

## About the Twelve Tribes

Question: Do the Hebrews still exist as the historic twelve tribes?

1. This is a complex question because of subtleties of distinction and commonality in the terms, Hebrew, Jew, Israelite. Here is a short overview:
  - A. Abram is the first identified Hebrew (**GEN 14:13**) from whom Isaac, Jacob and the twelve patriarchs came who are the heads of the twelve tribes.  
**DEU 27:12-13 c/w GEN 49:28.**
    1. This listing of twelve tribes differs from the list of the twelve tribes which would receive an allotment of land in Canaan.
    2. Levi was given no allotment since his inheritance was the LORD, not land.  
**DEU 10:9.**
    3. Joseph's inheritance was realized in his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, each of whom were given a tribal allotment of land. **GEN 48:5-6; JOS 14:4-5.**
  - B. The twelve tribes which became the *nation* of Israel after the exodus from Egypt were emphatically a Hebrew nation genealogically but others from outside the Abrahamic lineage were eventually grafted in among them. **EXO 12:48; JOS 6:25; ACT 2:10.**
  - C. "Jew" was a later term derived patronymically from *Judah* to whom the sceptre was promised in prophecy by Jacob. **GEN 49:10.**
  - D. In the Book of Jeremiah, "Jew" and "Hebrew" were basically synonyms. **JER 34:9.**
  - E. The national term, "Israel" continued to identify Judah after the *ten tribes of Israel* (**1KI 11:31-35**) were removed from their inherited lands by the Assyrians. **MAL 2:11.**
2. God had threatened Israel that their sin would cause them to be scattered among the nations (**LEV 26:32-33; DEU 4:27**) and this happened incrementally.
  - A. The *ten* tribes which constituted Israel (owing to the revolt under Jeroboam, **1KI 12:16-21**) were conquered and dispossessed by the Assyrians who took them out of the land and replaced them with aliens who became known as the Samaritans. **2KI 17:6, 22-24.**
  - B. Later, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were similarly scattered. **JER 9:16.**
    - (1) A remnant returned after the Babylonian captivity. **EZR 9:8; NEH 1:3**, etc.
    - (2) Also at that time many other people *became Jews* (**EST 8:17**), which produced a hybrid genealogical/proselytical national make-up.
  - C. Of the two scatterings there was produced a group which were "...the dispersed among the Gentiles..." (**JOH 7:35**) which did not dwell in the land of Canaan.
  - D. The identity of the twelve tribes was still intact in apostolic times.  
**MAT 19:28; ACT 26:6-7; JAM 1:1.**
  - E. Paul laid claim to being a pure descendant of Abraham through the tribe of Benjamin.  
**2CO 11:22 c/w PHIL 3:5.**
3. The destruction of Jerusalem and Judea by the Romans certainly took its toll, numerically speaking, on the twelve tribes, since the overthrow coincided with the return of many Jews to the land for an appointed feast (*The Complete Works of Josephus*, pp. 582-583).
  - A. The slaughter and the dispersal of survivors (**LUK 21:24**) certainly imperiled the continuity of the twelve tribes but the fact that there were survivors suggests the preservation of the tribes.
  - B. Also, the representation of the Jews at the feasts was incumbent only upon the "...men children..." (**EXO 34:23**). Therefore, besides rebels who might have refused to leave their foreign settlements to attend the feast, women and young boys may have stayed at

