

Who was Naphtali in the Bible?

Naphtali was Jacob's sixth-born son and the second of two sons by Rachel's maidservant, Bilhah. Naphtali's older brother was Dan.

Rachel was so delighted at the birth of another son that she called the child Naphtali, which means "my wrestling." She chose this name because she felt vindicated after struggling with her older sister, Leah, to provide Jacob with heirs: "Then Rachel said, 'I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won.' So she named him Naphtali" (Genesis 30:8).

Little more is written of Naphtali in the Bible; we know that he had four sons: Jahzeel, Guni, Jezer, and Shillem (Genesis 46:24), and, eventually, he moved his family with Jacob to Egypt to escape the famine.

Jacob's deathbed blessing upon Naphtali was, "Naphtali is a doe set free that bears beautiful fawns" (Genesis 49:21) or "gives beautiful words" (NASB). Scholars suggest many interpretations for Jacob's blessing of Naphtali. Some say it implied gentleness of character; others think it may have alluded to agility in battle or hastiness.

Naphtali's descendants came to be known as the tribe of Naphtali, one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The first census in the wilderness credited 53,400 adult, battle-ready males to the tribe of Naphtali (Numbers 1:42-43). A later census taken near the end of the wilderness wanderings counted 45,400 men of Naphtali who were capable of battle (Numbers 26:48).

Moses, when Israel entered the Promised Land, pronounced a blessing on Naphtali's

tribe: "Naphtali is abounding with the favor of the LORD and is full of his blessing; he will inherit southward to the lake" (Deuteronomy 33:23). As indicated in this blessing, Naphtali settled in northern Canaan in the high regions west and northwest of the Sea of Galilee.

Three Levitical cities reserved for the family of the Gershonites existed within the tribe's borders (Joshua 21:32; 1 Chronicles 6:62) along with Kedesh, a city of refuge (Joshua 20:7). Naphtali successfully conquered the region but did not drive out the Canaanites. Instead, the Canaanites were subjected to forced labor (Judges 1:33).

The geographical position of the tribe led to several major conflicts in the region. The most significant was the war against Jabin, king of Hazor. Barak, the Hebrew warrior and son of Abinoam, from Kedesh in Naphtali, was called by Deborah, the judge and prophetess, to lead the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali against the Canaanite forces of Hazor (Judges 4 - 5). The tribe of Naphtali as well as Asher, Zebulun, and Manasseh was also summoned by Gideon to fight against the Midianites and Amalekites (Judges 6:33-35).

During the monarchy period, the tribe of Naphtali sent armed forces to Hebron, showing support for David's rule (1 Chronicles 12:34). The tribe stayed loyal to David's dynasty during Solomon's administration as well. King Solomon had twelve regional officers over all Israel. One of them was Ahimaaz, who married Solomon's daughter, Basemath. Ahimaaz was from the tribe of Naphtali (1 Kings 1:1-15).

During the time of the divided kingdoms, the story of the tribe of Naphtali becomes harder to trace. When Pekah ruled in Israel, Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria began to exert his powerful influence in the region of Naphtali. By 732 BC, the Assyrian king had

conquered Gilead, Galilee, and all of Naphtali and taken the people into captivity (2 Kings 15:29).

The prophet Isaiah recalled how the Lord had brought the land of Naphtali into contempt but would one day make it glorious again (Isaiah 9:1). Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, who brought the Good News to people living in the region of Naphtali (Matthew 4:13-15). Finally, in the book of Revelation, 12,000 members of the tribe of Naphtali are included among the sealed servants of God (Revelation 7:6).