

THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL

AN INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL ISRAEL



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INTERNATIONAL WORSHIP CENTRE

What is Israel?

Israel means

(iz'ray-uhl; Heb., "may God rule" or possibly "Prince of God").

The story of Israel is a fascinating account of God's committed love for a chosen people. God's plan from the outset was to reach a sinful humanity through the obedience of a single person. The call of Abraham is significant in that the origin of a biblical nation of Israel lies in the obedience of an individual. Abraham enters into relationship with the covenant God.

Genesis 12:1-3, "Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Abraham's grandson Jacob (later named Israel) had twelve sons and from these sons the twelve tribes developed.

- The first time the name Israel appears in the Scriptures is when it was spoken to Jacob, after his long night of wrestling with a powerful opponent at river Jabbok. The heavenly stranger finally said, "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed" (**Genesis 32:28**). Thus, the name "Israel", a name of heavenly origin, was applied to Jacob alone. This name represented Jacob's spiritual victory over sin, as a result of his wrestling in prayer and claiming God's grace.

- The name Israel is also understood as a collective name of the twelve tribes that descended from Jacob. The descendants of Jacob are often called the "children of Israel" or simply "Israel". The descendants of these sons eventually multiplied into 12 tribes, who were later forced into slavery by the Egyptians until the time of Moses. Then God told Pharaoh through Moses, "Israel is my son, even my firstborn ... Let my son go" (**Exodus 4:22, 23**). Note here that the name "Israel" was expanded to include Jacob's descendants. In this way, the name "Israel" first applied to a victorious man and then to his people.

The reason for Israel's uniqueness was her unique relationship with Yahweh. The God of Israel is a covenant God who is committed to His people. This is important because the idea of divine covenant shapes the formation of Israel's national identity and touches every area of her life and culture.

How many tribes of Israel are there?

There are 12 tribes of Israel.

The 12 tribes of Israel are (for the most part) named after the 12 sons of Jacob. Each son became the patriarch of an individual tribe as the nation grew.

They are (in order of age) **Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph and Benjamin.**

Leah gave birth to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. Rachel gave birth to Joseph and Benjamin. Leah's maid, Zilpah, gave birth to Gad and Asher, and Rachel's maid, Bilhah, gave birth to Dan and Naphtali.

Thus, the Israelites descended from these 12 brothers and maintained the identity of their tribe. Following the Exodus, descendants of Joseph were known as the descendants of his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. This made for a total of 13 tribes.

The tribe of Levi became the priestly family and were exempt from having a land settlement like the other tribes. So, Levi isn't counted as one of the 12 tribes. Instead Ephraim and Manasseh are considered distinct tribes.

It seems that there are 13 tribes in total but here's the math:

12 tribes (sons) – 1 (Levi) – 1 (Joseph) + 1 (Ephraim) + 1 (Manasseh) = 12 tribes

Sons of Jacob(Israel)	Tribes of Israel
1. Reuben	1. Reuben
2. Simeon	2. Simeon
3. Levi	
4. Judah	3. Judah
5. Zebulun	4. Zebulun
6. Issachar	5. Issachar
7. Dan	6. Dan
8. Gad	7. Gad
9. Asher	8. Asher
10. Naphtali	9. Naphtali
11. Joseph	10. Ephraim 11. Manasseh
12. Benjamin	12. Benjamin

At Sinai the Israelites not only came to know more fully the God of their forefathers, they also received a calling to be "*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (**Exodus 19:6**).

With the grant of promised land, a people group became a settled nation. The land was given as a trust to Israel, confirming their divine calling.

Their calling was to become a light to the other nations, attracting them to the true God, Yahweh. Should Israel fail to follow this call to be God's witnesses, they too could be removed from the Land.

What happened to these tribes through history? Were they lost?

Israel continued as a single nation through several centuries under the judges and early kings. It reached its political zenith under King Solomon, but due to his unwise governing and personal apostasy, inter-tribal tensions arose, leading to civil unrest and the ultimate division of Israel into two states: the larger part, called **Israel** in the northern region, and the smaller **Judah** in the south (**1 Kings 11-12**).

So the northern kingdom of Israel consisted of 10 tribes (Reuben, Simeon, Dan, Asher, Zebulun, Gad, Issachar, Naphtali, Ephraim and Manasseh) and the kingdom of Judah consisted of 2 tribes (Judah & Benjamin).

Over a period of time, northern Israel entertained idol worship and unauthorized worship sites while Judah maintained official worship of Yahweh. Israel ultimately fell to the Assyrians empire in 721 BC (**2 Kings 17:20, 23**), while Judah was protected by God for another century before falling to the Babylonians in 586 BC (**2 Kings 24:10-17**). Many key people from both Israel and Judah ended up on exile in Babylon. During the exile, there seemed to be a renewal of Israel's calling, following the ways of Yahweh, resulting in the rebuilding of the temple and restoration of Jerusalem once the exile was over.

From the divine viewpoint, the division was a judgment on not keeping God's commands, specifically the commands prohibiting idolatry. From a human viewpoint, the division was the result of tribal discord and political unrest. The principle is that sin brings division (**1 Corinthians 1:13, 11:18; James 4:1**).

What's the significance of the number 12?

The number 12 signifies perfection of God's government or rule. The number 12 has further significance, as it represents divine authority, appointment, and perfect completeness.

The 12 tribes of Israel symbolize the completeness of the Israel nation and God's rule over them.

Some Old Testament references for the use of number 12:

12 animals were to be given as sacrifices (**Numbers 7:29**), 12 gemstones with the name of 12 tribes were inscribed on the High Priest's breastplate. (**Exodus 28:17-20**), 12 loaves of permanent offerings were on the golden table (**Leviticus 24:5**), 12 spies were sent into the land of Canaan (**Deuteronomy 1:23**), 12 Minor Prophets are in the Old Testament.

Some New Testament references for the use of 12

Lord Jesus chose 12 disciples, Jesus fed the masses with loaves and fishes and 12 baskets of food remained, Jesus healed a young girl who was twelve years old (**Mark 5:42**), John's vision of New Jerusalem had 12 gates with 12 pearls sitting on 12 foundations and guarded by 12 angels (**Revelation 21**).

What is God's intended purpose through Israel?

1. God chose the ancient Israelites because He had promised Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation and occupy the land of Canaan (**Genesis 12:3, 7; 17:4, 7-8; 22:17**). God blessed Abraham and his descendants because of Abraham's faith, a living faith that resulted in diligent obedience to God's instructions and law (**Genesis 26:3-5**). This promise was repeated to Abraham's son, Isaac, and to Abraham's grandson, Jacob (**Genesis 17:21; 26:24; 28:1-4, 13**).

2. God chose Israel so that they could be a model nation to other nations and that through them "*all the families of the earth*" would be blessed (**Genesis 12:3**). He wanted Israel to be "*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (**Exodus 19:6**). Other nations would see that when the Israelites obeyed God, they were blessed, and when they disobeyed God, they would be punished (**Deuteronomy 28**).

Deuteronomy 7:7-8 "*The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt*"

"For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou should be for salvation unto the ends of the earth"
(**Acts 13:47**).

3. Also, the Jewish nation were to preserve Scriptures (God's Word) and to introduce the Messiah to the world, which was accomplished at Pentecost. We read, "*Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God*" (**Romans 3:2**).

What's the implication of "Israel" in the New Testament?

In the New Testament, Peter applies these exact words of **Exodus 19:6** "*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" to the church: "*But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people*" (**1 Peter 2:9**).

Likewise, immediately after Paul's statement in Galatians 3 about Jesus being "*the seed*," he tells his Gentile (non- Jew) converts, "*And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise*" (**Galatians 3:29**).

Thus in the New Testament, the name Israel applies to those who are born in Christ—His Church! In other words, **all believers in Christ are now God's spiritual Israel**.

The church is called the Body of Christ (**1 Corinthians 12:27**), which is one reason why James, when writing to the church, addressed it as the 12 tribes that are scattered abroad (**James 1:1**). From the very beginning of the Church, they have come to understand the nation of Israel to mean a spiritual Body of Christ.

The election of Israel as God's special people become offensive to many people. How do we Biblically understand the election of God's people?

God's promise to Abraham was the basis to elect Israel to be God's people. Israel became a nation after it was delivered from Egypt and when it established a covenant with God at Sinai.

Election can be defined as the choosing of one, or some, person for some divine purpose or end.

The Bible clearly says that it was not that Israel was a greater nation among all the nations of the world. In His desire to reveal Himself to humanity, God chose to do so through a special people. It was in God's sovereignty and love that He chose Israel to be His chosen people.

The election of Israel does not mean that God rejected the other nations. To the contrary, the election of Israel is a call to the Israelites to serve God and the other nations. service to God and to the other nations. Israel was called to be an example of a people who lived according to God's laws and teachings and who also introduced the true God to other nations.

The core of the Biblical doctrine of being elected is the need to live a lifestyle that serves the One who selected us.

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