

Twelve Sons of Jacob / Twelve Tribes of Israel

In the Hebrew Bible (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.]

Meanings of the Names:

NAME	Meaning in Hebrew	Ref.	Explanation (NRSV translation)
Reuben	"see, a son"	Gen 29:32	Leah: "Because the Lord has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me."
Simeon	shama = "heard"	Gen 29:33	Leah: "Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also."
Levi	lawah = "joined"	Gen 29:34	Leah: "Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons."
Judah	hodah = "praise"	Gen 29:35	Leah: "This time I will praise the Lord."
Dan	"he judged"	Gen 30:6	Rachel: "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son "
Naphtali	niphtal = "wrestled"	Gen 30:8	Rachel: "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed."
Gad	"fortune"	Gen 30:11	Leah: "Good fortune."
Asher	"happy"	Gen 30:13	Leah: "Happy am I! For the women will call me happy."
Issachar	sakar = "hire; reward"	Gen 30:18	Leah: "God has given me hire because I gave my maid to my husband."
Zebulun	zabal = "honor"	Gen 30:20	Leah: "God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons."
Joseph	"he adds"	Gen 30:24	Rachel: "May the Lord add to me another son."
Benjamin	"son of the right hand" or "son of the South"	Gen 35:18	Rachel calls the baby "Ben-oni" ("son of my sorrow"); but Jacob calls him "Ben-jamin"
Manasseh	"making to forget"	Gen 41:51	Joseph: "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house."
Ephraim	"to be fruitful"	Gen 41:52	Joseph: "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."

Notes:

- **Gen 29:31–30:24 and 35:16-20** – births of the first eleven sons are mentioned in chronological order, along with meanings of their names; last son, Benjamin, is born much 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 70 members of Jacob's family who went to Egypt: his sons (grouped by the mothers: Leah, Zilpah, Rachel, Bilhah), along with their sons and a few grandsons; aside from the mothers, only three other women are named (Leah's daughter Dinah, Asher's daughter Serah, Joseph's Egyptian wife Asenath); total 70 is "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.
- For notes on each of the 25 passages (24 in OT & 1 in NT), please see <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/History-12Tribes.htm>

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Gen 29–30, 35	Gen 35:22c-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	Ephraim	Issachar	Simeon
Naphtali	Zebulun	Zebulun	Issachar	Zebulun	Jos./Ephraim	Zebulun	S: Gad	Simeon	Simeon	Benjamin	Zebulun	Benjamin
Gad	Joseph	Gad	Dan	Benjamin	Manasseh	Jos./Ephraim	[Mid: Levi]	Gad	Gad	Zebulun	Jos./Manasseh	Dan
Asher	Benjamin	Asher	Gad	Dan	Benjamin	Manasseh	W: Ephraim	Ephraim	[Levi-K]	Jos/Manasseh	Ephraim/Jos.	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
.	.	.	.	.	.	[ Levi]	N: Naphtali	Naphtali	Asher	.	.	Naphtali
.	.	.	.	.	omit: Levi	.	.	.	Naphtali	omit: Levi	omit: Levi	omit: Levi

Deut 27:12-13	Deut 33:1-29	Josh 13–19	Josh 21:4-8	Judg 5:12-18	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
Bl-Simeon	Reuben	Reuben	Judah	Ephraim	Reuben	Judah	Judah	Reuben	Dan	N: Reuben	Judah
Bl-Levi	Judah	Gad	Simeon	Benjamin	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	Asher	N: Judah	Reuben
Bl-Judah	Levi	Manasseh-E	Benjamin	Machir/Manasseh	Levi	Reuben	Levi	Levi	Naphtali	N: Levi	Gad
Bl-Issachar	Benjamin	Judah	Ephraim	Zebulun	Judah	Gad	Benjamin	Aaron !	Manasseh	E: Joseph	Asher
Bl-Joseph	Joseph	Ephraim	Dan	Issachar	Issachar	Manasseh-E	Ephraim	Judah	Ephraim	E: Benjamin	Naphtali
Bl-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