gad](#), [Asher](#), [Ephraim](#) and [Manasseh](#).

The story of the twelve tribes begins when [Jacob](#) and his family went down to [Egypt](#) as "70 souls" In Egypt "the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly," and there they became the "Israelite people." Following the death of [Joseph](#) - one of Jacob's sons who had become viceroy of Egypt - [Pharaoh](#) oppressed the Israelites by placing upon them burdensome labor.

God "remembered [His covenant](#) with [Abraham](#), with [Isaac](#), and with [Jacob](#)," made Himself known to [Moses](#) and rescued the Israelites from Egypt. By this time the nation numbered "600,000 men on foot" which is usually understood to be military-aged men excluding women and children.

At Mount Sinai, the Israelite nation is given its laws and regulations - the [Torah](#) - and affirms their covenant with God. After wandering for 40 years in the desert under the leadership of [Moses](#), the twelve tribes enter the land of Canaan with [Joshua](#) in command.

After conquering the land, each tribe was allotted an individual territory to settle. During this period of settlement, and the subsequent period of the [Judges](#), there was no predetermined pattern of leadership among the tribes though various crises forced the tribes into cooperative action against enemies.

[Shiloh](#) served as a sacral center for all the tribes, housing the [Ark of the Covenant](#) under the priestly family of Eli. Under the impact of military pressures, the Israelites felt compelled to turn to [Samuel](#) with the request that he establish a monarchy, and Saul was crowned to rule over all the tribes of Israel.

Upon his death, Saul's son was accepted by all the tribes as the new king, save [Judah](#) and [Simeon](#) who preferred [David](#). David's struggle with the house of Saul ended in victory for him and all the elders turned to David for royal leadership. He ruled from [Hebron](#) and later [Jerusalem](#) over all the tribes of Israel and following his death was succeeded by his son, [Solomon](#). After the death of [Solomon](#), the tribes once again split along territorial and political lines, with [Judah](#) and [Benjamin](#) in the south loyal to the Davidic house and the rest of the tribes in the north ruled by a succession of dynasties.

Modern scholarship does not generally accept the biblical notion that the twelve tribes are simply divisions of a larger unit which developed naturally from patriarchal roots. This simplistic scheme, it is felt, actually stems from later genealogical speculations which attempted to explain the history of the tribes in terms of familial relationships. The alliance of the twelve tribes is believed to have grown from the organization of independent tribes, or groups of tribes, forced together for historical reasons. Scholars differ as to when this union of twelve took place and when the tribes of Israel became one nation.

One school of thought holds that the confederation took place inside the country toward the end of the period of the Judges and the beginnings of the Monarchy. All of the traditions which see the twelve tribes as one nation as early as the [enslavement in Egypt](#) or the wanderings in the desert are regarded as having no basis in fact. This

school recognizes in the names of some of the tribes the names of ancient sites in Canaan, such as the mountains of [Naphtali](#), [Ephraim](#), and [Judah](#), the desert of [Judah](#), and [Gilead](#). With the passage of time, those who dwelt in these areas assumed the names of the localities.

Others feel that the tribes descended from the matriarch [Leah](#) - namely [Reuben](#), [Simeon](#), [Levi](#), [Judah](#), [Zebulun](#) and [Issachar](#) - existed at an earlier stage as a confederation of six tribes whose boundaries in Canaan were contiguous. Only at a later stage did other tribes penetrate the area, eventually expanding the confederation to twelve.

A second school grants that the union of twelve existed during the period of wanderings in the desert, but that Canaan was not conquered by an alliance of these at any one time. Rather, there were individual incursions into the land at widely separated periods. However, the covenant among the twelve tribes and their awareness of national unity flowing from ethnic kinship and common history, faith, and sacral practices had their source in the period prior to the conquest of the land.

The number twelve is neither fictitious nor the result of an actual genealogical development in patriarchal history. It is an institutionalized and conventionalized figure which is found among other tribes as well, such



as the sons of [Ishmael](#), of Nahor, of [Joktan](#), and [Esau](#). Similar organizational patterns built about groups of twelve, or even six, tribes, are known from Asia Minor, [Greece](#) and [Italy](#). In [Greece](#), such groupings were called amphictyony, meaning "to dwell about" a central sanctuary. Each tribe was assigned a prearranged turn in the provision and maintenance of the shrine. The amphictyonic members would make pilgrimages to the common religious center on festive occasions. The exact measure of correspondence between the amphictyony of the Hellenic world and the duodecimal structure of the tribes of Israel may be the subject of scholarly controversy, but there can be little doubt that this pattern of twelve attributed to the Hebrew tribes is very real and historically rooted. Thus, if one tribe were to withdraw from the union or to be absorbed into another, the number twelve would be preserved, either by splitting one of the remaining tribes into two or by accepting a new tribe into the union. For example, when the tribe of [Levi](#) is considered among the twelve tribes, the Joseph tribes are counted as one. However, when [Levi](#) is not mentioned, the Joseph tribes are counted separately as

[Manasseh](#) and [Ephraim](#). For the same duodecimal considerations, [Simeon](#) is counted as a tribe even after having been absorbed into [Judah](#), and [Manasseh](#) even after having split in tw, is considered one.

The confederation of the twelve tribes was primarily religious, based upon belief in the one "God of Israel" with whom the tribes had made a covenant and whom they worshiped at a common sacral center as the "people of the Lord." The Tent of Meeting and the [Ark of the Covenant](#) were the most sacred objects of the tribal union and biblical tradition shows that many places served as religious centers in various periods. During the desert wanderings, "the mountain of God," that is, Sinai or Horeb, served as such a place, as did the great oasis at [Kadesh-Barnea](#) where the tribes remained for some time and from where the tribes attempted a conquest of the land. Many sites in Canaan are mentioned as having sacred associations or as being centers of pilgrimage. Some of these, such as [Penuel](#), where [Jacob](#) received the name Israel, [Beth-El](#), where the [Ark](#) rested, and [Beer-Sheba](#), go back to patriarchal times. [Jacob](#) built an altar at [Shechem](#) and the tribes gathered there "before the Lord" and made a covenant with Him in Joshua's time. [Shiloh](#) enjoyed special importance as a central site for the tribes. There they gathered under [Joshua](#) to divide up the land by lot, and it was there that they placed the Tent of Meeting and the [Ark of the Covenant](#). Eli's family, which traced its descent from [Aaron](#), the high priest, served at Shiloh, and it was to [Shiloh](#) that the Israelites turned for festivals and sacrifices.

The multiplicity of cultic places raises the question of whether all twelve tribes were actually centered about one amphictyonic site. It may be that as a tribe's connections with the amphictyony were weakened for various reasons, the tribe began to worship at one or another of the sites. Possibly, different sites served the several subgroups among the tribes. [Beer-Sheba](#) and [Hebron](#), for example, served the southern groups of tribes; [Shechem](#), [Shiloh](#), and [Gilgal](#) were revered by the tribes in the center of the country; and the shrine at Dan served the northern tribes. The likelihood of a multiplicity of shrines is strengthened by the fact that clusters of Canaanite settlements separated the southern and central tribes and divided the central tribes from those in [Galilee](#). It is possible that various shrines served different tribes simultaneously, while the sanctuary which held the Ark of the Lord was revered as central to all twelve.

The changes which occurred in the structure of the twelve tribes and in their relative strengths, find expression in the biblical genealogies. The tribes are descended from four matriarchs, eight of them from the wives [Leah](#) and [Rachel](#), and four from the handmaids [Bilhah](#) and [Zilpah](#). It is a widely held view that attribution to the two wives is indicative of an early stage of tribal organization, the "tribes of Leah" and the "tribes of Rachel." The attribution of four tribes to handmaids may indicate either a lowered status or late entry into the confederation. In the list of the twelve tribes, [Reuben](#) is prominent as the firstborn, followed by [Simeon](#), [Levi](#), and [Judah](#), the sons of [Leah](#), who occupy primary positions.

[Reuben](#) stood at the head of a tribal league and had a position of central importance among his confederates prior to the conquest of the land. On the other hand, the same tribe is inactive during the period of the Judges - it did not provide any of the judges and during [Deborah's](#) war against [Sisera](#), [Reuben](#) "sat among the sheepfolds" and did not render any aid. Possibly, because this tribe dwelt on the fringes of the land, its links with the others were weakened and its continued existence as one of the tribes of Israel was in jeopardy.

[Simeon](#) was absorbed by [Judah](#). [Levi](#) spread throughout Israel as a result of its sacral duties. [Judah](#) was cut off from the rest of the tribes by a Canaanite land strip that separated the mountains of Judah and Ephraim. Reuben's place as head of the twelve tribes was taken by the house of Joseph which played a decisive and historic role during the periods of the settlement and the Judges. [Joshua](#) came from the tribe of [Ephraim](#). Shechem and Shiloh were within the borders of the house of Joseph. Samuel came from the hill country of Ephraim. Ephraim led the tribes in the war against Benjamin over the incident of the concubine in Gibeah. At the beginning of the Monarchy, the leadership passed to Judah. The passage in I Chronicles 5:1-2 illustrates well how the dominant position among the tribes passed from Reuben to Ephraim and from Ephraim to Judah.

Each of the twelve tribes enjoyed a good deal of autonomy, ordering its own affairs after the patriarchal-tribal pattern. No doubt there were administrative institutions common to all the tribes, situated beside the central shrines, though information about them is exceedingly scanty. During the desert wanderings, leadership of the people was vested in the princes of each of the tribes and the elders who assisted [Moses](#). They met and

legislated for the entire people. There are references to meetings of tribal leaders and elders during the periods of the settlement and the Judges. "The princes of the congregation, the heads of the thousands of Israel" along with Phinehas the priest, conducted negotiations with the Transjordanian tribes, in the name of the entire nation. Joshua summoned "the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel" to make a covenant in Shechem. The elders of Israel, speaking for the entire nation, requested Samuel to appoint a king. The incidents of the concubine in Gibeah and Saul's battle with Nahash the Ammonite are classic examples of joint action taken by the league of twelve tribes acting "as one man, from Dan even to Beer-Sheba, with the land of Gilead". In the one case, unified action was taken by the tribes against one of their members, Benjamin, for a breach of the terms of the covenant. The war against Nahash the Ammonite proves that the tribes were required to come to the aid of any one of the league that found itself in difficulty. Because of the sacral nature of the league, the wars of the tribes were considered "wars of the Lord". Nevertheless, the narratives in the Book of Judges regarding the battles which Israel waged against its enemies make it clear that the league must have been rather weak in those days.

The consciousness of national and religious unity had not yet led to a solid politico-military confederation. The Song of Deborah gives clear expression to the lack of solidarity among the tribes, for some of them did not come to the aid of the Galilean tribes. It is impossible to designate even one war against external enemies during the period of the Judges in which all the tribes acted in concert. Indeed, there are indications of intertribal quarrels and disputes. In this connection, there are scholars who hold that the judge-deliverers were not pantribal national leaders, but headed only individual tribes, or groups of them. It was only toward the end of the period of the Judges when the Philistine pressure on the Israelite tribes increased in the west and that of the Transjordanian peoples in the east, that the religionational tribal confederation assumed political and military dimensions. The Israelite tribes then consolidated as a crystallized national-territorial entity within the framework of a monarchical regime. David, Solomon, and afterward the kings of Israel and Judah tended to weaken tribal consciousness in favor of the territorial and monarchical organization. It is apparent, however, from Ezekiel's eschatological vision that the awareness of Israel as a people composed of twelve tribes had not, even then, become effaced.



- The Tribes**
- Reuben
 - Simeon
 - Levi
 - Judah
 - Dan
 - Naphtali
 - Gad
 - Asher
 - Issachar
 - Zebulun
 - Joseph
 - Manasseh
 - Ephraim
 - Benjamin