

How History and Genetics Define Jewish Diversity and Identity

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Are We All Cousins?

By

Boris Draznin

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To my parents, Roza and Nahum Draznin, and my in-laws,
Judith and Victor Lerman (all of Blessed Memory, ל"ו),
whose identity with Jewish peoplehood was unbreakable
and everlasting.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
People of the Same <i>Book</i> or People of the Same <i>Nation</i> ? <i>Who is a Jew? Can genetics help us answer this question? How does the history of the Jewish diaspora pertain to our search for common roots?</i>	
Chapter 1	8
From Abraham to the Twelve Tribes <i>From the first Hebrew to the nation of tribes—the Kingdom of Israel</i>	
Chapter 2	22
A Few Words About Genetics, Genealogy, and Commercial Genetic Testing <i>DNA, the paternal Y chromosome, and maternal mitochondrial DNA: Searching for our ancestors</i>	
Chapter 3	37
The Birth of the Diaspora <i>A united Kingdom of Israel splits into the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah: Wars among the tribes and wars with Assyria and Babylon</i>	
Chapter 4	47
The First Mizrahim: Assyrian and Babylonian Exile <i>Resettlement in the Middle East: Jews of Yemen and Iraq, Samaritans, and Karaites</i>	

Chapter 5	59
Jews in Africa	
<i>The first of the Ten Lost Tribes: Ethiopian Jews and the tribes of Igbo and Lemba</i>	
Chapter 6	71
Moving East	
<i>Persian, Georgian, and Mountain Jews</i>	
Chapter 7	82
Moving Farther East	
<i>The Jews of Central Asia (Bukhara), India, and China</i>	
Chapter 8	90
Jews in the Greek and Roman Empires: The Final Exile	
<i>A move to North Africa and Europe</i>	
Chapter 9	99
Sephardic Jews	
<i>Spain, Portugal, the Mediterranean Shores, the Balkans, and Turkey</i>	
Chapter 10	109
Ashkenazi Jews	
<i>From the Rhine Valley to Eastern Europe—and all over the world</i>	
Chapter 11	121
Are We Indeed All Cousins?	
<i>Ethnicity, religion, culture, and our gene pool</i>	
Appendix	127
Glossary.....	135
Suggested Reading	139

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INTRODUCTION

PEOPLE OF THE SAME *BOOK* OR PEOPLE OF THE SAME *NATION*?

Who is a Jew? Can genetics help us answer this question? How does the history of the Jewish diaspora pertain to our search for common roots?

The tree of life, or *etz chaim* in Hebrew, is a dominant tree of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9), growing next to the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Does this Jewish tree of life—fed, nurtured, and held together by strong ancestral roots—support the growth and strength of the 5,000-year-old trunk of peoplehood, while allowing the branches of tribes and individuality to bear the fruit of immortality and rebirth of our souls? Can this tree of life be a true representation of Jewish diversity connected by the common roots of Jewish identity?

These are perhaps impossible questions to answer, but certainly ones worth exploring, and to do so, we need to navigate through the history of the Jewish people and try to find supporting scientific evidence in genetics and genealogy while realizing that time is tirelessly working against us: wars, disasters (both natural and man-made), and human migration, along with love and intermarriage, take us further and further away from the origin of the Jewish nation. Nevertheless, what we know today sheds a few rays of light, however dim or bright, on the potential connection between Jewish diversity and Jewish identity.

Who Is a Jew?

Let us look closely at this question of Jewish identity. Is this a rhetorical question that requires no answer, either because the answers are so obvious that everyone knows them or there are no answers at all? Or is it an open-

ended question that explores vast possibilities and initiates an expansive philosophical (and religious) discourse?

A seemingly simple question, “Who is a Jew?” has no simple answer. To some, it is so obvious that it doesn’t require an answer. And yet, this basic question about Jewish identity has been asked for at least 2,000 years—certainly from the birth of another monotheistic religion—and it still has no widely accepted answer.

Because Judaism refers to a religion, a nation, and a culture, being Jewish pertains to religious observance, peoplehood, ethnic and genetic ties, as well as to social aspects of life. To some, a Jew is anyone born to a Jewish mother, regardless of whether this person follows any Jewish traditions or laws. This definition is simple and is supported by the orthodox traditional law (*Halakha*), which does not recognize patrilinear descent and requires that for a person with only a Jewish father to be considered a Jew, a formal conversion must be performed under the auspices of the Orthodox Rabbi. This interpretation may not align well with progressive views in the 21st century. To others, a Jew can also be born to a Jewish father and raised Jewish, or even be someone who feels Jewish and considers themselves Jewish, whatever that means in their eyes.

This then naturally leads to questions about converts to Judaism. Are they Jewish? Indeed, many converts are more Jewish in their religious observance than thousands of secular Jews born to Jewish mothers! While all Jewish religious denominations agree that a person may become Jewish by conversion, the issue of conversion (the process) is not as simple as it seems, because Orthodox Judaism does not recognize either Conservative or Reform conversions. This controversy is far from settled.

