

## Who are the biblical patriarchs?

The biblical patriarchs are the line of men God used to establish the nation of Israel. Perhaps the most well-known of the biblical patriarchs is Abraham, because from him all Israelites are descended. God made a covenant with him, promising that Abraham would be “the father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4). In fact, God changed Abram’s name to Abraham, which means “father of a multitude.”

**Abraham:** God approached Abraham (then “Abram”) and promised to make his descendants a great nation (Genesis 12:2) in the land of Canaan. Following God’s instruction, Abram took his extended family to Canaan, and they lived there as nomads. Despite God’s promise, Abram’s wife, Sarai, remained barren. In desperation, she gave Abram her handmaiden, Hagar, as a concubine. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, thought to be the forefather of Arabs. Despite Sarah’s doubts, she later gave birth to Isaac (Genesis 21:2). In her jealousy for her son’s inheritance, Sarah forced Hagar and Ishmael to the wilderness. When Sarah died, Abraham married Keturah and had six more sons, although the line of biblical patriarchy ran through Isaac.

**Isaac:** Isaac began as a man of great faith, trusting his father when God told Abraham to sacrifice him (Genesis 22) and trusting his father’s servant to choose Rebekah as a wife for him (Genesis 24). When his wife was pregnant with twins, however, and was told the older (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob), Isaac rebelled and attempted to favor the older anyway. But God’s plan was for Jacob to be next in the line of patriarchs, which is exactly what happened.

**Jacob:** When Rebekah realized she was pregnant with twins, God told her the older would serve the younger (Genesis 25:23). Jacob was barely younger, as he came out holding his

brother Esau's heel. Esau went on to marry, giving Isaac and Rebekah grief (Genesis 26:35) and became the father of the Edomites (Genesis 36:9), who gave the nation of Israel grief. Jacob presumably knew of the prophecy given to Rebekah, but didn't trust God to fulfill it in His time. With prompting from Rebekah, Jacob (whose name means "supplanter") tricked Isaac into giving him the blessing of the firstborn (Genesis 27) and then promptly ran away to Rebekah's brother, Laban. When Jacob fell in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, Laban proved to be a match for his nephew and had him work for seven years, then married him to his older daughter, Leah. Laban gave Jacob Rachel at the end of Leah's wedding week, but Jacob had to work another seven years. Because Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, God comforted Leah by allowing her to conceive and bear sons.

Rachel gave her handmaiden to Jacob, resulting in more sons. Leah countered with her handmaiden, Rachel finally got pregnant, and Jacob wound up with twelve sons and a daughter. Before reconciling with Esau, Jacob wrestled with the pre-incarnate Christ, who changed his name to Israel ("he who strives with God"; Genesis 32:24-28). The nation took the name, Israel, from the man who fathered the nation.

Jacob's sons: Each of Jacob's sons became the patriarch of a tribe of Israel. As Jacob lay dying, he blessed each son (Genesis 49), mirroring his own inheritance by placing Joseph's younger son, Ephraim, over the older Manasseh (Genesis 48:14). The sons of Jacob and the heads of the tribes of Israel were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulon, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Benjamin, and Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh.