

## THE 13 TRIBES (Not Twelve?)

### The Following is a List of the Fourteen Sons of Jacob

<b>Leah</b>		The numbers assigned reflect the order of birth
<b>1. Reuben</b>		
<b>2. Simeon</b>		
<b>3. Levi</b>		
<b>4. Judah</b>		
<b>9. Issachar</b>		
<b>10. Zebulun</b>		
<b>Zilpah</b>		Zilpah was Leah's Handmaid
<b>7. Gad</b>		
<b>8. Asher</b>		
<b>Rachel</b>		
<b>11. Joseph</b>		Although Joseph was a son of Jacob, there never was a Joseph tribe.
<b>13. Ephraim</b> <b>14. Manasseh</b>		Ephraim and Manasseh were Joseph's sons, but Jacob adopted them, <sup>1</sup> on a parity with his other children. <sup>2</sup>
<b>12. Benjamin</b>		
<b>Bilhah</b>		Bilhah was Rachel's Handmaid
<b>5. Dan</b>		
<b>6. Naphtali</b>		

Although Jacob technically had fourteen sons, there were not fourteen tribes, nor were their eleven. **There were always 13.** Land was allotted among twelve of the tribes. Joseph wasn't a tribe, so he doesn't count. On the other hand, Levi didn't get any land, but Levi was nevertheless always considered a tribe. Ephraim and Manasseh each got a full allotment. So, however you look at it, there were always thirteen tribes, and never twelve.

Even the Bible refers to "twelve" tribes, despite the fact that there were thirteen. There were fourteen sons of Jacob, two of them adopted, but one son, Joseph (a natural son), was never a tribe. Instead, Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh were adopted by Jacob, and placed on a parity with Jacob's first born<sup>3</sup> so that they each got a full inheritance from Jacob, equal to Joseph's other brothers. Each is very definitely a full tribe, though they are sometimes referred to as the half tribes.<sup>4</sup>In fact, among the Northern tribes (Israel), Ephraim was dominant.

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 47:27-48:22.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 48:5. "Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are."

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Joshua 13:7.

Since we can all count, the only way I can explain the constant reference to twelve, both in the Bible in and in the popular imagination, is that the number twelve held such a mystical significance that even the writers of the Bible, and naturally the readers of it, persist in ignoring the real number, in favor of an idealized one. This should tell us something.

It goes without saying that the tribal confederation gave itself a somewhat idealized history in any case. Most scholars believe that when the tribes came out of Egypt, they found other Hebrew speakers in Canaan who had never left. These Hebrew speakers undoubtedly had a common ancestry of sorts, and had shared historical and ancestral memories, with a probable basis in fact. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to treat the story as historical fact in all its details. The stories of the tribal confederation found in the Pentateuch are rich in metaphor and myth, which gives it a spiritual aspect that in the case of pure unadulterated history is much less accessible.

### **The Players Genesis 29 & 30**

**Jacob** is the son of **Isaac** and **Rebekah**, and the grandson of **Abraham**.

**Laban** is Jacob's uncle (Laban is the brother of Jacob's mother Rebekah), and Laban is Jacob's cousin too (Laban is also the grandson of Abraham's brother Nahor). **Since Abraham married his half-sister, Sarah/Sarai, the relationships are complicated further.**

Abraham's brother was Nahor. Nahor's (and Abraham's) father was **Terah**. Terah's father was also named **Nahor**, which makes things a little confusing. Nahor is also the name of a city in Northern Mesopotamia, as is **Haran**, Abraham's other brother's name.<sup>5</sup> Recall that Terah, Abraham's father, had three sons: Abram, Nahor and Haran. **Lot** was Haran's son. Terah died in the city of Haran.

**Nahor** (Abraham's brother), had married his niece, **Milcah**, Haran's daughter. Milcah had eight children, among whom was a son named **Bethuel**, whom we later learn is the father of Laban and Rebekah (the mother of Jacob). Laban is the father of Leah and Rachel, who are Jacob's wives, as well as his first (and second or third) cousins. This is a family tree that occasionally has trouble forking.

**Leah** is Laban's elder daughter, and **Rachel** is the younger. Jacob is married to both of them. Jacob also married Leah's handmaid **Zilpah** and Rachel's handmaid **Bilah**. You know the story.

Incest and bigamy? Not by the standards of the time. With these stories as a part of our sacred tradition, it is no wonder the Christian attitude toward moral relativism is mixed.

The relationships are described in Genesis 29 & 30.

\* \* \* \*

---

<sup>5</sup>Genesis 22:20-24 (J)

---

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Encarta, I think.