

# JOURNEY

Through The Scriptures



By Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein  
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## The Twelve Tribes of Israel, Part I

*The Gripping Drama of Jacob's Sons  
and the Critical Place They Hold  
in Israel's Development and History*

### One Incredible Family

**Genesis 29:1–30:24; 35:16–29**

Every family has a story! Some are more interesting than others. But it is doubtful if any family saga can measure up to the story of Jacob and his offspring. This is true whether we speak of its human interest and drama, or its biblical significance. That is why our next two studies in *Journey Through The Scriptures* will be devoted to studying the origin, history, and importance of the twelve tribes of Israel. Bible students know Israel's original tribes sprang from Jacob's sons. The term "children of Israel" to describe the Jews came into use in recognition of the fact that the Jewish nation grew out of Jacob's children (later renamed "Israel" by God).

For a study like this, it helps to familiarize ourselves with the main characters. Jacob was the third of Israel's great patriarchs (*avot* in Hebrew), fleeing from his older twin Esau after stealing Esau's birthright and blessing. Jacob was a "grasper" or "schemer," but he met his match in his deceptive uncle Laban. As a result, Jacob wound up with two wives—the unwanted Leah, and his beloved Rachel. They, in turn, married their maidservants to Jacob in an attempt to produce more children—and God worked through it all to fulfill His divine plan.

### Study Points

1. One Incredible Family
2. Two Prominent Sons
3. A Violent Duo
4. Two Middle Brothers
5. 'Fortune' and 'Happy'
6. Open Rivalry in Jacob's House
7. Rachel's Sons—Jacob's Favorites



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# The Twelve Tribes of Israel, Part 1

1. Jewish teaching says Jacob was essentially a good person who sometimes resorted to cunning and deceit to get what he felt belonged to him. What lesson did Jacob need to learn most?

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2. Why did God lead Jacob from the deception of his father Isaac and Esau straight to the home of his uncle Laban?

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3. In Genesis 28:13, God identified Himself to Jacob as “the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.” Why did God link His identity with Jacob’s ancestors?

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4. Was Laban justified in substituting Leah for Rachel at Jacob’s wedding?

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5. Why did Leah resort to buying a night with Jacob when she was already his wife?

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## Something to Think About:

In all of our lives we can see human mistakes and misjudgments intermingled with shining examples of God’s love, mercy, and care. Think about your family’s story and your part in it. Is your life a testimony to the goodness of God and an example of living faith in Him? You can be a powerful influence on others when you live for God.



# The Twelve Tribes of Israel, Part 1

## Two Prominent Sons

**Genesis 35:21–26; 37:1–30; 38:1–30;  
49:3–4, 8–12**

With this lesson we are plunged into the complex, and sometimes shameful, history of Jacob’s twelve sons. It is interesting to compare the relatively rapid birth of Leah’s first four sons with the twenty-five long years that Abraham had to wait for the birth of Isaac. And Isaac himself had only Esau and Jacob. But with Jacob’s family we begin to see the multiplication of Abraham’s descendants in accordance with God’s promise to him (Genesis 12:2; 15:4–5).

We have paired Judah with Reuben because these two stand out among the first group of sons. Firstborn Reuben should have been the leader. But for His purposes, God had established the principle in Abraham’s family that “*the older will serve the younger*” (Genesis 25:23)—so Judah and his tribe rose to prominence. Reuben forfeited his rights by sleeping with Bilhah, one of his father’s wives. Judah’s flawed character played out in his evil sons and his disgraceful act with his daughter-in-law, Tamar. The deathbed prophecies Jacob gave to Reuben and Judah spoke of their character, but also included the astounding promise to Judah that the Messiah would come from his line, an anticipation of

Israel’s later kingship that was centered in the land of Judah.

1. Reuben’s actions may have been an unwise attempt to proclaim himself as Jacob’s heir. How might Reuben’s act have signified that he was declaring himself the new family leader?

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2. Why were Er and Onan, the first two sons of Judah, put to death by the Lord?

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3. What does Jacob’s prophecy mean when he said the scepter would not depart from Judah “*until he comes to whom it belongs*” (Genesis 49:10)?

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4. How did the blessing of Jacob that “*brothers will praise you*” (Genesis 49:8) come true for Judah?

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## Something to Think About:

Even though Judah and his family made serious mistakes, God still graciously elevated Judah’s tribe to a place of leadership. Perhaps one reason is that, unlike Reuben, Judah expressed remorse for his sin. This can be an encouragement for us, because we all err. God can restore and use anyone who is willing to turn to Him for forgiveness.