Finally, on a societal level, whether one considers oneself Jewish or not can often be irrelevant. What matters is whether *others* consider you Jewish or not. In Nazi Germany, even those who converted away from Judaism were still considered Jewish. In this context, being Jewish was a matter of ethnic belonging and had nothing to do with religion. According to the documents on display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Executive Order on the Law on the Alteration of Family and Personal Names, issued August 17, 1938, required German Jews bearing names of “non-Jewish” origin to adopt an additional name: Israel for men and Sara for women. Even people of mixed Jewish and non-Jewish heritage

(labeled *Mischling*, a pejorative term codified in the Nazi racial laws of 1935 that described a person of Jewish and Aryan ancestry) were considered Jewish if some of their grandparents were Jewish. This same governmental attitude was prevalent in Soviet Russia, where Jews were considered an ethnic group even though the society was doctrinally atheistic (and neither Jews nor non-Jews could practice their religion without punishment).

According to the latest estimates, today there are approximately 14 to 15 million self-identified Jews on this planet, with the majority living in Israel and the United States. But, based on the questions around what it means to be a Jew, what does this number mean? Are they all, or at least a substantial number of them, related genetically to the ancient Hebrews who lived in the land of Canaan about 3,000 years ago? Or are they united by a common religion and common beliefs in one God, reading the same Torah, though interpreted in somewhat distinct ways by the Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform rabbis? If it's the latter, ethnicity or peoplehood becomes less relevant. If it's the former, and being a Jew means to belong to a common ancestral group and to share ethnic roots as well as religious ones, then many of us are indeed distant "cousins," regardless of whether we are believers or secular Jews.

Essentially, the question is how much—and what—do these 14 to 15 million Jews living today mostly in Israel, Europe, South and North America, and Australia have in common with the members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Babylonian and Persian Jews, Jews of the ancient Greco-Roman Empire, those in medieval Europe, and the Jews of 19th century Germany, Poland, and Russia?

Even though the worldwide Jewish population is small in comparison with most of the world's nations (0.2% of the world population), the diversity is astounding: Jews of Africa, Jews of Eastern Europe, Jews of Asia and the Middle East, Jews of the Caucasus, and Jews of Iberia come with a multitude of racial and ethnic characteristics. But do they have common roots in the ancient world that justify a designation of peoplehood on top of their common religion?

Do We Really Want to Know?

Then again, is there a need to find this out? Does it matter at all? If Jewish identity is defined primarily by religion, culture, and traditions, it is highly unlikely that genetics will ever take top spot as the “priority of Jewishness.” Isn’t it enough to believe and worship the same God, “*Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad*,” and fulfill the 613 mitzvot to be Jewish? Will a genetic kinship ever be equal to spiritual affinity?

And is there even a way to find this out? One would hope this question could be answered with the help of archeology, history, and genetics. However, despite the enormous progress in these scientific fields, it remains an open-ended question, one that invites various branches of science to uncover the mystery of Jewish identity.

Assuming we wish to find out the missing links among our diverse Jewish roots, can genetics help us? Even though rapid scientific advances will improve our knowledge in genetics and expand our understanding of real or perceived kinship among the Jewish populations, the issue of Jewish identity will continue to challenge our imagination, curiosity and, beyond all, our consensus.

“Crypto-Jews” and the Complexity of Ancestry

The concept of “crypto-Jews” is well known in Jewish communities around the world, it historically has described Sephardic Jews who publicly converted to Christianity (or Islam) but continued practicing Judaism in secret. (The term comes from the Greek word *krypsos*, meaning hidden.) As decades and centuries passed, many of these new Christians became “true” Christians in subsequent generations, unaware of their Jewish origins. Genetically, however, they continued to carry the genes of their Jewish ancestors, which they passed on to their offspring.

The same happened to many Jews who converted to Islam or various Christian denominations in the Greco-Roman world (as well as *Neofiti*, Italian crypto-Jews in Sicily, and *Susiti*, crypto Jews in the Holy Roman Empire). In fact, Jewish diversity accelerated in the Roman times with the rise in Christianity. Not only Jesus and all of his Apostles were Jewish by birth and practices, but all their immediate followers were Jews as well. At the time, they did not see any conflict between being Jewish,

following Jewish law, and accepting Jesus as Messiah. As the two religious movements diverged and thousands of gentiles joined the Christian Church, the genetic pool of Jewish Christians mixed with that of various gentiles. The wave of conversions continued to evolve in the 17–19th centuries in France, England, Germany, and Russia, resulting in thousands, if not millions, of people unaware of their Jewish ancestry. It is evident that as the Jewish Christians eventually abandoned their Judaism in favor of other faiths (or as is more common now, secularism), their Jewish gene pool was further attenuated with each subsequent generation (remaining, nevertheless, a pinch of a wonderful spice in the recipe!).

These genetic legacies may be too small for today's commercial genetic testing companies to include in their profiles. Alternately, some people with more significant Jewish genetic material may be duly surprised to find out their Jewish ancestry.

