More than you ever wanted to know about the

12 tribes of Israel

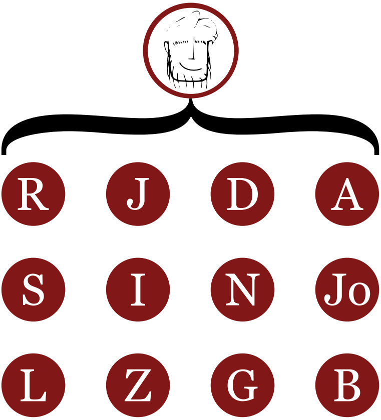
Prophecies, political intrigue, land disputes, civil wars—the 12 tribes of Israel are a mystery to most Christians today. But the better we understand them, the better we can understand the events of the Bible. So let's take a look at these 12 families.

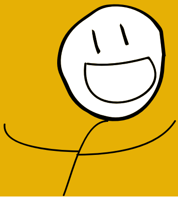
Where the tribes come from

The 12 tribes are the descendants of 12 brothers in the book of Genesis: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin.

Their father is a man named Jacob. God later changes Jacob's name to Israel (kind of like how God changes Abram's name to Abraham).

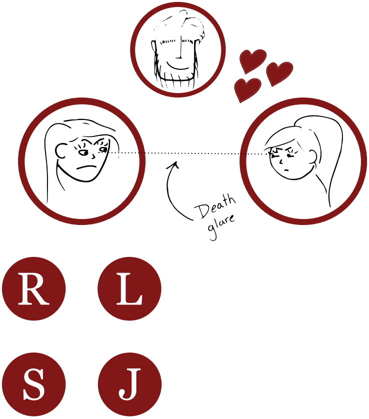
The 12 tribes of Israel come from the 12 sons of Israel.





Wow! What a big, happy family. They're like the Waltons, or that family in *Cheaper by the Dozen*! Awww …

Well, not exactly …



Jacob has two wives

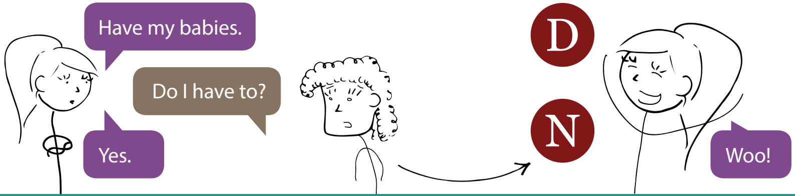
They're named Leah and Rachel. Jacob loves Rachel, but not Leah. (He was tricked into marrying her.)

However, Rachel can't conceive, while Leah gives Jacob 4 sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah (Gn 29:31–35).

And if that's not dramatic enough, these two ladies are sisters.

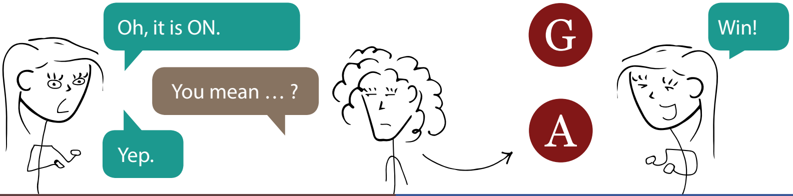
Not to be outdone by Leah, Rachel has Jacob marry her maid, Bilhah.

Bilhah has two sons: Dan and Naphtali. But Rachel claims them as her own (30:1–8).


Have my babies.
Do I have to?
Yes.
D
N
Woo!

Leah's not giving up any ground, so she has Jacob marry *her* maid, Zilpah.

Zilpah has two sons: Gad and Asher. Of course, Leah claims them (30:9–13).


Oh, it is ON.
You mean … ?
Yep.
G
A
Win!

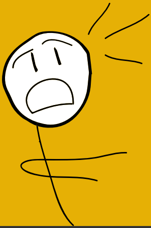
Then Leah has two more sons and a daughter: Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah (30:17–21).

I Z

Finally, Rachel has sons of her own: Joseph and Benjamin. Sadly, she dies in childbirth (30:23–24; 35:16–18).

Jo B

So, that's where the 12 tribes of Israel come from



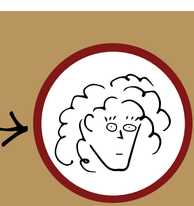
Yeah. And it gets screwier.

