

Benjamin

From International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Benjamin ben -jə-min [Heb *binyāmîn*—‘son of the right hand’].

The youngest of Jacob’s sons, the only one to be born in Palestine; and the tribe named for him. According to tradition, his mother Rachel died in giving him birth (Gen. 35:16–20), and the name Benoni, “son of my sorrow” (Gen. 35:18), was given by the dying Rachel; Jacob, however, named him Benjamin.

Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh formed a special group among the tribes, all of them being sons of Rachel. Some scholars believe that as “sons of Rachel” these tribes were goatherds at the time of their wanderings, since the name Rachel in Hebrew means “young goat,” and that the other tribes were cattle breeders inasmuch as they were related to Leah (“cow” in Akkadian; “wild cow” in Arabic). The tribes descendant from Rachel finally settled in Canaan in an uninterrupted stretch of country. As the territory of Benjamin lay S of that of Manasseh and Ephraim, i.e., to the right of them, some scholars have believed that their name was given them after their settlement. The tradition of Benjamin having been born in Palestine may mean, according to some scholars, that this tribe had already settled there before the coming to Canaan of Jacob and his sons.

At the time of the Exodus the number of men of war in the tribe is given as 35,400; at the time of the second census as 45,600 (Nu. 1:37; 26:41); their place was with the standard of the camp of Ephraim, W of the tabernacle; their leader was Abidan son of Gideoni (Nu. 2:22). Benjamin was represented among the spies by Palti son of Raphu (Nu. 13:9). At the time of the division of the land the leader of Benjamin was Elidad son of Chislon (34:21).

The tribe of Benjamin settled between Ephraim to the north and Judah to the south. To the west their neighbor was the tribe of Dan (Josh. 18:11).

The northern border started from the Jordan over

against Jericho, then continued to the west toward Bethaven, the northern part of the Wilderness of Judah. From there it turned NW to Bethel, then to Ataroth-addar and W to the neighborhood of Beth-horon. The western border crossed the town of Kiriath-jearim and then turned east. The southern border crossed the waters of Nephtoah and then ran S of Jerusalem through Beth-hoglah and joined the river Jordan again near its mouth (Jgs. 18:11–20).

The eastern parts of the territory of Benjamin were seized by force at the beginning of the Israelite conquest of Canaan. But most of their territory was acquired through the treaty between the Israelites and the four Hivite cities (Josh. 9:7). This situation is reflected in the list of Benjaminite cities (18:21–28), which is divided into two groups of a dozen cities each. The first group, the conquered area, consists of the cities of the southern Jordan Valley E of the watershed; the second group of cities, which came to them through the treaty, lay W of the watershed.

The first of the judges that emerged in Israel after the conquest was Ehud of the tribe of Benjamin, who fought the Moabites. If we trace in the genealogical lists the names that reflect place names, it appears that during this period Benjamin expanded northward and southward, and later also to the west when the tribe of Dan left its previous territory. The Benjaminites were men of war and famous slingers (Gen. 49:27; Jgs. 3:15; 1 Ch. 8:40; 12:2). The story told in Jgs. 19–21 presents many difficulties that cannot be discussed here. The atrocity committed by the Benjaminites and the terrible punishment they suffered for it illustrate certain features of life in those lawless times when there was no king in Israel. The refusal of the men of Jabesh-Gilead (of the tribe of Manasseh) to take part in the battle of requital against Benjamin provides the background for the special relationship between the Benjaminites and the inhabitants of that city. It explains why Saul and the Benjaminites came to their aid when Jabesh-Gilead was attacked by the Ammonites (1 S. 11:1–3).

Benjamin was also the first tribe to oppose the Philistines. From among the Benjaminites arose the first king, Saul. After his death David a Judahite, became king. David did not easily win the loyalty of the Benjaminites; and one of them, Shimei son of Gera, a descendant of Saul, took part in Absalom's rebellion (2 S. 16:5). Sheba son of Bichri led the revolt against David after the quelling of Absalom's rebellion (2 S. 21:1f). Owing to David's peaceful policy, however, the Ben-

jaminites finally joined him and remained loyal to his son Solomon even after the division of the kingdom. From that time the history of the tribe is the history of the kingdom of Judah.

Other Benjaminites of distinction were the prophet Jeremiah (1:1), Esther and Mordecai (Est. 2:5), and the Apostle Paul (Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:5).

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