Ancestral Roots

While the ancestral boundaries between gentiles and Jews can be porous, as evidenced by crypto-Jews, this book will focus on the diversity of the Jews who remained Jewish after the rise of Christianity and Islam and still identify as Jewish today, dealing with aspects of the Jewish diaspora only as they pertain to a search for Jewish common roots. It is not a research text but an attempt to summarize what we know today about the formation of a Jewish nation, its split into twelve tribes, and the voluntary and involuntary migration away from the land of Israel, all while preserving a religion and customs through a more than 4,000-year history.

Why do this? What is the importance? For one, it may help settle controversy. There are theories promoting the idea that Jewish people in various parts of the world emerged by adopting Jewish religion. For example, that Arabs and Berbers of Morocco adopted Rabbinic Judaism and thus became Jewish (the people we consider Sephardic Jews today). Similarly, some Poles and Lithuanians in villages and small towns adopted Judaism and became Jews in Eastern Europe. One theory claims that Ashkenazi Jews originated from Central Asian tribes of Khazars who converted to Judaism in the 8th century CE. These theories eliminate all ethnic considerations of ancient Jewish peoplehood.

The science of genetics, however, suggests something different. The case for Jewish migration was bolstered when it became possible to identify genetic markers inherited with either the paternal Y chromosome or through maternal mitochondrial DNA. By using markers from either parent, comprehensive studies of “genetic signatures” among various Jewish populations revealed that centuries of genetic admixture strongly suggest links between today’s Jewish groups and the original Twelve Tribes of Israel.

That said, significant limitations still exist. Commercial testing can easily identify an individual’s genetic relation to contemporary Ashkenazi or Sephardic Jews, for example, but cannot answer with certainty whether individuals, or even entire Jewish groups, are firmly related to the Jews of the era of the First or even the Second Temple. The increasing number of interfaith marriages makes this task more difficult in each subsequent generation.

Migration and cultural considerations confound commercial DNA testing even further. Most commercial results identify people corresponding to large geographical areas (i.e., as West African, Chinese, Northern European, etc.) or slightly more refined locations (i.e., as British, Italian, etc.). However, when DNA reports list Jewish identity, do we assume religious and cultural belonging or an ethnic peoplehood? Moreover, while Brits have been living on the British Isles for millennia and Italians in Italy, Jewish people moved through vast areas of Europe, Asia, and the northern Mediterranean in search of safety until relatively recent history. Because of these diverse living conditions in the “four corners” of the world, frequently in isolation from other Jewish groups, and because of immeasurable tragedies and conversions to and from Judaism, the genetic pool of many Jewish groups is nearly impossible to tie to specific regions.

Nevertheless, the Ashkenazi genome has been sequenced from a small number of individuals and used as a reference since 2001. In 2020, a group of scientists from Johns Hopkins University (Shumate and colleagues) published a more complete Ashkenazi genome (they call it Ash1) containing 2,973,118,650 nucleotides that should be used as a reference genome (we’ll discuss further what this means in **Chapter 2** and the **Appendix**, which cover the basics of genetic science).

In this book, I provide an overview of how the science of genetics and the historical record (what little we know of it) overlap. I begin, as one should, at the beginning, with the rise of the Abrahamic tribes. I then provide a brief overview of the science of genetics (with a deeper dive available in the **Appendix**), and then walk through each geographic endpoint of the Jewish diaspora, with a summary of the historic record, the cultural and religious narratives, and a commentary on what current science has to say (or not say) about the genealogic history of these groups. We will examine the history and genetics of Babylonian, Persian, Ethiopian, Georgian, Indian, and even African and Chinese Jews as they might relate to Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. What we often find is that there are more questions than clear answers, but by interrogating these questions, we can perhaps approach a more satisfying formulation of what it truly means to be Jewish.

The future is promising. The science of genetics, population genetics, and genealogy has advanced so much that it is now possible to detect people's ancestry, identify founders for many ethnic groups, and trace paternal and maternal lineages deep into antiquity. May this scientific progress and these discoveries help us identify or refute the existence of common roots among different Jewish populations? Are the Indian Jews of Cochin related to the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula or the Jews of the Rhine Valley? What about the Mountain Jews of Azerbaijan and the Ethiopian Jews? Jews from the Pale of Settlement in imperial Russia and Jews from Tunisia?

These are still questions without satisfying answers. However, I sincerely hope that this book, which summarizes what is known today about the origin and diversity of the Jewish diaspora and Jewish genetics, will encourage young and inquisitive minds to embark on the quest for these answers.

