

The Family of Abraham

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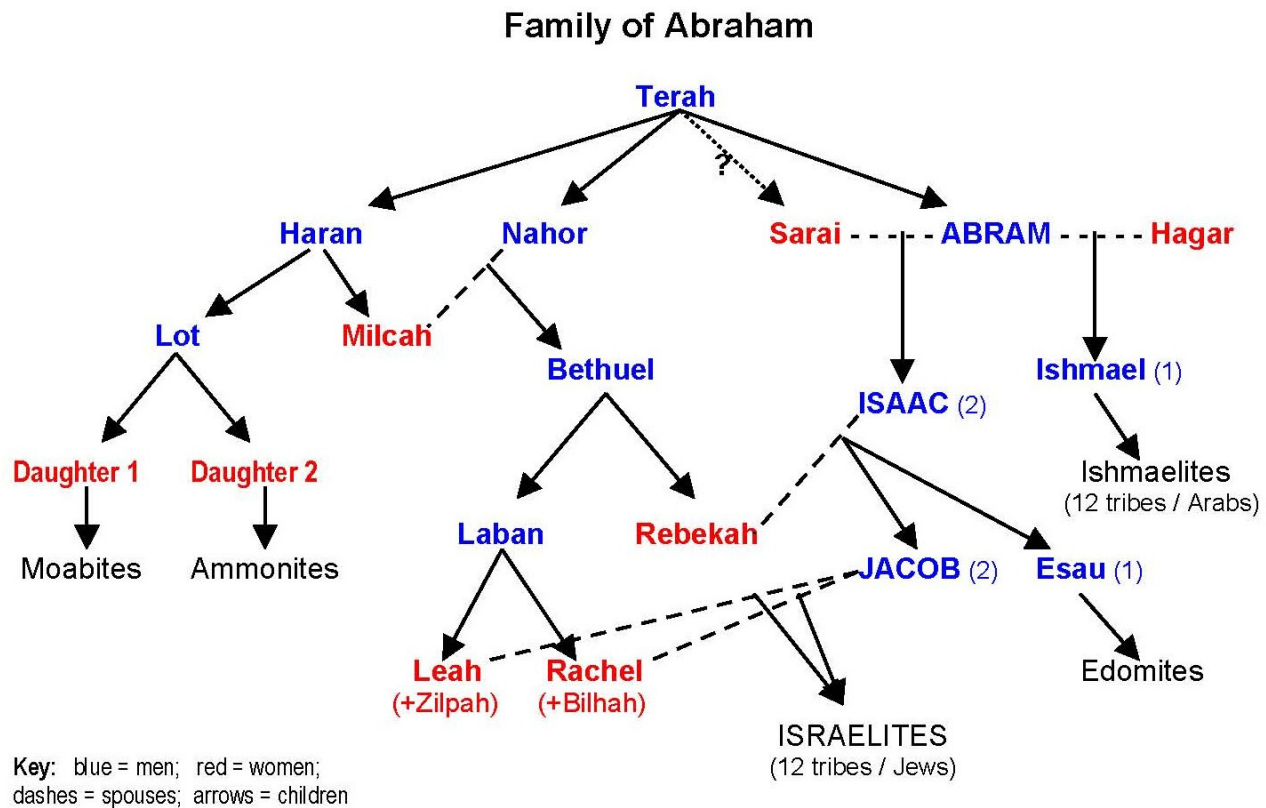
Various biblical passages describe the ***complex inter-relationships*** in the family of Abraham (originally named Abram). Contrary to modern Western customs, it was acceptable in ancient times to marry close family relatives, including cousins and nieces. It was evidently also common for men to have more than one wife, and even to have children with women who were not their wives (slaves or concubines). For example, Abraham's first son was the child of his wife's slave-girl; and one biblical tradition even says that his wife, Sarah, was actually his half-sister. Similarly, the twelve sons of Jacob have four different mothers: the two wives of Jacob (who are his first cousins) and two other women (slave-girls of his wives).

A prominent feature of the biblical texts is also the ***explanation of tribal origins*** through various genealogies. Thus, the *Israelites* (the twelve tribes of Israel) see themselves as the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. In contrast, groups like the *Ishmaelites* and *Edomites* (to the south and southeast of the Israelites) are said to be descendants of Abraham's other children and grandchildren, while the neighboring *Moabites* and *Ammonites* (west of Israel) are described as descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew.

