

Who was Ephraim in the Bible?

Ephraim was the second son of Joseph and a grandson of Jacob. His name means “doubly fruitful,” because “God has made [Joseph] fruitful in the land of [his] suffering” (Genesis 41:52). When Ephraim was born to Joseph and Asenath (Joseph’s Egyptian wife), Joseph was a foreigner in Egypt, yet he had gained a high position in Pharaoh’s court.

Ephraim was the younger brother of Manasseh. In Genesis 48:5, Jacob blessed Ephraim as an adopted son, saying to Joseph, “Now then, your two sons born to you in Egypt before I came to you here will be reckoned as mine; Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are mine.”

Later, as Jacob’s health was failing, Joseph brought Manasseh and Ephraim to him for a patriarchal blessing. Being the firstborn, Manasseh would normally have received the bigger blessing, but Jacob switched things up on purpose. As Joseph guided his two sons toward Jacob, he made sure Manasseh was on Jacob’s right side and Ephraim, the younger of the two sons, was on Jacob’s left (Genesis 48:13). But, as Jacob extended his hands, he crossed his arms so that his right hand was placed on Ephraim’s head. Joseph began to object, but his father assured him that he knew what he was doing (verses 17-19). In this way, Ephraim was given precedence over his older brother, Manasseh (Genesis 48:14).

Descendants of Ephraim became known as the tribe of Ephraim, which is designated as one of the twelve tribes of Israel. They settled in central Canaan, just northwest of the Dead Sea. The tribe was bordered by Manasseh on the north and Dan and Benjamin on the south (Joshua 16; 19:50). Ephraim became the leading tribe of the northern kingdom (Joshua 17:15; Judges 3:27), and the capital, Samaria, was located in Ephraim’s territory. In fact, Scripture sometimes refers to Israel as simply “Ephraim,” due to the

size of the tribe (e.g., Isaiah 11:13 and Jeremiah 31:6).

The tribe of Ephraim was chastised for idolatry (Hosea 4:17) and their partnership with heathen nations (Hosea 12:1). The tribe of Ephraim was taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC when the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered. Even so, the Lord declared, “Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him” (Jeremiah 31:20).

Notable figures from the tribe of Ephraim include Joshua (Joshua 19:50); Samuel (1 Samuel 1:1); and Jeroboam I, the first king of the divided kingdom in the north (1 Kings 12:25). After the Babylonian captivity, some of the descendants of Ephraim resettled in Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 9:3).