The blessing of the firstborn

R

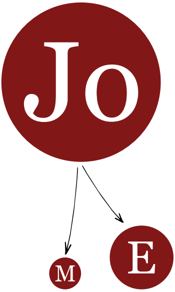
In those times, the firstborn son received a double portion of the father's inheritance. This was called the birthright. Reuben was born first, so that *would* put him in line for that blessing, but …

S L J D N G A I Z Jo B



… the dude sleeps with Zilpah (Gn 35:22). His dad's concubine. His half-brothers' mom. You can imagine how Jacob reacted.

NO BLESSING FOR YOU.



So Jacob gives the blessing to Joseph, the firstborn of Jacob's second wife (1 Ch 5:1). He's Jacob's favorite son, anyway (Gn 37:3).

R S L J D N G A I Z B

And since it's a double portion, Jacob blesses both of Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Gn 48). Two tribes come from Joseph. But there's a twist: Jacob prophesies that Ephraim will become the greater tribe, even though Manasseh is the firstborn.

Jacob's prophecy

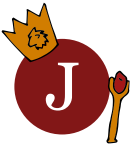
Before he dies, Jacob prophesies over each of his sons (Gn 49).

Reuben

Like water boiling over: because of Reuben's recklessness, he will not become the preeminent tribe.

Simeon & Levi

These two straight-up massacre a city to take revenge for their sister (Gn 34:25–31). Jacob curses their anger and says they will be scattered in the new nation.

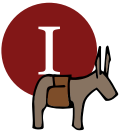


Judah

Like a lion: he will defeat his enemies, rule the people, and have plenty of wine.

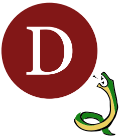
Zebulun

He'll live by the sea and run successful ports.



Issachar

Like a strong donkey: comfortable submitting to forced labor.

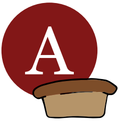


Dan

Like a serpent: he'll judge the other tribes, but also be an obstacle to passersby.

Gad

Raiders will raid him, and he'll raid them right back.



Asher

He'll enjoy and produce rich food.

Naphtali

Like a doe: he makes beautiful words.

Joseph

Like a fruitful bough: he gets all the uber blessings.

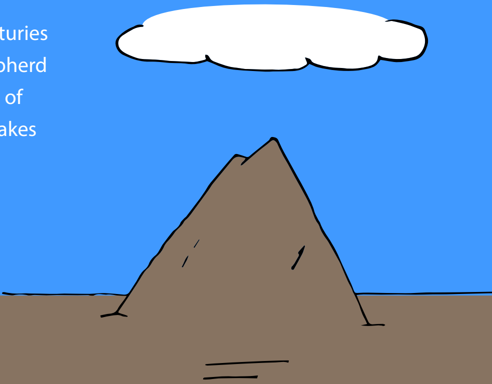
Benjamin

Like a wolf: he eats in the morning and divides spoil at sunset.

Note: the birthright goes to Joseph, but a mysterious scepter goes to Judah. Remember this for later.

Fastforward about 400 years

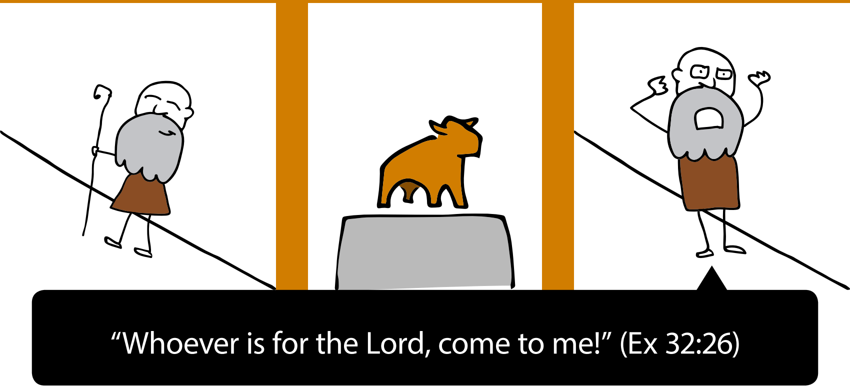
The Israelites spend the next few centuries as slaves in Egypt. Then Moses, a shepherd from the tribe of Levi, leads them out of slavery to Mount Sinai, where God makes Israel his special nation.



Moses goes up the mountain to receive God’s laws for the people.

But the people below make a golden calf and worship that instead.

As you can imagine, neither God nor Moses is OK with this.