Another important aspect of the biblical stories is what could be called ***family rivalries and disputes***, esp. when younger sons usurp the inheritance rights of their older brothers. Thus, Abraham's inheritance is passed on to Isaac (not the first-born Ishmael), and then to Jacob (not his elder brother Esau).

Combining all the above points helps to explain both the close relationships and the bitter rivalries between the ancient Israelites and the neighboring Semitic peoples. The Israelites (and modern Jews!) believe that the promises God made to Abraham (esp. that his descendants shall possess the Promised Land forever) were legitimately handed on to them through Isaac and Jacob (as described in the Bible), while the descendants of the other tribes (and modern Arabs!) believe that the land should belong to them, since they are descendants of the elder sons (and thus the rightful heirs) of Abraham.

The following charts can help us visualize some of these complex relationships:



[Click here for a PDF version of this chart](#)

NOTES: (unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are from the **Book of Genesis**)

- **Terah:** from Ur of the Chaldeans; has three sons; wife not named (11:26-32; cf. Luke 3:34).
- **Haran:** dies in Ur before his father dies; wife not named; son Lot, daughters Milcah & Iscah (11:27-28).
- **Nahor:** marries **Milcah**, daughter of his brother Haran (11:29); have eight sons, incl. Bethuel (22:20-24).
- **Abram:** main character of Gen 12–25; recipient of God's promises; name changed to **ABRAHAM** (17:5); sons Ishmael (by Hagar) and Isaac (by Sarah); after Sarah's death, takes another wife, **Keturah**, who has six sons (25:1-4), including Midian, ancestor of the **Midianites** (37:28-36).
- **Lot:** son of Haran, thus nephew of Abram, who takes care of him (11:27–14:16; 18:17–19:29); wife and two daughters never named; widowed daughters sleep with their father and bear sons, who become ancestors of the **Moabites** and **Ammonites** (19:30-38).
- **Sarai:** Abram's wife, thus Terah's daughter-in-law (11:29-31); Abram also calls her his "sister," which seems deceptive in one story (12:10-20); but in another story Abram insists she really is his half-sister (his father's daughter by another wife; 20:1-18); originally childless, but in old age has a son, Isaac (16:1–21:7); name changed to **SARAH** (17:15); dies and is buried in Hebron (23:1-20).
- **Hagar:** Sarah's Egyptian slave-girl; mother of Abram's first son, Ishmael; much conflict with Sarah after his birth; even more after the birth of Sarah's son, Isaac (16:1–21:21).
- **Ishmael:** first-born son of Abraham, by Hagar (16:1–17:27); wife or wives never named, but has **12 sons** (25:12-16), the ancestors of 12 tribes of **Ishmaelites** (37:25-28). - *see below*