CHAPTER 1

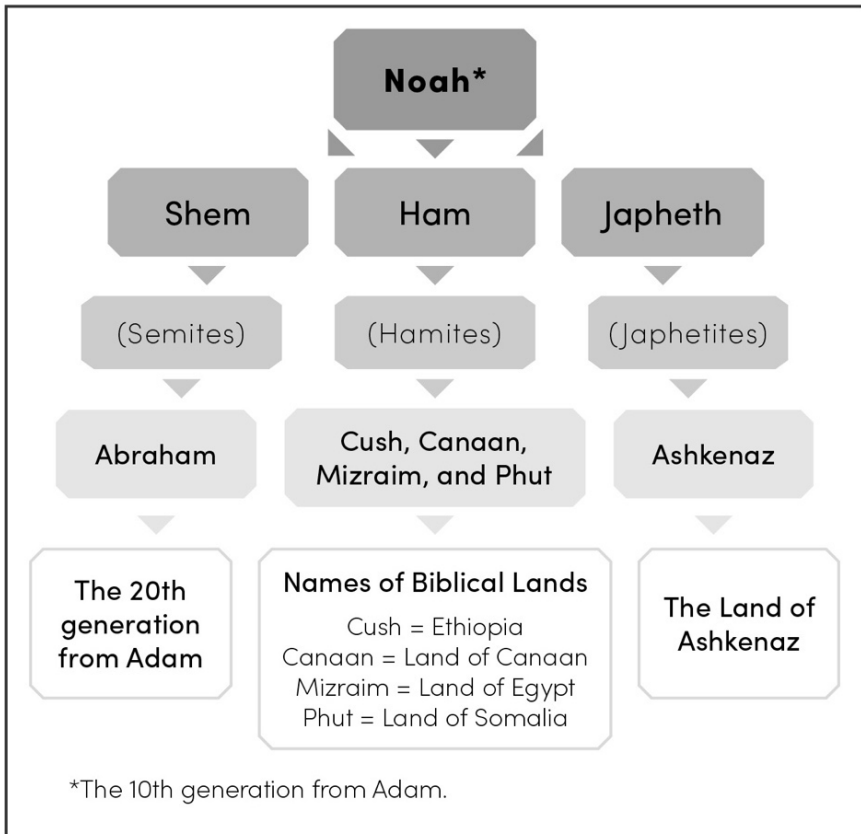
FROM ABRAHAM TO THE TWELVE TRIBES

From the first Hebrew to the nation of tribes—the Kingdom of Israel

From Abraham to Moses

As we begin our genealogic exploration of Judaism, we find ourselves confronted with another simple question with a complicated answer. Who was the first Jew? Leaving aside concerns about what it means to be a Jew or who a Jew is, let us examine the parable of who the first Jew was or, maybe, who the first Jews were. For most of us, the first Jew was the patriarch Abraham, a man who listened to God and left the Mesopotamian city of Ur with his family roughly 4,000 years ago.

Abraham hails from one of the Semitic tribes living in northern Arabia and Mesopotamia that descended from the oldest son of Noah, who saved his family and one pair of all God's creatures from the flood. This oldest son, Shem, became Sem in Greek and Roman languages, as they did not have the unvoiced fricative "sh" sound. Thus, the word Semitic (which, technically should have been Shemitic) refers to the descendants of Shem, whose great-grandson, Eber, is said to be the founder of people later called Hebrews, including Abraham (**Figure 1.1**).

Figure 1.1: From the Table of Nations (Modeled on Genesis 10:9)

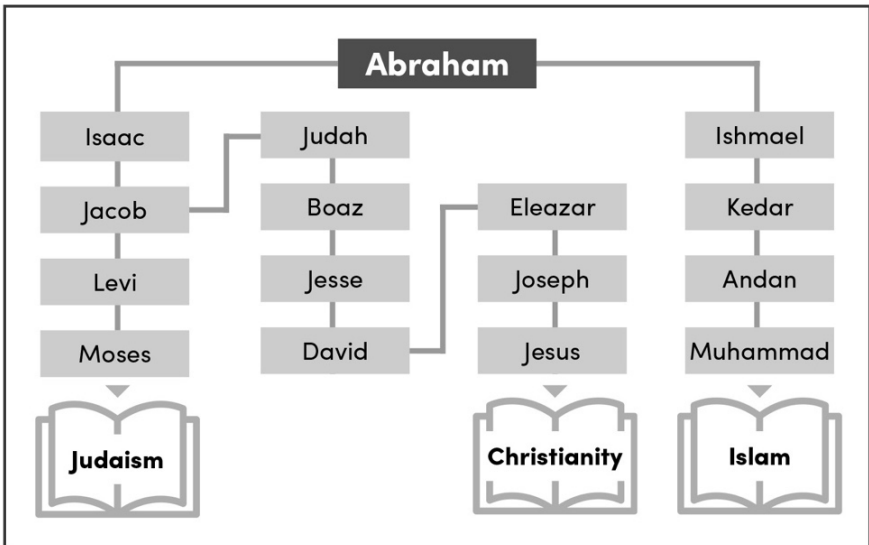
While the Greco-Romans were responsible for the modified Sem, the term Semitic, or Semites, was coined by a group of historians at the University of Göttingen in 1770 to indicate Shem's lineage in the genealogy of Semitic tribes. (Another group of historians from the same Göttingen School of History coined the term Caucasians in 1780, and some later classifications included the Semitic people in the Caucasian race.) The languages used by the Semitic people became known as the Semitic languages and included Aramaic, Arabic, Amharic, and several other Ethiopian languages, along with Hebrew and many other languages spoken by the people of this vast

area of the Middle East, as well as the north and northeastern regions of Africa.

