

Listings of the Tribes of Israel

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The names of the tribes of Israel are listed fifteen times in the Torah, while the order in which those names appear varies in twelve different permutations. This essay presents each list separately with attention to the larger context in which it appears, examines the variations among the lists, and brings to the fore the primary and secondary criteria that played a role in determining the specific order of the names in each of them. After laying this groundwork, the author considers the underlying meanings and values, as well as the ideological and pedagogical messages conveyed by the variations, major as well as minor, among the lists. The discussion draws on rabbinical, medieval, and modern traditional Bible commentary, distinguishing the essential approaches of a variety of interpretations, and compares the contributions of contemporary academic scholarship in addressing the issues at hand. Three fundamental criteria are identified as formative: the tribes are listed either in the order of their birth; in correspondence with their mothers' marital status; or in accordance with the formations of their encampments [*degalim*]. Secondary criteria include the order of their inheritance in the Land of Israel and personal attributes of the tribes or individuals belonging to them. Two interpretive approaches are distinguished: one motivated by practical and circumstantial concerns, the other guided by ethical and conceptual value questions.