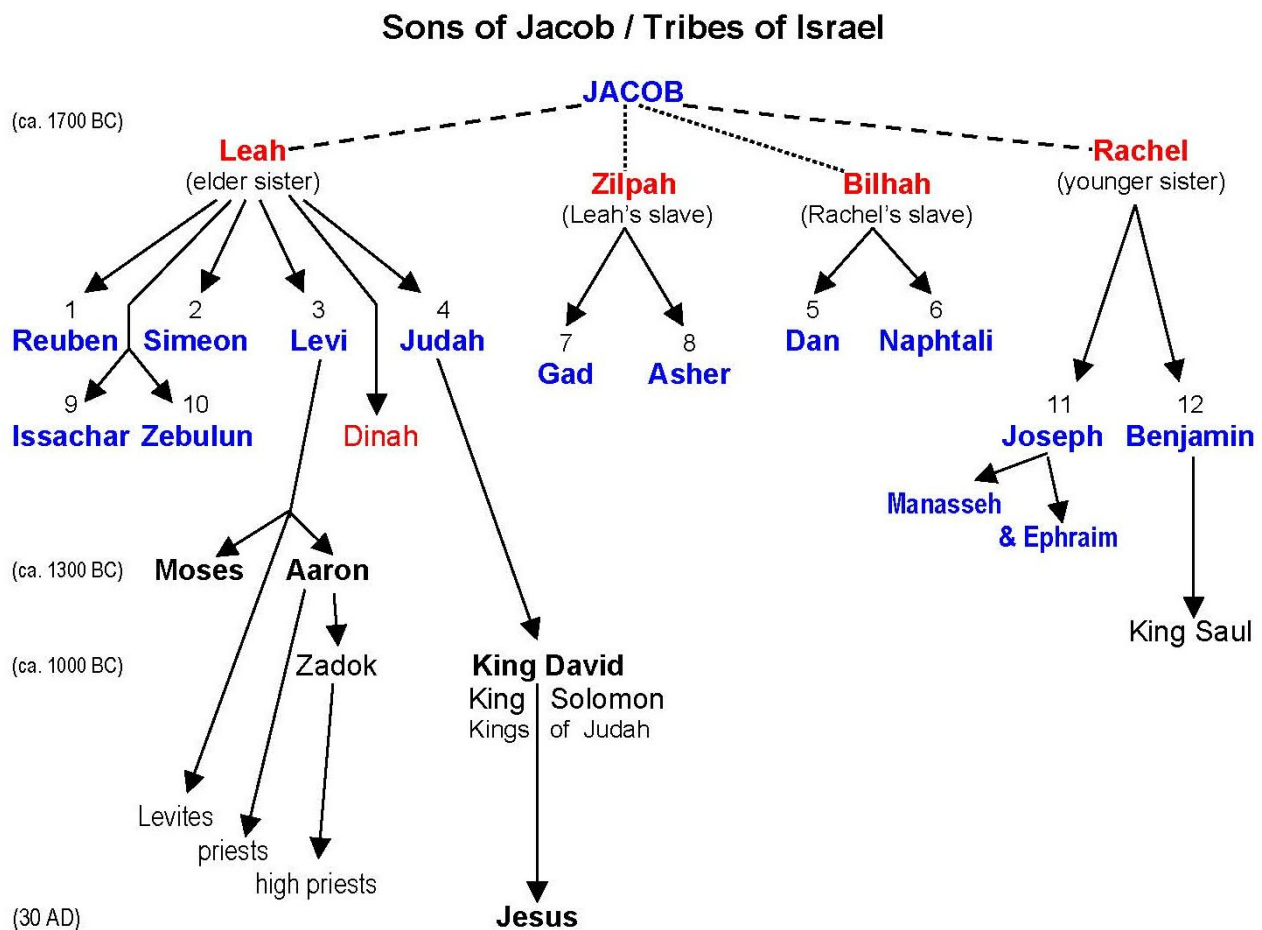
- **Isaac:** second son of Abraham, by wife Sarah, despite her old age (17:15-21; 21:1–35:29); marries Rebekah, who has twin sons, Esau & Jacob.
- **Bethuel:** youngest son of Nahor & Milcah; wife unnamed; father of Rebekah (22:23) and Laban (24:29).
- **Rebekah:** daughter of Bethuel (22:23); becomes wife of Isaac (24:15–25:20); favors their younger son.
- **Laban:** son of Bethuel, brother of Rebekah; has extensive interactions with Jacob (24:29–31:55).
- **Esau:** elder twin son of Isaac & Rebekah (25:25); names of wives differ in two traditions (26:34 & 28:9 vs. 36:2-3); one is a daughter of Ishmael; his sons are ancestors of the Edomites (36:1-43).
- **Jacob:** younger twin son of Isaac & Rebekah (25:26); conflicts with Esau (25:27–27:46); marries Leah and Rachel, daughters of his uncle Laban (27:43–29:30); name changed to **ISRAEL** (32:28); has **12 sons** (with two wives + two slave-girls), ancestors of the **Israelites** or "[12 Tribes of Israel](#)" (29:31–49:33). - *see below*
- **Curiosity about the ages of the Patriarchs:**
 - **Abraham** lived 175 years (Gen 25:7), which equals 7×5^2
 - **Isaac** lived 180 years (Gen 35:28), which equals 5×6^2
 - **Jacob** lived 147 years (Gen 47:28), which equals 3×7^2

The Bible says very little else about the "**Twelve Tribes of Ismaelites**" aside from naming the twelve sons of Ishmael in Gen 25:12-16 and again in 1 Chron 1:29-31.

