BIBLE TOPICS · OLD TESTAMENT

12 Tribes of Israel

From One Family to a Nation · Genesis to Revelation

12 Sons	70 Souls	603,550 Men	48 Cities
By four mothers	Went into Egypt	Counted at Sinai	For Levi

GENESIS TO REVELATION

From One Family to Twelve Tribes

The story of the tribes moves in eight stages, from Jacob's sons in Haran to the gates of the New Jerusalem.

1 C. 1930–1900 B.C.

Jacob's Twelve Sons

Four mothers, twelve sons, and a new name: Israel.

GENESIS 29–35

2 C. 1898–1876 B.C.

Joseph and His Brothers

Sold by his brothers, Joseph saves the family.

GENESIS 37–45

3 C. 1876–1859 B.C.

Jacob Blesses the Tribes

Ephraim and Manasseh adopted; a word for each son.

GENESIS 48–49

4 C. 1876–1445 B.C.

From Family to Nation

Seventy become a nation, counted and camped around the tabernacle.

NUMBERS 1–2

5 C. 1406–1399 B.C.

Dividing the Land

Land by lot for each tribe; Levi receives cities.

JOSHUA 13–21

6 C. 1380–1050 B.C.

Tribes Without a King

Unfinished conquest, judges from many tribes, a civil war.

JUDGES 1–21

7 C. 1050–586 B.C.

United, Then Divided

One king over all, then ten in the north and Judah in the south.

1 KINGS 11–12

8 C. 538 B.C. AND BEYOND

The Tribes in God's Plan

Promised reunion, the New Testament, and twelve gates.

REVELATION 21:12

KEY VERSE

"All these are the twelve tribes of Israel: and this is it that their father spake unto them, and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them."

Genesis 49:28 (KJV)

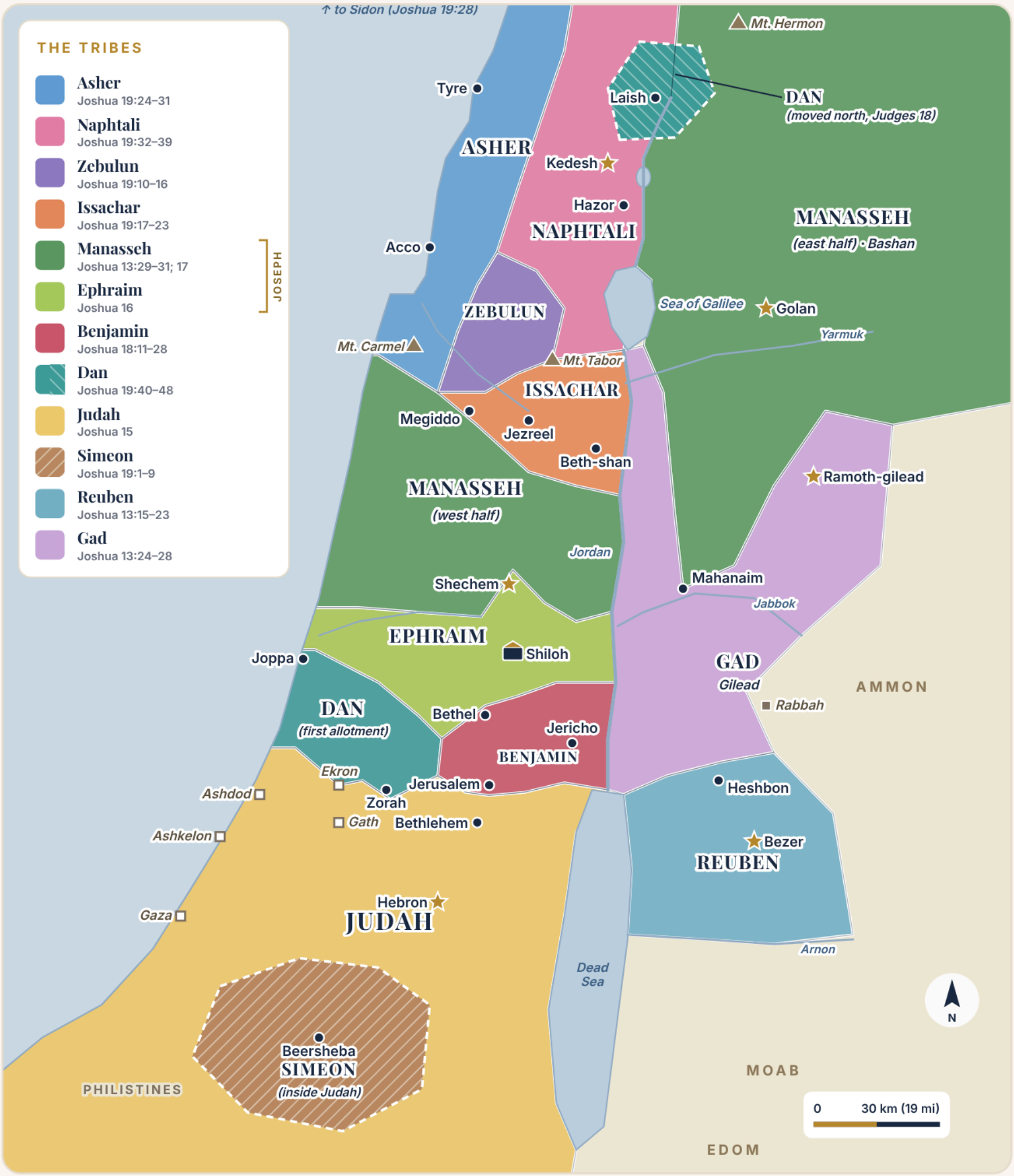
Map of the Twelve Tribes' Land

JOSHUA 13–19

The Land of the Twelve Tribes

How Joshua divided the Promised Land by lot

c. 1406–1399 B.C. · Borders approximate



City of refuge
Six Levite cities (Joshua 20:7–8)

Shiloh
Tabernacle; land divided by lot (Joshua 18:10)

Town
Positions approximate

Philistine city
Allotted but not taken (Joshua 13:2–3)

LEVI

No land of its own. The Levites received 48 cities with pasture land spread through all the other tribes, "the LORD God of Israel was their inheritance" (Joshua 13:33; 21:41).

JOSEPH

Joseph's double portion went to his sons. Ephraim received the central hill country; Manasseh received land on both sides of the Jordan, half in the west and half in Bashan and Gilead (Joshua 16–17).

> *"By lot was their inheritance, as the LORD commanded by the hand of Moses, for the nine tribes, and for the half tribe."*
>
> JOSHUA 14:2

Borders follow the towns named in Joshua 13–19; many cannot be located with certainty, so lines are approximate. Manasseh also held towns inside Issachar and Asher (Joshua 17:11).

Meet Every Tribe

WHO'S WHO

Meet Every Tribe

Jacob had twelve sons by four mothers. Each card gives the son's number and mother, the meaning of his name, a blessing from Genesis 49 or Deuteronomy 33, and what the tribe is remembered for.

JACOB'S FIRST WIFE
Leah
Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun
GENESIS 29:31–35

JACOB'S BELOVED WIFE
Rachel
Joseph, Benjamin
GENESIS 30:22–24

RACHEL'S MAID
Bilhah
Dan, Naphtali
GENESIS 30:3–8

LEAH'S MAID
Zilpah
Gad, Asher
GENESIS 30:9–13

The Twelve Sons, in Order of Birth

SON 1 · LEAH
Reuben
Name means *See, a son*. Firstborn, but lost the birthright.
"Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel"
GENESIS 49:4

SON 2 · LEAH
Simeon
Name means *Hearing*. Later lived inside Judah's land.
"I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel."
GENESIS 49:7

SON 3 · LEAH
Levi
Name means *Joined*. The priestly tribe of Moses and Aaron.
"They shall teach Jacob Thy judgments, and Israel Thy law"
DEUTERONOMY 33:10

SON 4 · LEAH
Judah
Name means *Praise*. The tribe of David and of Jesus.
"The sceptre shall not depart from Judah"
GENESIS 49:10

SON 5 · BILHAH
Dan
Name means *Judge*. Samson the judge; later an idol in the north.
"Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel."
GENESIS 49:16

SON 6 · BILHAH
Naphtali
Name means *My wrestling*. Barak; Galilee saw a great light.
"Naphtali is a hind let loose: he giveth goodly words."
GENESIS 49:21

SON 7 · ZILPAH
Gad
Name means *A troop*. Settled east of the Jordan.
"he shall overcome at the last."
GENESIS 49:19

SON 8 · ZILPAH
Asher
Name means *Happy*. Anna the prophetess, of the tribe of Aser.
"Out of Asher his bread shall be fat"
GENESIS 49:20

SON 9 · LEAH
Issachar
Name means *Reward*. Men who had understanding of the times.
"Issachar is a strong ass couching down between two burdens"
GENESIS 49:14

SON 10 · LEAH
Zebulun
Name means *Dwelling*. Risked their lives with Deborah and Barak.
"Zebulun shall dwell at the haven of the sea"
GENESIS 49:13

SON 11 · RACHEL
Joseph
Name means *May He add*. Two tribes: Ephraim and Manasseh.
"Joseph is a fruitful bough"
GENESIS 49:22

SON 12 · RACHEL
Benjamin
Name means *Son of the right hand*. King Saul, Esther and the apostle Paul.
"Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf"
GENESIS 49:27

The Camp and the Census

NUMBERS 1–4 AND 26

The Camp and the Census

In the wilderness the tribes camped in a square around the tabernacle, with the Levites in an inner ring. The men of each tribe were counted at Sinai and again forty years later on the plains of Moab.

