Twelve Tribes of Israel
Cultural Insight

The tribes (Hebrew *shebeṭ*) represent an important social and administrative unit in ancient Israel. The Bible describes the tribes as descending from the twelve sons of Jacob and his various wives, and the tribes bear the names of their eponymous ancestors throughout the biblical record. Although Jacob had twelve sons, it is clear from the Bible that the number of tribes differed, since there were also two tribes through Joseph—Ephraim and Manasseh. In fact, Manasseh was treated as two tribes in tribal allotments, and according to 1 Chronicles 27:20–21, the two "half-tribes" had separate princes, or chieftains. Additionally, at times the biblical authors treated descent groups as tribes, such as with the tribe of Machir in Judges 5:14. In general, however, the biblical number is twelve tribes, and this seems to be a symbolic number even if pragmatically that number sometimes fluctuated (see Genesis 49:28).

Thus, according to the account in Exodus, twelve tribes—corresponding to the twelve sons of Jacob—accompanied Moses out of Egypt to Sinai and into the promised land. These tribes seemed to have been formed into some kind of loose league, centered around the Sinai covenant and the worship of Jehovah. The tribes settled various places in the Holy Land. During the period of the judges, the tribes were not united in any political sense, and the judges served various coalitions. The tribes were eventually united into a monarchy, first under Saul, who came from the tribe of Benjamin (see 1 Samuel 10), and then under David, who came from the tribe of Judah (see 2 Samuel 5).

When David's grandson Rehoboam became king and continued the preferential treatment to the tribe of Judah started by his father, Solomon, the northern tribes seceded from the ruling tribe of Judah, forming the Kingdom of Israel to rival the Kingdom of Judah governed by David's heirs (1 Kings 12). Most of the Israelite tribes were associated with the north, while Judah, Benjamin, and Levi were associated with

the south. In 721 BC the Kingdom of Israel was destroyed, and its people were carried off by the Neo-Assyrian Empire (see 2 Kings 15). These northern tribes became known as the lost ten tribes and passed from history into legend, although the Book of Mormon makes it clear that God still knows where they are (see 3 Nephi 17:4). Similarly, in 586 BC the Neo-Babylonian Empire carried Judah into captivity (see 2 Kings 25). These descendants of Judah returned to the Holy Land under the Persians, and it was Judah that carried the torch of the Israelites into the New Testament.

Related verses

Genesis 49:28

Exodus 1:1–5

Exodus 24:4

Exodus 39:14

Numbers 1:1–4

Numbers 31:1–5

Numbers 32:28

Numbers 34:13–15

Deuteronomy 1:15–23

Deuteronomy 12:14

Deuteronomy 33

Joshua 3:11–13

Joshua 4:1–9

Joshua 7:14

Judges 5:14–18

Judges 20:2

1 Samuel 2:28

1 Samuel 10:19

2 Samuel 5:1

2 Samuel 19:9

1 Kings 11:31–36

Ezra 6:17

Psalm 78:54–56

Psalm 105:35–38

Psalm 122:4

Isaiah 4:6

Isaiah 63:17–18

Ezekiel 45:8

Ezekiel 47:13–21
Ezekiel 48:31–35
Hosea 5:9
Zechariah 9:1

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