Ancient Hebrews and subsequent generations of Jews proudly claim Abraham as their father and patriarch. He and his wife Sarah are universally considered the founders of the Jewish nation, or the Hebrews, as they were known for hundreds of years.

A confounding factor is that Abraham is also considered the founder of the Muslim nation and the founder of Christianity. For Muslims, Abraham was the father of Ishmael (with Hagar), from whom the Prophet Muhammad descended. For Christianity, founded by early Jews at the turn of Common Era, Abraham retained his place as patriarch when the Hebrew Bible became the Old Testament, and the New Testament was seen as a fulfilment of the prophecies. According to Christian genealogy, the lineage from Shem to Abraham and then to Isaac, Jacob, and Judah brings us to David and, according to the New Testament (Luke 3:36), along the Davidian line to Joseph and Jesus (**Figure 1.2**).

Figure 1.2: Abrahamic Religions

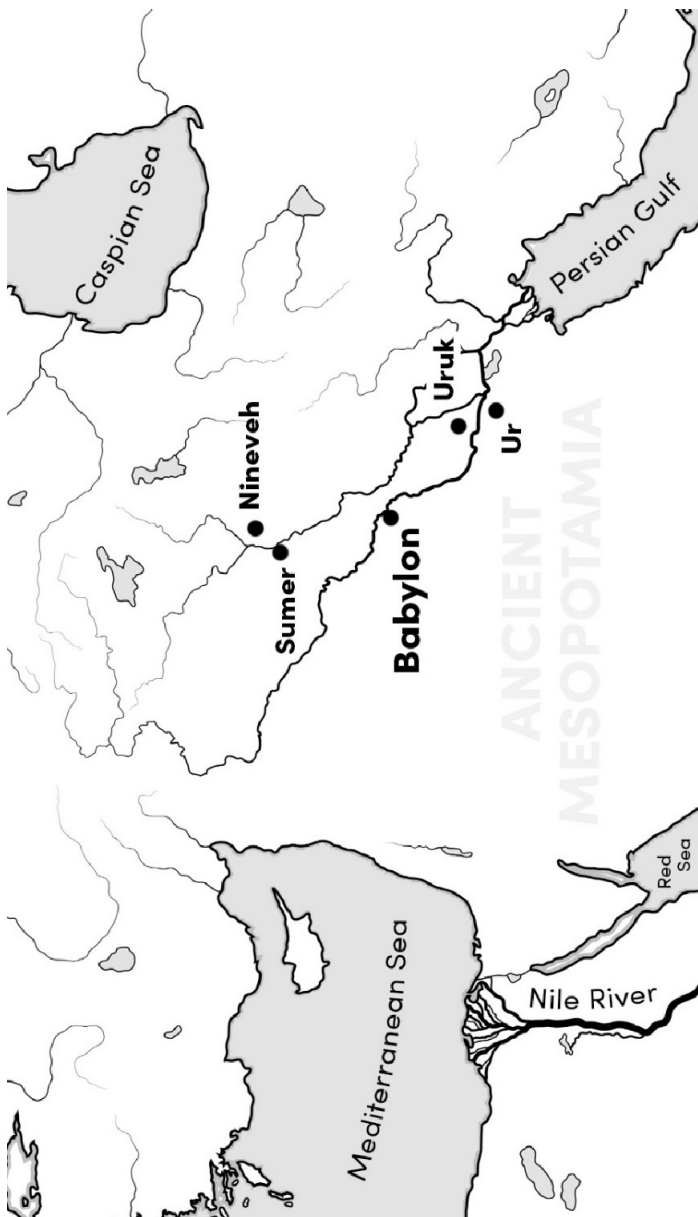


But was Abraham the first Jew? Was he even Jewish at all? The English words Jew and Jewish originated from the Hebrew word *Yehudi* (or *Yehudim* in plural), meaning, “a person from the ancient Israelite kingdom of Judah, the ancestral home of the Tribe of Judah, the fourth son of patriarch Jacob.” The word initially referred to people from the Tribe of Judah, not to their religion. There was no Jewish religion until Moses received God’s Law and the religion of the people of Judah became known as the “Jewish” religion. Logically, then, the term Jewish cannot be applied to Abraham—or Isaac or Jacob or Joseph or even Moses—because they lived centuries before the Tribe of Judah settled in Canaan and called its territory the Kingdom of Judah.

There was another term used by ancient Hebrews much more commonly—*Ivri* (*Ivrim* in plural), variations of which entered many languages via ancient Greek and Latin. The origin of this word is unknown but, according to one theory, comes from Eber, great-grandson of Shem, whose ancestors were called *Ivrim*, or *Ibrim*. The word Eber, or Ever, itself means “to cross, to traverse.” In one verse of Genesis (14:13), Abraham is described as “Abram Ha-Ivri,” or Abram the Hebrew, which can be translated as “Abram standing on the other side.” This takes us back to Mesopotamia and the city of Ur that Abraham (who might be the first *Ivri*, but not the first Jew) left about 2000 BCE.