# The Twelve Tribes of Israel, Part 1

## A Violent Duo

**Genesis 29:33–35; 34:1–31; 49:5–7**

Simeon and Levi were the second and third sons of Jacob from Leah, the wife he never chose and never loved. Simeon means “*hearing*” and Levi means “*attachment*,” the significance of which is explained in the text. All the sons had meaningful names—and we can even trace the developing story of Jacob’s family through his sons’ names. For instance, adding Reuben (“*look, a son*”) and Judah (“*praise*”), we can see that Leah was telling a story of God’s dealings with her. The names can be combined into this statement: “Look, I have a son to take away my barrenness. God has heard my prayer, and now Jacob will be attached to me. I will praise the Lord for what He has done.”

But even as Reuben disqualified himself from family leadership by his actions, Simeon and Levi left a questionable legacy. The sad story began with their sister Dinah’s rape by Shechem, a prince in one of the Canaanite tribes that inhabited the Promised Land. This was a sin and violation of the worst sort, and needed to be dealt with. But Simeon and Levi allowed their anger to take over, and innocent people were killed. Jacob’s prophecy anticipated the future of these two tribes. The Simeonites were dispersed, and

the Levites became the priestly clan that served in the Temple and had no claim to land in Israel.

1. What was wrong with the offer of Shechem’s father Hamor to Jacob to live among their people, “intermarry” with them, and take some of the land that Hamor would give them?

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2. The plan that Simeon and Levi used to disable their intended victims was very clever—and also quite deceptive! Where do you suppose they learned their “craft”?

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3. What was Simeon’s and Levi’s defense for destroying the people of Shechem?

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4. Why were the Levites later appointed as priests (Exodus 32:25–29)?

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## Something to Think About:

The deadly outburst of anger and revenge on the part of Simeon and Levi should remind us of what can happen when we take the law, and God’s prerogative as Judge, into our own hands. God prohibited these two sons and their tribes from playing a leading role in Israel. Let us determine to reject violence and personal vengeance as the means to right a wrong or gain satisfaction.



# The Twelve Tribes of Israel, Part 1

## Two Middle Brothers

**Genesis 30:1–8; 49:16–17, 21**

Some birth order experts say middle children in a family are often the most well adjusted. You can decide that for yourself concerning Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher—the middle four sons of Jacob. Dan and Naphtali were the fifth and sixth sons, born to Bilhah the maidservant of Rachel. When Rachel saw how God had blessed Leah, Rachel became jealous and insisted that Jacob marry Bilhah. The sons born to this union would thus be “credited” to Rachel in this battle between Leah and Rachel to see who could give Jacob more children.

The tribes of Dan and Naphtali became well known for their tenacity in battle. Naphtali was granted a key position of defense among the tribes, but failed to drive out the Canaanites. Dan was known as a tribe that preserved the old, traditional Israeli customs. Perhaps the most famous member of the tribe of Dan was Sampson (Judges 13:2, 24), who seemed to embody the characteristics of the Danites as they struggled against the Philistines. Neither of these tribes had an important place in the subsequent history of Israel. It has been suggested that perhaps they intermarried with foreign people.

1. Why would the strength of Dan and Naphtali in battle be important?

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2. Why was it crucial that the Canaanites be driven out of the Promised Land?

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3. Though Jacob prophesied that Dan was to “provide justice,” Jacob also said this tribe would become treacherous. What event in Judges 18:30 reveals the way in which Jacob’s prophecy of treachery came to pass?

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4. How do the meanings of Dan’s name, “justice,” and Naphtali’s name, “wrestling,” further tell the story of Jacob’s family?

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## Something to Think About:

It’s interesting to see once again the interplay between God’s activity and human emotions and scheming in the births of Dan and Naphtali. Their story is both an encouraging reminder to us that God is at work even in very human situations, and a sobering reminder to check our motives for the actions we take!



# The Twelve Tribes of Israel, Part 1

## ‘Fortune’ and ‘Happy’

**Genesis 30:9–12; 49:19–20**

Gad and Asher were the seventh and eighth sons of Jacob. Their names mean “*fortune*” and “*happy*,” respectively, which spoke to the situation into which they were born. The sons’ names were given to them by Leah to express her joy at the fruitfulness of Zilpah, her maidservant, in opposition to Leah’s own sudden barrenness after having four sons.

Following Rachel’s example with Bilhah, Leah gave Zilpah in marriage to Jacob specifically for the purpose of bearing more sons.

Gad and Asher were thus full brothers, of which there were four sets among Jacob’s twelve sons—with six from Leah and two each from Bilhah, Zilpah, and Rachel as their mothers.

Gad and Asher had more in common than the same mother. Neither son appeared to be prominent. In fact, the only thing we know about either of them is that when Jacob and his family went into Egypt years later to escape a famine, Gad had seven sons and Asher had four (Genesis 46:16–17). Their descendants were probably absorbed into other peoples.

1. Do you think Leah was acting out of jealousy toward Rachel when she gave Zilpah in marriage to Jacob?

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2. Why do you suppose Leah suddenly “stopped having children”?

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3. How does Jacob’s family illustrate the problems resulting from the ancient practice of polygamy (multiple wives)?

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## Something to Think About:

The fact that the tribes of Gad and Asher seemingly disappeared into history over the years reminds us that decisions made in the present have great consequences in the future. If we are faithful today we can literally store up blessing for future generations of our family!



# The Twelve Tribes of Israel, Part 1

## Open Rivalry in Jacob’s House Genesis 30:14–20; 49:13–15

By the time we come to the births of Issachar and Zebulun, Jacob’s ninth and tenth sons and the fifth and sixth born to Leah, the rivalry in this household was out in the open. The conception of Issachar only happened—at least from the human standpoint—because of a deal struck between Leah and Rachel whereby Leah purchased Jacob’s companionship for one night. Mandrakes were thought to aid in fertility, so it is not surprising that Leah and Rachel both wanted them.

But Leah held the upper hand, so Rachel had to give something in return for what she wanted. Issachar was born and given a name that meant “reward.” We are not told how the conception of Zebulun came about. Perhaps Jacob was pleased by the birth of another son and spent more time with Leah. Zebulun can mean both “dwelling” and “honor,” so it seems Leah felt that giving Jacob so many sons would cause him to dwell with and honor her. Issachar and Zebulun appear to have been like most of their brothers—basically undistinguished. Once again, the only detail given of their lives is the notation that they had four and three sons, respectively, when the family moved to Egypt (Genesis 46:13–14).

1. Describe how you see the hand of God at work amid all the rivalries and scheming in Jacob’s family.

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2. How does Reuben’s involvement in this part of the story indicate that the rivalry had spread to his generation?

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3. Why did Leah believe that God’s answer to her prayer came because she had given Zilpah to Jacob as his fourth wife?

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4. Was Leah’s hope that the birth of Zebulun (and all six of her sons) would finally turn Jacob’s heart toward her ever realized?

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## Something to Think About:

We will learn in our next study that many years later, each of these two tribes provided a leader for Israel during the period of the judges. Just as faithfulness on our part today can mean blessing for future generations, so a lack of significant achievements now does not rule out the possibility that God can use us in greater ways in the future.



# The Twelve Tribes of Israel, Part 1

## Rachel's Sons—Jacob's Favorites Genesis 30:22–24; 35:16–20; 37:1–36; 49:22–27

We could almost draw a line through the family record of Jacob, and put Joseph and Benjamin on one side opposite their ten brothers. Their mother was Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, and so these two became his favorite sons. Our next study book will explore the lives of Joseph and his own sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, whose families attained tribal status in Israel. The story many people are familiar with is Joseph and his special coat, a gift from Jacob to signal Joseph's favored status—which soon cost him his freedom. But God was at work to save Jacob's family, and actually the nation of Israel, from a deadly famine by Joseph's exile to Egypt.

Benjamin's birth cost Rachel her life, so it is understandable why Jacob's youngest son was very dear to him. Rachel named him Ben-Oni, "son of my sorrow," in her suffering. But Jacob renamed him Benjamin, "son of the right hand." Benjamin's birth was an answer to Rachel's prayer for another son (Genesis 30:24). She made this prayer when Joseph was born, and his name indicated Rachel's belief and hope in God's answer: Joseph means "may the Lord add."

1. How did the birth of Joseph take away Rachel's "disgrace" (Genesis 30:23)?

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2. What is the significance of the meaning of Benjamin's name, "son of the right hand"?

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3. Jacob's prophecy concerning Joseph (Genesis 49:22–26) reveals the secret of Joseph's success. What was it that enabled Joseph to accomplish so much despite his trials?

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4. Benjamin's tribe would have a sordid and violent future. How did Jacob's prophecy (Genesis 49:27) foresee and predict that future?

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## Something to Think About:

Joseph's life in particular reminds us of the dangers of playing favorites, either in our families or in other important relationships. Joseph's coat became the visible symbol of his status, arousing his brothers' jealousy. Let us be careful not to send either subtle or overt signals that we are favoring one person over another.

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# JOURNEY

## Through The Scriptures

Answer Key for: *The Twelve Tribes of Israel, Part 1*

### Page 2: One Incredible Family

1. He needed to learn that God does not need human cunning or assistance to accomplish His plans.
2. To learn this very lesson—that deception does not please God. The Lord was teaching Jacob to stop relying on trickery and trust fully in Him.
3. This statement was a powerful and well-timed reminder to Jacob that just as God had been faithful to Abraham and Isaac in days past, He would be faithful to Jacob.
4. No, Laban should have informed Jacob ahead of time of the custom in that land.
5. She knew that Jacob did not love her, and she felt this was the only way she could obtain Jacob's attention and affection—even if just for one night.

