Tribes of Israel

General Notes[1]

The individual names (Reuban, Levi, Judah, etc.) take on both tribal and geographical naming. So, the descendants of the person Judah, were part of the tribe of Judah, and lived in Judah. Identifying which is being described is important. In the same way, Jacob/Israel is a person and a community of tribes/nation, and a location.

Highlights of Tribes (name meanings from Gen 29:33-30:24, 41:50-52)

Reuben (see, a son - Leah) - Reuban is firstborn and receives the first of the land conquered (Num 32). But because of his sin against Jacob (Gen 35), loses the birthright (given to Joseph – firstborn of Rachel - through the double portion and double blessing in Ephraim and Manasseh – Gen 48). Reuben seems to diminish over time (as predicted in Dt 33) losing all firstborn importance.

Simeon (one who hears - Leah) - Simeon also seems to have lost importance over time (perhaps because of Shechem? – Gen 34). Part of census and encampments in Numbers (ch 1, 2, 26), but not listed by Moses in the Dt 33 blessing. Given its proximity to Judah in the land and Judah's importance, it seems to have been subsumed into Judah although some of its cities remain associated with Simeon (Josh 19:1-9, 1 Chron 4:24-43).

Levi (attached – Leah) - Levi is a unique tribe with no specific geography given although cities and land apportioned to it (Num 35:1-5 – perhaps because of Shechem – Gen 34?). Their portion is God and His tabernacle/temple (Num 18:21-24, Dt 18:1-2).

Judah (praise – Leah) - Judah rises to its greatest prominence through David. Becomes the *de facto* southern kingdom (along with Benjamin and Simeon).

Dan (He has vindicated – Bilhah: Rachel) – Began in central coastal Israel (per map attached), but moved (Judges 18) to the north (see city of Dan on map attached in Naphtali). Dan not mentioned in 1 Chr 2-7 genealogy (because of idolatry – Judges 18:31- and no longer being in their ordained place?)

Naphtali (my struggle – Bilhah; Rachel) – Not mentioned much in scripture

Gad (good fortune – Zilpah; Leah) – changes position in the lists the most but not mentioned much in scripture

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[1] Material throughout this document drawn from: Wolf, C. U. (1946). Some Remarks on the Tribes and Clans of Israel. *The Jewish Quarterly Review, 36*(3), 287-295. https://doi.org/10.2307/1452115. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1452115

Asher (glad – Zilphah; Leah) – not mentioned much in scripture

Issachar (reward – Leah) – often mentioned with Zebulun (late child of Leah) and produced a judge but otherwise not mentioned much in scripture

Zebulun (honor – Leah) – often mentioned with Issachar (late child of Leah) and produced a judge but otherwise not mentioned much in scripture. Not mentioned in 1 Chronicles 2-7, so perhaps subsumed into Issachar by that time?

Joseph (may He add – Rachel) - Joseph (firstborn of Rachel) receives the firstborn double portion and blessing through Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen 48). Whether Joseph or his sons are used in a list seems to be tied to the Tradition of 12 (see Lists of Tribes) more than a specific designation of father/sons. Sometimes all three used but then it is linking them and being specific.

Benjamin (son of my right hand - original Ben-Oni, son of my trouble – Rachel) – primary prominence is the placement of Jerusalem just inside its border with Judah.

Manasseh (forget) – Not the largest by census but the largest land recipients (due to large amounts of livestock – Num 32:1?)

Ephraim (twice fruitful) – combined with Manasseh, largest presence in the north and the northern kingdom becomes known by Ephraim.

Lists of Tribes

Birth Order (Gen 29:31 – 30:22, 35:16-18, 41:50-52)	Jacob's Blessing (Gen 48-49)	Census Leaders (Num 1)	Census (Num 1, 26)	Camps (Num 2)	Moses' Blessing (Dt 33)	Land Allotment (Dt 3:12-20; Josh 13-19)	Chronicles (ch. 2-7)[2]	Ezekiel	Revelation
Reuben (L) Simeon (L) Levi (L) Judah (L) Dan (B) Naphtali (B) Gad (Z) Asher (Z) Issachar (L) Zebulun (L) Joseph (R) Benjamin (R) Manasseh Ephraim	Ephraim Manasseh Reuben Simeon/Levi Judah Zebulun Issachar Dan Gad Asher Naphtali Joseph Benjamin	Reuben Simeon Judah Issachar Zebulun Ephraim (J) Manasseh (J) Benjamin Dan Asher Gad Naphtali	Reuben Simeon Gad Judah Issachar Zebulun Ephraim Manasseh Benjamin Dan Asher Naphtali	Judah (E) Issachar (E) Zebulun (E) Reuben (S) Simeon (S) Gad (S) Levites Ephraim (W) Manasseh (W) Benjamin (W) Dan (N) Asher (N) Naphtali (N)	Reuben Judah Levi Benjamin Joseph (E/M) Zebulun/ Issachar Gad Dan Naphtali Asher	Reuben Gad ½ Manasseh Judah Ephraim ½ Manasseh Benjamin Simeon Zebulun Issachar Asher Naphtali Dan	Judah Simeon Rueben Gad ½ Manasseh Levi Issachar Benjamin Naphtali ½ Manasseh Ephraim Asher	Dan Asher Naphtali Manasseh Ephraim Reuben Judah Levi Benjamin Simeon Issachar Zebulun Gad	Judah Reuben Gad Asher Naphtali Manasseh Simeon Levi Issachar Zebulun Joseph Benjamin

Notes:

Generally, it is difficult to assign an ordering that fits perfectly. However, very broadly, there seems to be several, overlapping frameworks at play:

- Birth – Obviously the Birth Order, but also Jacob's Blessing, Census Leaders, Census, and Camps which group by birth mother
- Geography – Land Allotment is clearly by Trans-Jordan (Reuben, Gad, half Manasseh), Judah and Ephraim (leading tribes in Israel), and then surrounding lesser tribes
- Spiritual – Levi, when mentioned after Pentateuch, is almost always at the center of the list representing God in their midst
- Tradition of 12 – There is a preference to group in 12 tribes even at the expense of leaving a tribe(s) out

Reuben, not surprisingly as firstborn, is almost always near the top; Dan, Naphtali, Asher (handmaid sons) almost always near bottom; Gad moves around a lot

Judah takes place of prominence (because of Reuben, Simeon, Levi sins?)

Joseph is sometimes a 'stand-in' introducing or fully representing Ephraim and Manesseh.

[2] Introductory ordering in 1 Chron 2:1-2 - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Joseph, Benjamin, Naphtali, Gad, Asher – generally birth mother.



This represents the original layout of the land.
The tribe of Dan, eventually in Judges, moves up to the northern part of Naphtali (where the city Dan is shown.