The name Mesopotamia comes from Greek, meaning “land between the rivers”—in this case, the mighty Tigris and the Euphrates (**Figure 1.3**) that marked the eastern and western boundaries of the Fertile Crescent. These two rivers are first mentioned in Genesis: “*And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates*” (Genesis 2:14). They flowed out of Eden to water the gardens—must be lovely!

Figure 1.3: Ancient Mesopotamia



Sumerians are believed to be the first people to create a great civilization—Ancient Sumer—in southeastern Mesopotamia around 5500–6000 BCE. Slowly but surely, they built several city-states throughout Mesopotamia. The wheel, the plow, cuneiform writing—these all originated in Mesopotamia.

The story of Abraham originates here as well and is known to us from the narrative found in the Bible with scant, if any, archeological evidence. Nevertheless, the story goes that around 2000 BCE our patriarch Abraham left Ur with his extended family and his father Terah. Even though Abraham’s journey to the land of Canaan was long and tortuous—he traveled through modern day Iraq, Syria, and Egypt and back to Canaan—no archeological evidence for his existence has been found so far. We presume that he is buried in the Cave of Machpelah near the city of Hebron, the second holiest site for Jews after the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, along with other patriarchs and matriarchs, including Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah. Only Rachel is buried in Bethlehem.

Though he was a complicated figure with numerous character features and flaws, Abraham made a full and unwavering commitment to one God, with whom he built an unbreakable and everlasting covenant. None of the patriarchs, neither Abraham himself nor his son Isaac nor his grandson Jacob, had yet received the Jewish law, the Torah, from God. They had only a promise that they and their offspring would be blessed if they honored this covenant with one God who would guide their lives and deeds.

The Twelve Tribes of Israel

Many years passed and the children of Jacob—Joseph and his eleven brothers, their children, and their children’s children—obeyed and upheld the same covenant: One God but no Jewish law (God would not give these laws to Moses for another several centuries). So, were they Jewish? Again, this word was unknown at that time. Judah, the fourth son of Jacob and brother of Joseph, did not yet have his tribe nor the territory where his tribe would settle. No kingdom of Judah, no Judea—thus no Jews.

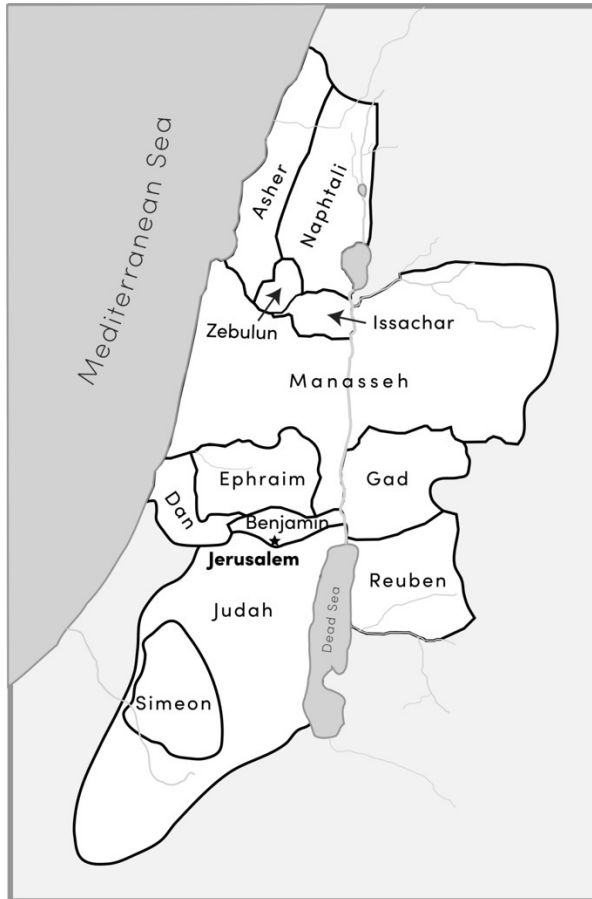
The story of the Twelve Tribes of Israel thus begins with the twelve sons of Jacob (later known as Israel, or “he who fought with God”). Jacob had six sons with his wife Leah (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar,

and Zebulun); two sons, Gad and Asher, with Leah's servant Zilpah (certainly not kosher today); two sons with his second wife Rachel's servant Bilhah (Dan and Naftali); and finally, two sons with Rachel—Joseph and Benjamin. These twelve sons of Jacob begat the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Because the tribes were named after the sons of Jacob, also known as Israel, the Hebrew people became known collectively as Israelites.

As straightforward as twelve sons and twelve tribes may seem, it turns out that one of the sons, Joseph, did not have a tribe named after him. Rather, his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, Jacob's grandsons, each had a "half" tribe and received their tribal territories when they returned to Canaan. This makes the numbers somewhat confusing. Counting all the names, one ends up with 13. However, because Manasseh and Ephraim divided Joseph's tribe in two, creating their "half" tribes, the Bible settles on Twelve Tribes of Israel (**Figures 1.4 and 1.5**). Levi's descendants, including Moses and his younger brother Aaron, received no tribal land of their own, and when the Israelites returned to the promised land, they were dispersed among other tribes and later became priests and temple functionaries.

Figure 1.4: The Twelve Tribes of Israel

1. Reuben
2. Simeon
3. Levi
4. Judah
5. Issachar
6. Zebulun
7. Gad
8. Asher
9. Dan
10. Naftali
11. Sons of Joseph (half a tribe each)
 - a. Manasseh
 - b. Ephraim
12. Benjamin

Figure 1.5: The Twelve Tribes of Israel

From Moses to the Kingdom of Israel

The story of the Twelve Tribes began when the Israelites entered Egypt, living first as guests of Joseph and his master, the Pharaoh, in the land of Goshen, a place in Egypt gifted to them by this generous Pharaoh (Genesis 45:9–10). However, as “all good things come to an end” (Psalm 30), so did the good fortune of the Israelites in Egypt. Moses, a surviving Hebrew child of Amram and Yocheved and raised as a prince by the Pharaoh’s daughter,

rediscovered his origin, defended a Hebrew slave (going so far as to kill an Egyptian who beat the slave), ran away from the malevolent Pharaoh then ruling Egypt, and fled to the desert of Midian (presumably in the northwest Arabian Peninsula), where he spent 40 years in voluntary exile. It was here that he met and married Zipporah, a daughter of Jethro, the priest and prince of Midian.

Interestingly, there is no account of Zipporah's conversion to Judaism. The same is true of Abraham and Sarah, their descendants, and their wives. All of Jacob's sons married non-Jewish women when founding their populous tribes. One of the prevailing explanations is that before God had given the Torah, conversion did not have a formal process and was simply a matter of accepting God and Hebrew beliefs. The formal process of conversion was established after God had given his laws to the Israelites.

During his exile in the Midian desert, God appeared to Moses as a burning bush and commanded him to return to Egypt to assume the honor, responsibility, danger of leading the Israelites from bondage and to the promised land of Canaan. This encounter with God took place on Mount Horeb—also called Mount Sinai—located in the south-central Sinai Peninsula, known as *Har Sinai* in Hebrew. The biblical Mount Sinai, the exact location of which has never been identified, is also sacred to Christian and Islamic religions (**Figure 1.6**).

Figure 1.6: Mounts of the Bible

1. Mount Ararat (Genesis 8:4)—Where Noah's ark rested after the flood.
2. Mount Sinai/Mount Horeb (Exodus 19 and 20, Numbers 3, Nehemiah 9:13–14)—Where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.
3. Mount Gerizim (Deuteronomy 11:29, Joshua 8:33, Judges 9:7)—Where Israelites received the blessing before entering the promised land.
4. Mount Nebo (Deuteronomy 32:49, 34:1)—Where Moses saw the promised land and where he died and was buried by God.
5. Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:2, Chronicles 3:1)—Where Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac, and where King Solomon built the First Temple.

6. Mount Zion (2 Samuel 5:1–10, 1 Kings 8:1)—Refers to Jerusalem, Solomon’s Temple, and, in a spiritual sense, to Israel.
7. Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:16–46, 2 Kings 2:25)—Where Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal.
8. Mount Olive (2 Samuel 15:30)—Where David escaped from his persecutors.

This is the narrative as it is explained in the Bible. Again, as with many biblical narratives, there is no direct archeological evidence confirming either Moses’ existence or the entire exodus from Egypt. The lack of supporting archeological evidence does not mean the events did not happen, however, as evidence may be unearthed in the future. We accept the biblical account as true (or almost true) events celebrating the end of bondage and finding freedom after crossing the Sea of Reeds (the Red Sea) with the help and magic of Moses.

This last story, the story of the exodus from Egypt, is extremely dramatic. Approximately 600,000 men and their scores of dependents leaving the land of Goshen that was given to them at the time of Joseph, after God imposes an extraordinary punishment on the recalcitrant Pharaoh and the Egyptian people in the form of ten plagues. After drowning the Egyptian chariots in the Red Sea, Israelites escape the house of bondage and become a free nation.

The group then headed to Mount Sinai, where God had conferred his leadership role to Moses. Here, Moses left the throngs of tired people and ascended the mountain to meet with God again. When he returned, he brought with him the most important document of the Jewish people—God’s Law, the Torah, “*By the mouth of God, through the hand of Moses.*” (This phrase, which merged Deuteronomy 4:44 and Numbers 9:23, is recited each time the Torah is returned to the Holy Ark.)

The Promised Land

Though now armed with God’s Law, the exodus was not over. It took another 40 years and the birth of a new generation of free people to reach the promised land. Not even Moses lived to see it, as he was not allowed to enter. The new and free nation of people, under the leadership of Joshua ben

Nun from the Tribe of Ephraim, was destined to settle in Canaan. Though the land of Canaan was divided among the Twelve Tribes by Moses according to God's wishes, Moses himself never made it and the actual allocation was made by Joshua after the land of Canaan was conquered.

