

Who was Dan in the Bible?

Dan was the fifth of twelve sons born to the Jewish patriarch Jacob. Dan's mother was Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant. Dan's younger brother was Naphtali. As full brothers, the two are frequently mentioned together in the Bible (Deuteronomy 27:13; Exodus 1:4).

The account of Dan's birth is contained in Genesis 30:1-8. Rachel, who had remained childless, was envious of her sister, Leah, who had already given birth to four sons of Jacob. Barrenness held great shame for women in ancient cultures, so Rachel followed the custom of the day and presented her maidservant, Bilhah, to Jacob as a third wife. When Bilhah gave birth to Dan, Rachel considered the child her own. Rachel named him Dan, meaning "he judged," because she felt that God had judged and vindicated her through the child's birth.

On his deathbed, Jacob pronounced a blessing over all his sons. Dan was promised the role of a judge: "Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel" (Genesis 49:16, ESV). Dan's blessing also included these words: "Dan will be a snake by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse's heels so that its rider tumbles backward" (verse 17). Scripture does not tell us if Dan himself possessed these traits, but his tribe was small yet fierce like the viper in his father's blessing.

Dan had only one son, Hushim, to carry on his bloodline (Genesis 46:23). He is listed as Shuham (an alternate spelling of Hushim) in Numbers 26:42 and identified as the ancestor of the clan of the Shuhamites. Nothing else is disclosed about Dan in the Bible.

Some of Dan's descendants are mentioned in the days of the wilderness wanderings. Oholiab was a skilled craftsman appointed by God to work on the tabernacle (Exodus 31:6;

35:34; 38:23). An unnamed son whose father was Egyptian and whose mother was from the tribe of Dan blasphemed the name of the Lord and was put to death (Leviticus 24:10-11). Ahiezer was a leader of the tribe of Dan (Numbers 1:12; 2:25; 7:66-71; 10:25).

When Israel entered the Promised Land, the tribe that descended from Dan was allotted a portion of Canaan between Judah and Ephraim bordering the Mediterranean coast (Joshua 19:40-48). However, except for the valley of Zorah and Eshtaol, Dan's tribe failed to gain control of the territory, especially after the Philistines settled there. In the book of Judges, Samson, who was from the tribe of Dan, was called by God to fight against the Philistines (Judges 13 – 16). Eventually, Dan's tribe migrated to the north and seized the city of Laish. They renamed the city Dan and took up residence in the surrounding areas (Judges 18).

In Moses' blessing, Dan's tribe is called "a lion's cub, springing out of Bashan" (Deuteronomy 33:22). Some believe the reference relates to Dan's northern migration and capture of Laish. After Dan resettled to the north, the tribe became associated with idolatry (Judges 18:30-31; 2 Kings 10:29).