- home in their settlements in the diaspora and been able to continue the tribal lines.
- C. The ancient rabbin did not deem **EXO 23:17; 34:23** binding upon infant males, idiots, the very aged or the infirmed (*John Gill's Commentary* on EXO 23:17).
  - D. The tribal affiliation of Jewish Christians was likely preserved by fleeing Jerusalem before the destruction. **LUK 21:20-21**.
  - E. Therefore, it is possible that the twelve tribes' identities were not annihilated. However, with the destruction, dispossession and dispersion, the most important issue was survival, not the tribal identities affiliated with a lost land.
4. Genealogical records of the tribes were destroyed in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., thus obliterating official documentation of any Jew's ancestral claim: "The [Hebrew] Rabbis affirm that after the [Babylonian] Captivity the Jews were most careful in keeping their pedigrees (Babyl. Gemar. Gloss. fol. xiv, 2). Since, however, the period of their destruction as a nation by the Romans, all their tables of descent seem to be lost, and now they are utterly unable to trace the pedigree of any one who might lay claim to be their promised Messiah" (3.771; emp.WJ). (*McClintock and Strong Cyclopedia*).
- A. This would have left any preservation of tribal identity up to the local claims and traditions of those who survived, therefore putting a big question mark on the authenticity of such claims.
  - B. This seems to be corroborated by the fact that modern day Jews have been trying to reconstruct tribal lineages *scientifically* (particularly of the Cohen/priestly line in Levi but this requires assumptions and does little for establishing other tribal identities).
  - C. Some modern Jewish apologists claim that there was no need for ancient genealogical documents, affirming that the records were preserved *orally* in the diaspora. This, however, is contradicted by the Scriptural emphasis on the *books of generations* (**GEN 5:1; 1CH 9:1 c/w EZR 2:59-62; MAT 1:1**), by their own Talmudic writings, and by common sense.
5. It thus seems reasonable that the twelve tribes existed beyond 70 A.D. but how could this be genealogically proven to a certainty in the absence of preserved documentation?
- A. The Khazar issue complicates the matter since they were racially of Turkish-Mongol stock but "became" Jews for political expediency.
  - B. Fables like Anglo-Israelism or Mormonism only muddy the question.
6. That there would be an Israelite identity preserved seems clear from **ROM 11:13-25**.
- A. Paul was speaking of those who were *his flesh*. **ROM 11:1, 14**.
  - B. God has his own among Israel who are blinded "...until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in" (**ROM 11:25**) and the times of the Gentiles are the *last times* which continued after 70 A.D. unto the general resurrection yet future.  
**GAL 4:4 c/w HEB 1:1-2 c/w ACT 24:15**.
  - C. Therefore it would be an overstatement that there are no Israelites after 70 A.D.
7. The only relevant tribes under the New Testament are the *spiritual* tribes of **REV 7:4-10** which are the multitude of the redeemed regardless of nation, lineage, race, etc. The significance of genealogies is an artifact of a discarded system. **1TI 1:4; TIT 3:9**.
- A. This list of tribes differs from O.T. listings.
    - 1. Where is Dan? Why are both Joseph and Manasseh listed but not Ephraim?
    - 2. This list is a spiritual list of God's true Israel which are His elect from all nations.  
**GAL 3:29**.

- B. The meanings of these names may be applied to God's children.
1. Judah = *praise*. **EPH 1:6; ROM 2:29.**
  2. Reuben = *behold a son*. **HEB 2:13; 1JO 3:1.**
  3. Gad = *that troop*. **HEB 2:10.**
  4. Aser = *happy*. **DEU 33:29; 1PE 4:14.**
  5. Nephtalim = *my wrestling*. **EPH 6:12; ROM 7:21-23.**
  6. Manasses = *causing to forget*. **PHIL 3:13; ISA 65:17.**
  7. Simeon = *hearing*. **JOH 5:24-29.**
  8. Levi = *joined*. **ROM 8:17-18; EPH 5:30-32.**
  9. Issachar = *bearing hire, reward*. **1CO 6:19-20.**
  10. Zabulon = *dwelling*. **JOH 14:17; REV 21:3.**
  11. Joseph = *adding or increaser*. **JOH 15:5; COL 2:19.**
  12. Benjamin = *son of the right hand*. **MAT 25:33.**
- C. The true Jew is one inwardly. **ROM 2:28-29 c/w REV 2:9; 3:9.**
- D. The Israel of God is the church. **GAL 3:27-29; 6:16.**
- E. As promised, God now calls His people by another name. **ISA 65:15 c/w ACT 11:26.**
- F. Paul even discouraged "spiritual" tribalism. **1CO 3:4-7.**