“Whoever is for the Lord, come to me!” (Ex 32:26)

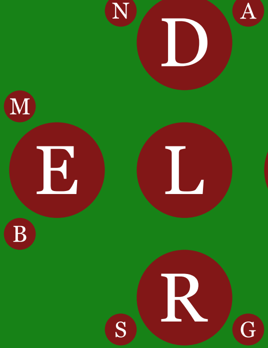
Of all the tribes, only the Levites rally to Moses. The Levites then move through the nation, killing about 3,000 Israelites who were worshiping the idol.

Because of their zeal for the Lord, Levi is set apart from the rest of the nation. The Levites are given the responsibility for the tabernacle, sacrifices, and all things worship in the nation. (Numbers 18:19–20).

Leader tribes and camps

This is also when the nation starts camping in groups of three tribes, with one tribe leading each group. Levi is situated at the center, with the tabernacle (Nu 2).

Dan leads Asher and Naphtali in the northern camp.



Ephraim leads Manasseh and Benjamin in the western camp.

Judah leads Zebulun and Issachar in the eastern camp.

Reuben leads Simeon and Gad in the southern camp.

NOTE: By this time in Israel’s history, Ephraim and Manasseh are treated as distinct tribes.

Moses’ blessing

Right before Moses dies, he blesses the 12 tribes (Dt 33).

Reuben

Life and strength in numbers.

Judah

He fought on Israel’s behalf, and God should hear and help him.

Levi

He was loyal to the Lord and will teach the people God’s ways.

Benjamin

Security and protection.

Joseph

Like a majestic ox: he gets the best of the land and dominates other nations.

Zebulun & Issachar

Joy, righteousness, and treasures of the sea.

G

Gad

Like a lion: takes the ruler’s portion and executes justice.

D

Dan

Also like a lion.

N

Naphtali

Favor and blessing from God, takes the sea and the south.

A

Asher

Very blessed: riches, security, and leisure.

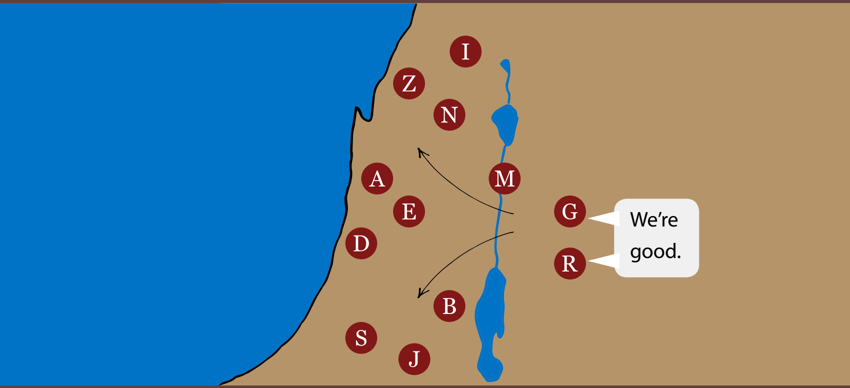
S

Simeon

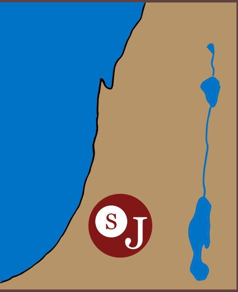
…aaaand Simeon gets the shaft. Seriously. Nothing.

The tribes’ territories in the promised land

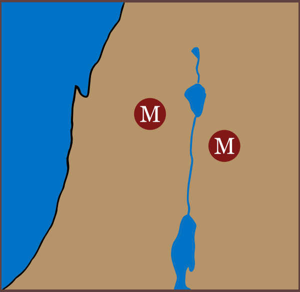
At this point the nation is just across the Jordan River from the promised land. But two tribes like it just fine on the east side. Reuben and Gad ask Moses for these pasturelands. Moses is OK with it, as long as the eastern tribes still help the other tribes in battle. (Numbers 32:28–32)



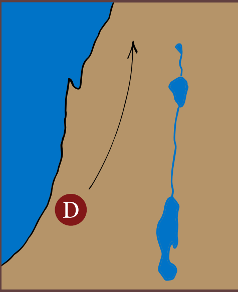
The other tribes settle into their own territories across the river, in the land of Canaan. Well, with a few exceptions.