- **Gen 25:12-16** – "These are the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave-girl, bore to Abraham. / **These are the names of the sons of Ishmael**, named in the order of their birth: **Nebaioth**, the firstborn of Ishmael; and **Kedar**, **Adbeel**, **Mibsam**, / **Mishma**, **Dumah**, **Massa**, / **Hadad**, **Tema**, **Jetur**, **Naphish**, and **Kedemah**. / These are the **sons of Ishmael** and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes."
- **1 Chron 1:29-31** – "These are their genealogies: the firstborn of Ishmael, **Nebaioth**; and **Kedar**, **Adbeel**, **Mibsam**, / **Mishma**, **Dumah**, **Massa**, **Hadad**, **Tema**, / **Jetur**, **Naphish**, and **Kedemah**. These are the **sons of Ishmael**."
 - **Adbeel**, **Massa**, **Kedemah** - not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible
 - **Mibsam & Mishma** - not mentioned elsewhere, but different people with the same name appear in 1 Chron 4:25-26
 - **Hadad** - not mentioned elsewhere, but several other biblical characters are named Hadad, Ben-Hadad, Hadadezer, etc.
- **Other biblical references to some of the sons of Ishmael** (aside from Gen 25:12-16 and 1 Chron 1:29-31)
 - **Nebaioth** - also in **Gen 28:9; 36:3; Isa 60:7**
 - **Kedar** - also in **Ps 120:5; Prov 21:4; Songs 1; Isa 21:16; 21:17; 42:11; 60:7; Jer 2:10; 49:28; Ezek 27:21**
 - **Dumah** - also in **Josh 15:52; Isa 21:11**
 - **Tema** - also in **Job 6:19; Isa 21:14; Jer 25:23**
 - **Jetur & Naphish** - also in **1 Chron 5:19**

The Hebrew Bible describes the "**Twelve Tribes of Israel**" as descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob (also named Israel), with four different mothers. The births of the *twelve sons* (and the significance of their names) are described in chronological order in the book of Genesis (29:31–30:24 & 35:16-20). The Bible contains several different listings of the [twelve tribes](#). Each tribe has its own characteristics and eventually obtains its own territory:

- **Reuben** is the first-born son, and thus sometimes exercises a leadership role among this brothers; but he later loses favor and prominence.
- The **tribe of Joseph** (through his sons *Manasseh* and *Ephraim*) becomes the largest and most prominent by the time the Israelites enter the Promised Land and divide it among themselves.
- The **tribe of Levi** is uniquely important, not only because of Moses and Aaron, but since they become the *priestly tribe* (all the sons of Levi are priests, while members of any other tribe cannot be priests). The Levites do not receive a separate territory of their own, but rather live scattered among all the other tribes, where they serve as priests for the whole people.
- Although the first king of Israel (Saul) is from the tribe of Benjamin, the **tribe of Judah** becomes known as the *royal tribe*, due to the promise God makes to King David that his descendants will rule over Israel forever (2 Sam 7).



Notes:

- **Jacob's twelve sons** are first mentioned in the order of their births, in Genesis 29:31–30:24 & 35:16-20.

- **Leah** (elder wife): 1) **Reuben**, 2) **Simeon**, 3) **Levi**, 4) **Judah**; later also 9) **Issachar**, 10) **Zebulun**
- **Bilhah** (Rachel's slave): 5) **Dan**, 6) **Naphtali**
- **Zilpah** (Leah's slave): 7) **Gad**, 8) **Asher**
- **Rachel** (younger wife): 11) **Joseph**, 12) **Benjamin**
- **Manasseh & Ephraim** – sons of Joseph, whose descendants figure prominently in the later history of Israel
- **Moses and Aaron** – leaders of the Israelites at the time of their migration out of Egypt and wandering in the Sinai desert
- **Kings David & Solomon** – the two greatest rulers of the united Kingdom of Israel, from about 1100 to 930 BCE
- **Tribe of Levi** – becomes known as the “priestly tribe,” since all cultic & temple officials had to belong to this tribe
- **Tribe of Judah** – becomes known as the “royal tribe,” since all later Kings of Judah were descendants of King David

See also my [Overview of Israelite and Jewish History](#)



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