EAST

Led by Judah

Judah, Issachar and Zebulun: 186,400 men

NUMBERS 2:3–9

SOUTH

Led by Reuben

Reuben, Simeon and Gad: 151,450 men

NUMBERS 2:10–16

WEST

Led by Ephraim

Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin: 108,100 men

NUMBERS 2:18–24

NORTH

Led by Dan

Dan, Asher and Naphtali: 157,600 men

NUMBERS 2:25–31

TRIBE	SINAI → MOAB	NUMBERS 1
Reuben	46,500 → 43,730	−2,770
Simeon	59,300 → 22,200	−37,100
Gad	45,650 → 40,500	−5,150
Judah	74,600 → 76,500	+1,900
Issachar	54,400 → 64,300	+9,900
Zebulun	57,400 → 60,500	+3,100
Ephraim	40,500 → 32,500	−8,000
Manasseh	32,200 → 52,700	+20,500
Benjamin	35,400 → 45,600	+10,200
Dan	62,700 → 64,400	+1,700
Asher	41,500 → 53,400	+11,900
Naphtali	53,400 → 45,400	−8,000
Total	603,550 → 601,730	−1,820

Levi was counted separately, from a month old: 22,000 at Sinai (Numbers 3:39) and 23,000 on the plains of Moab (Numbers 26:62).

Why the Lists Differ and the Tribes and Jesus

COUNTING TO TWELVE

Why the Lists of Tribes Differ

There are thirteen names for twelve places, because Joseph became two tribes. When Levi is counted, Joseph is usually one tribe; when Levi is left out because it has no land, Ephraim and Manasseh are listed separately.

GENESIS 49

Jacob's Sons

Includes Levi and Joseph; Ephraim and Manasseh are counted under Joseph.

GENESIS 49:1–28

NUMBERS 1–2

The Census and Camp

Includes Ephraim and Manasseh; Levi is counted separately.

NUMBERS 1:47–49

JOSHUA 13–19

The Land

Includes Ephraim and Manasseh; Levi has cities, not land.

JOSHUA 13:33

EZEKIEL 48

Ezekiel's City Gates

Includes Levi and Joseph as gate names.

EZEKIEL 48:31–34

REVELATION 7

The 144,000 Sealed

Includes Levi, Joseph and Manasseh; Dan and Ephraim are not named.

REVELATION 7:4–8

1 CHRONICLES 5

Birthright and Sceptre

The birthright went to Joseph, the leadership to Judah.

1 CHRONICLES 5:1–2

THE REST OF THE STORY

The Tribes and Jesus

Jacob promised the sceptre to Judah "until Shiloh come." Jesus was born of that tribe, in David's line, and He did what no priest of Levi could do.

The Lion of Judah

"For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda"

HEBREWS 7:14

The Promised King

"Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed"

REVELATION 5:5

Sent to All Israel

"But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

MATTHEW 10:6

Twelve Apostles

"ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

MATTHEW 19:28

A Better High Priest

"For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners"

HEBREWS 7:26

One City, Twelve Gates

"which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel"

REVELATION 21:12

Lessons for Today

FOR TODAY

Five Things to Remember

God built His nation out of a quarrelling, imperfect family, and He never forgot a single tribe.

1

Twelve Sons, One Family

The tribes are named after Jacob's sons by Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah.

GENESIS 35:22–26

2

Joseph Counts Twice

Jacob adopted Ephraim and Manasseh, giving Joseph the double portion.

GENESIS 48:5

3

Levi Is Set Apart

Levi served God instead of holding land.

NUMBERS 3:12

4

Judah Leads

Kings came from Judah, and so did Jesus.

REVELATION 5:5

5

God Remembers Them All

From the breastplate to the New Jerusalem, all twelve names are kept.

EXODUS 28:21

6

God Meant It for Good

Joseph saw God's hand in all of it.

"ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good"

GENESIS 50:20

THINK ABOUT IT

Questions for Reflection

Judah went from selling one brother to offering himself for another: where is God changing your heart toward your own family? Levi had no land because the LORD Himself was their inheritance: what would it look like for God to be your portion? Every tribe pitched its tents facing the tabernacle: what sits at the center of your life?

KEY THEMES

Six Themes of the Tribes

These six truths run through the story of the tribes, from Genesis to Revelation.

1

God Keeps His Promises

Seventy people became a nation, as God promised Abraham.

EXODUS 1:7

2

God Uses Flawed People

Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah all failed, yet God used every tribe.

GENESIS 49:3–10

3

God at the Center

The tribes camped around the tabernacle, and the high priest bore their names.

NUMBERS 2:2

4

Every Tribe Has a Place

Each received its inheritance by God's choice.

"all came to pass."

JOSHUA 21:45

5

Unity Matters

Standing together they prospered; turning on each other they suffered.

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"

PSALM 133:1

6

None Are Forgotten

The New Jerusalem bears all twelve names.

REVELATION 21:12