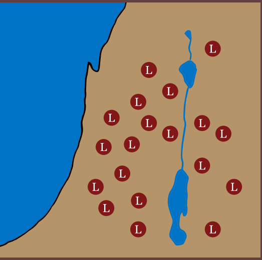
Simeon dissolves into Judah (Jos 19:1; 1 Ch 4:27, 40–43).



Manasseh settles on both sides of the Jordan, becoming two half-tribes (Jos 17:5–6).



Dan doesn't like his territory, so he moves north (Judg 18).



Plus, Levi doesn't get his own territory: they're all over (Jos 21).

Remember Jacob's prophecy about Simeon and Levi way back when? Note that they're both being scattered in the nation, just like Jacob said.

The 14 tribes of Israel?

You've probably noticed by now that there are 14 tribes called by name: the original 12 sons of Israel, plus Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph. The main thing to remember is that there are 12 patriarchs (the sons) and 12 territories.

12 patriarchs

Reuben
Simeon
Levi
Judah
Issachar

Joseph
Benjamin
Dan
Asher
Gad

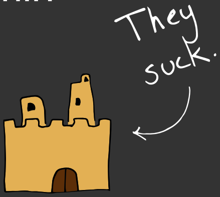
12 territories

Reuben
Simeon
Judah
Issachar
Zebulun

Manasseh
Benjamin
Dan
Asher
Gad

Zebulun Naphtali Ephraim Naphtali

Civil war with Benjamin



Fastforward to the age of judges. A bunch of men in a town of Benjamin rape a woman to death (Jdg 19).

The nation of Israel resolves to punish the rapists … well, except Benjamin, who defends the scumbags. (20:12–14).

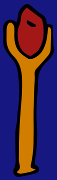
And just like that, it's the whole nation against one tribe: 400,000 warriors of Israel vs. 26,000 Benjamites. Of course, Benjamin loses, and the tribe almost goes extinct. They survive by kidnapping women as wives—which is weird, since abusing a woman was what got them into this mess in the first place (Jdg 21).

Benjamin rules?

Fastforward a few hundred years. Israel demands a king, and the prophet Samuel anoints Saul—a really tall guy from the tiny tribe of Benjamin (1 Sa 9:19–21). Don't call it a comeback.

Israel follows Saul's family for a while. After Saul dies, most of the tribes make Saul's son Ish-bosheth king. But the tribe of Judah declares its own king. You've heard of this guy. His name is David (2 Sa 2:8–11).

The scepter of Judah

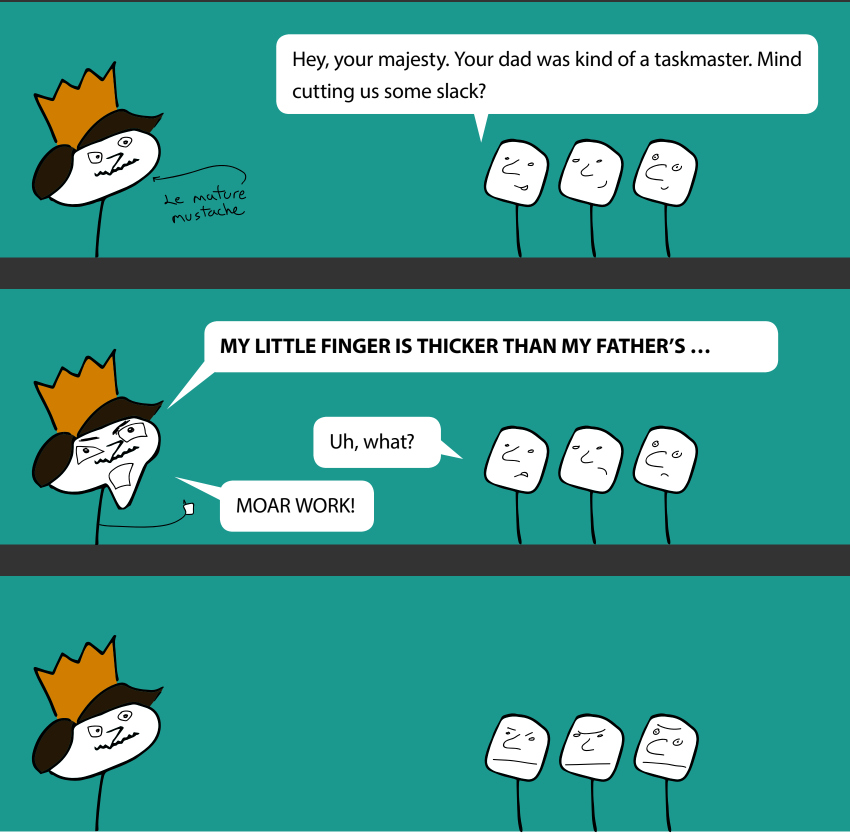


However, David prevails over Ish-bosheth and becomes king of all Israel. The Lord makes a covenant with David, promising that a descendant of David will be on the throne forever (2 Sa 7:6).