### Page 3: Two Prominent Sons

1. By sleeping with Bilhah, Reuben may have been trying to show that he was the rightful heir of Jacob's household, including the wives in it. But Jacob was still living!
2. Because they were "*wicked in the LORD's sight*" and displeasing to Him.
3. The scepter referred to kingship, and the reference is to the greatest king still to come—the Messiah.
4. Judah's descendants were prominent in the leadership of Israel and later in the southern kingdom of Judah after Israel was divided into two nations—the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

### Page 4: A Violent Duo

1. The problem was that marrying into an idolatrous Canaanite tribe would defile God's people. Although the specific command for Israel not to intermarry with the peoples around them was not given until the time of Moses, Jacob must have known that Hamor's plan was not right.
2. They had plenty of skilled "teachers," including their father Jacob and grandfather Laban. Even their mother, Leah, was not above scheming to get what she wanted.
3. They argued that Hamor's son had violated their sister and treated her like a prostitute. True enough, but hardly a justification for their indiscriminate revenge.
4. They proved to be faithful to the Lord in the incident of the golden calf, obeying Moses' orders to cleanse Israel of the idolaters.

### Page 5: Two Middle Brothers

1. Because they lived in a time of frequent war as various groups tried to lay claim to land.
2. God ordered Israel to drive out the Canaanites so as not to become entangled in their immoral and idolatrous practices.
3. During the time of the judges, the Danites instigated the first major practice of idolatry in Israel—a sin that would plague the nation for hundreds of years.
4. The Bible says that Rachel named these two sons to commemorate God's intervention in giving her a son (albeit

through Bilhah) and to celebrate her "victory" over Leah in their seemingly endless struggle.

### Page 6: 'Fortune' and 'Happy'

1. The Bible does not indicate that her motive was to go "two up" on Rachel, so to speak—but given the nature of this family, we cannot rule jealousy out completely!
2. It could have been God's way of testing her, teaching her patience, and developing her faith.
3. Jacob's multiple wives began to compete for his favor and attention, and there had to have been an ongoing atmosphere of tension in their home.

### Page 7: Open Rivalry in Jacob's House

1. The Bible says specifically that God responded to Leah's prayer in regard to Issachar, and the names she gave to these two sons also speak of God's provision and blessing.
2. Like his mother, Reuben appeared to be unwilling to share his mandrakes with Rachel, a gesture which would have possibly helped his mother's rival become more likely to bear children.
3. Leah obviously believed she had done the right thing in marrying Zilpah to Jacob so the family could continue to produce children. Interestingly, the text does not say this is why God answered Leah's prayer—only that she believed this was the reason.
4. Not as far as the Bible is concerned. Leah and her children returned to the Promised Land with Jacob, but she is seldom mentioned after the birth of Zebulun until we read of her burial by Jacob (Genesis 49:31).

### Page 8: Rachel's Sons—Jacob's Favorites

1. In the ancient world it was considered a disgrace, and even a sign of God's disfavor, for a woman to be unable to have children.
2. To be at a person's right hand was to be in the place of special favor with that person.
3. Clearly, Joseph was able to prosper and bring blessing to himself and others because God's hand of favor was on him despite the opposition of his own brothers and his slavery in Egypt.
4. Jacob prophesied that the Benjamites would be a warlike people who showed little mercy to their victims.

# JOURNEY

Through The Scriptures

## An Exciting Adventure of Discovery and Faith in the Pages of God's Word



Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, an orthodox rabbi, is the founder and chairman of the *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews*.

He is an internationally recognized teacher of the Bible, and an expert in Jewish life and customs who has helped tens of thousands of Christians discover the Jewish roots of their Christian faith.

Rabbi Eckstein is also the author of several books, including *How Firm A Foundation*, an authoritative guide to Judaism for Christians, and *The Journey Home*.

Rabbi Eckstein has spent over 25 years helping Jews and Christians bridge the gap of misunderstanding and mistrust that has marked the past 2,000 years of their relationships. Realizing what could be accomplished if Christians and Jews came together in mutual respect and cooperation, and drawing on their shared biblical heritage, Rabbi Eckstein founded *The Fellowship* in 1983 to build bridges of understanding between these two faith communities.



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30 North LaSalle Street • Suite 2600 • Chicago, IL 60602  
312-641-7200 • 312-641-7201 (fax)  
info@ifcj.org • www.ifcj.org

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*Bible Study Series:  
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The Bible studies presented in *Journey Through The Scriptures* are intended to be a devotional and practical teaching series, rather than a formal or in-depth examination of biblical theology. For the deeper meaning of many aspects of theology, and of Jewish practice, holidays, and events, we suggest that you consult Rabbi Eckstein's book explaining Judaism for Christians, *How Firm A Foundation*, and his 3-volume CD-ROM teaching series, *Returning to Zion*, all of which are available from *The Fellowship*.