God also spoke to Joshua and asked him to appoint cities of refuge, so that anyone who killed a person without intent or by mistake may flee there and find a refuge from an "avenger of blood." So, Kadesh in Galilee, Shechem in the mid-country, and Kiryat Arba in the south (in current Hebron) were designated as cities of refuge. They then added Bezer, east of Jericho, Ramon in Gilead, and Golan in Bashan for a total of six cities. Any Israelite, or even a foreigner living among the Israelites, could take refuge in these cities while waiting for a trial before the congregation.

The Tribe of Levi—the Levites—were not given any territory. Instead, "*The Lord God of Israel is their inheritance*" (Joshua 13:33), and they received towns among all the tribes, with the direct descendants of Aaron receiving 13 towns from the tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin. In total, the Levites received 48 towns and the pastureland around them. They were not disappointed. Even though the Tribe of Levi is not counted among the Twelve Tribes in terms of land allocation, the total number of tribes was still twelve, because, as mentioned above, two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, were counted as half tribes (**Figures 1.4 and 1.5**).

It is worth mentioning that the descendants of Levi were divided into four families or divisions: the Kohathites, the Gershonites, the Merarites, and the Aaronites (more commonly known as Kohen or Cohen). The Kohathites descended from Kohath, a son of Levi. The Gershonites were the descendants of Gershon, a son of Moses who himself was from the Tribe of Levi. The Merarites came from Merari, another son of Levi, and the Aaronites were the descendants from Aaron, the Kohen, meaning "the priest." So, the offspring of Aaron are called Kohanim in reference to his priesthood. According to Halakhah, the collective body of Jewish religious laws, the name, and the designation of Kohen (or Cohen) is transmitted from father to son and, as we will see a bit later in the book, can be traced genealogically and genetically by examining traits linked to the Y chromosome (male-to-male transmission).

In times of peace, the tribes were governed by councils of elders, and in times of military conflicts, by judges, charismatic commanders who were tribal chieftains leading their own tribes against the enemy. Lengthy

and continuous wars with neighbors forced the Israelites to form alliances and formal cooperation among the tribes, though these were often pragmatic and temporary.

This lack of continuity in civil or military governance was probably the major weakness of the tribal organization and coexistence. Nevertheless, the groups preferred living in a tribal society and even when one of the military commanders, Gideon, was offered the kingship by other tribes after he defeated the Transjordanian invaders (Midianites), he flatly and vehemently refused. *“I will not rule over you, nor shall my son; the Lord will rule over you”* (Judges 8:23), was his firm reply.

If we are to believe the Book of Judges, which tells us about the rule of twelve Judges (eleven men and one woman, Deborah; **Figure 1.7**), this period lasted for nearly 300 years, from 1382 to 1063 BCE. It lasted as long as it could, until it became abundantly clear that a unified governing body and a unified military defense were crucial for survival in a land where military conflicts were a way of life. The safety and painful military necessity had prevailed, and the people asked Samuel, the last of the judges, *“to appoint a king to govern us, like other nations”* (1 Samuel, 8:5).

Figure 1.7: Twelve Judges and Three Kings of Israel Before the Split of the Kingdom

1. Othniel
2. Ehud
3. Shamgar
4. Deborah
5. Gideon
6. Tola
7. Jair
8. Jephthah
9. Ibzan
10. Elon
11. Abdon
12. Samson
13. King Saul
14. King David
15. King Solomon

The first king of Israel, Saul, came from the Tribe of Benjamin. What an excellent warrior and commander he was! He defeated the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Amalekites, the Edomites, and others, but finally fell in battle with the Philistines. After the civil war that erupted following Saul's death, David, who ruled over the powerful Tribe of Judah, ascended to the throne, starting not only the Davidic dynasty, but also a long-lasting belief that a Messiah would be his descendant—a hero from the house of David.

A Question of Accuracy

Reading the biblical genealogy, one can be easily baffled (and one frequently is!) by the numerous mathematical inaccuracies. Many personalities in the Bible ostensibly lived far beyond today's life expectancy, and well beyond the life expectancy of the ancient world, which was likely around 35 years of age. Nevertheless, because many biblical events and descriptions are based on historical facts (notwithstanding some inaccuracies), some biblical lineages may be assumed to be correct. Or at least close to reality.

One of these widely accepted connections is the genealogic lineage between the historical King David (son of Jesse) and historical Jesus. *“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots, a branch will bear the fruit”* (Isaiah 11:1).

Both King David and Jesus were born in Bethlehem (Ruth 4:18–22 and 1 Samuel 16–17) a millennium apart. Micah, the sixth of the twelve minor prophets in the Tanach, wrote around 750 BCE that a Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:12), the same small town where King David was born sometime around 1000 BCE. Thus far, outside of this accounting in the Bible, the firm historical and genetic evidence of a connection between the two is lacking, but future science may prove to be more revealing.

The rule of David and his brightest son, Solomon, were the pinnacle of the glory days of the Kingdom of Israelites. The expansion of the kingdom through numerous military victories, many years of peace and prosperity, and the building of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem brighten this golden age of the monarchy. The brilliance of Solomon's rule strengthened