Remember Jacob's prophecy about the scepter not departing from Judah back in Genesis 49?

Divided kingdom

David was an iconic leader. His grandson Rehoboam … not so much.


Hey, your majesty. Your dad was kind of a taskmaster. Mind cutting us some slack?
Le mature mustache
MY LITTLE FINGER IS THICKER THAN MY FATHER'S …
Uh, what?
MOAR WORK!

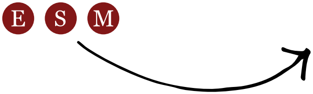
That doesn't go over too well (2 Ch 10). The kingdom spilts: Judah, Levi, and Benjamin stay loyal to David's dynasty. The rest of the tribes make a new king in the North: Jeroboam.

Northern kingdom

- New capital: Samaria
- Keeps the name Israel, but also goes by Ephraim (Ho 4:15–17)
- New religion: Jeroboam sets up idolatrous, non-Levite priesthood (1 Ki 12:26–33)

Southern kingdom

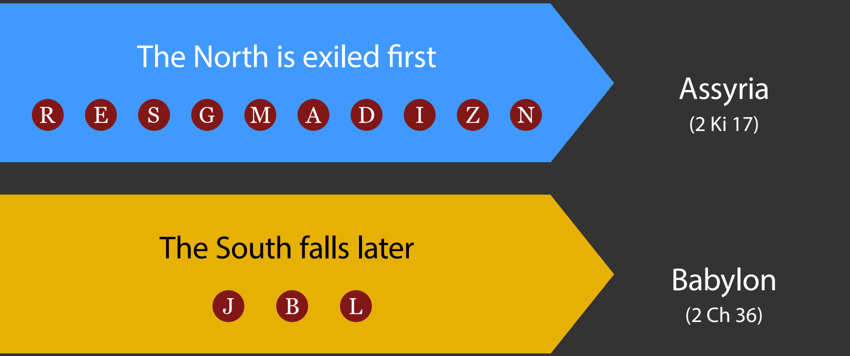
- Same capital: Jerusalem
- Now simply called Judah
- Same temple and priests: the Levites migrate to Jerusalem when Jeroboam sets up a new religion (2 Ch 11:13)



Later on, several families from Ephraim, Simeon, and Manasseh move to Judah, too (2 Chronicles 15:8–9).

Exile and restoration

Neither kingdom follows the Lord, however. So both are eventually taken exile by other world empires.



The North is exiled first

Assyria
(2 Ki 17)

The South falls later

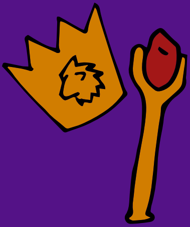
Babylon
(2 Ch 36)

Jerusalem
(Ez 1)

Persian emperor Cyrus lets them return

The scattered tribes are called “Israel” once more.

Centuries later, Messiah comes



Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is born in Bethlehem. He is a descendant of David (Mt 1:1) of the tribe of Judah (He 7:14). He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the promised one who will rule Israel and the nations in peace and justice.

Remember how Judah was compared to a lion back in Jacob’s prophecy? Jesus is *the* Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Re 5:4–5).

What about the future?

The tribes of Israel show up in a few prophecies that have yet to be fulfilled.

In Revelation

In John’s vision, 144,000 Israelites are marked as God’s. That’s 12,000 from each tribe … except Dan (Re 7:4–8).

D

Why does Dan get the shaft? This mystery still bugs scholars today.

In Ezekiel

Rewind almost 700 years: the prophet Ezekiel is an Israelite exiled in Babylon. He sees a vision of Israel restored: the temple is rebuilt and the tribes are given territories in the land (Eze 48:1–9).

Joseph is given two portions, one for Ephraim, one for Manasseh. The Lord allots some of the land to himself, which the Levites share with him. Even Dan has an inheritance in the land, at the far North.

And there you have it!

(Told you it was more than you ever wanted to know!)