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Q&A#105 Numbering the Tribes

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Today's question: "Could you clarify for lay readers of the Bible (who might be getting confused or forgetting things from one book to another) by giving an overview of how the tribes of Israel are numbered as twelve, and differences between how the tribes are numbered (or in how they are named) throughout the biblical narrative?"

See also my earlier video on the exclusion of Dan in Revelation 12:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cUB0AagCBQ>

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:
<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, could you clarify for lay readers of the Bible who might be getting confused or forgetting things from one book to another, by giving an overview of how the tribes of Israel are numbered as 12, and differences between how the tribes are numbered, or in how they are named, throughout the biblical narrative? Sure, if you go to Genesis chapter 30, you'll see 11 of the tribes mentioned there, as the sons of Jacob born while he was with Laban in Paddam Aram. Now, the last tribe of Benjamin is not mentioned.

Benjamin was born presumably after Joseph goes into Egypt, and he was born as Rachel dies. There are four mothers for the tribes. There is Leah and her handmaid Zilpah, and then there is Rachel and her handmaid Bilhah.

The sons are as follows, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun. Those are all the sons of Leah, and Gad and Asher are through Zilpah. The sons of Rachel, Dan, Naphtali, Joseph, and Benjamin.

Dan and Naphtali are through Bilhah, and they were born before Joseph and Benjamin. Leah had Gad and Asher through Zilpah before Issachar and Zebulun were born. Her womb was opened up again.

Now, at the end of the book of Genesis, in chapter 48, we see the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, brought to Jacob, who blesses them. And he mixes up the order intentionally, and gives the firstborn blessing to the younger son. Now, what we see in that is that Joseph is being given the firstborn portion himself.

If we look in First Chronicles 5, it mentions this. So now there are 12 sons of Jacob, and there is a double portion given to Joseph, which means that there are 13 portions, as it were. And at that point, you have two sons of Joseph counted as distinct tribes.

So now you have 13. You have Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Benjamin, and then instead of Joseph, you have Ephraim and Manasseh. So there are 13 tribes, Joseph being counted for by Ephraim and Manasseh.

Now, there is one tribe that does not have a regular portion of the land. They have cities, and they have certain other things, but their portion is God himself. They have his service in the temple, and they serve as Levites.

That is the tribe of Levi. So you have now 12 tribes and the tribe of Levi, which leads to 14 altogether that can be counted as tribes for some purpose or other. So you have Ephraim and Manasseh as the two extra, and then you have Joseph that can be counted as a tribe for some purposes.

So, for instance, if you go to the book of Ezekiel, you'll see the portions in the land are for the 12 tribes, and that's including Ephraim and Manasseh, excluding Joseph and Levi. And then Levi has part of the special portion, the holy part. And then you see in the gates of the city, you have Ephraim and Manasseh aren't mentioned.

Joseph is mentioned, and Levi are mentioned. So in this different order, you have a recognition that there are different ways that you can count these tribes. In the case of Revelation, we do not have the tribe of Dan mentioned.

And what we have is the tribe of Joseph mentioned. And then we have the tribe of Levi is included as well. So if you look in Revelation chapter 7, you have Manasseh is

mentioned.

Ephraim is not included. Ephraim, presumably, is the one that has the firstborn portion, is associated with Joseph. So you have Joseph and you have Dan excluded, and you have Levi included.

So the inclusion of Levi is significant in part because Levi is no longer having this special, distinct portion. They're reduced, as it were, to a more regular status of the other tribes. Ephraim, I think, is counted for by Joseph.

In the case of Dan, I've done a video on that, commenting upon Dan's exclusion. But this order, I think, helps to explain why we'll have different mentions at different points. There are 14 potential tribes.

Judah, Levi, Ephraim and Manasseh can be included or excluded, depending upon the particular purpose. And Dan is the surprising exclusion in the case of Revelation. And I've done a video on that.

As we look through this, I think we'll also see the significance of the number 12. That whatever the ordering, whatever the inclusions or exclusions, it will almost invariably be 12. And in the case of the apostles, there are 12 apostles.

They will sit on thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. And they have to make up the number to the 12 after the betrayal of Judas. So there's a sense that this number is significant, that you can't just have any old number.

They are the 12. And even when there's 11 of them, they're still the 12. It's a more formal understanding of this number has a symbolic significance.

And it also needs to have the full complement of people involved. Likewise, when we think about the tribes, the 12 is significant. And understanding how that plays out throughout scripture, I think, is helpful.

I trust this helps to answer the question. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and other videos, please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts.

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Thank you very much for listening. I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless.