

THE TRIBE OF REUBEN

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FROM THE TRIBE OF REUBEN?

The tenth Article of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints says: “We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes.”¹ As President Joseph F. Smith taught, the gathering of Israel in the latter days is to prepare a people for the coming of Christ.² As individuals, we must also prepare ourselves for His coming and contribute to the gathering effort. To this end, the Lord has blessed each of us with special spiritual gifts. Patriarchal blessings help us identify these gifts so that we can exercise them and improve upon them.

Specific spiritual gifts are also dominant in each of the tribes of Israel. For example, it is well known that in the last days the Tribe of Ephraim would be numerous and would have the primary responsibility to lead the latter-day work of the Lord.³ [Ephraimites](#) are leaders. This is one of their identifying characteristics. And it follows that each tribe, including the tribe of REUBEN, has unique gifts and responsibilities in preparing the Church and the world for the Second Coming.

GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

The Doctrine and Covenants teaches us about gifts of the Spirit. “To every man (and every woman) is given a gift by the Spirit of God. To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby.”⁴ We should study these gifts of the Spirit outlined in the 46th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants and elsewhere in the scriptures. By prayer and with help from our patriarchal blessing we can identify which gifts are ours and begin to use them to bless and benefit ourselves and others.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS OF THE TRIBE OF REUBEN

STRENGTH. Reubenites lend strength to new beginnings. When Jacob gave Reuben his patriarchal blessing, he began it by saying, “Reuben, thou art my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power!”⁵ Reuben’s birth allowed Jacob to feel the power of new beginnings. New beginnings bring strength, enthusiasm, and excitement to all new enterprises and projects. Jacob felt unconquerable when Reuben was born. Witnessing the start of a new family energized him. Reubenites bring this feeling of strength to things they get involved in.

¹ [Tenth Article of Faith](#)

² [Messages of The First Presidency](#)

³ [See “Patriarchal Blessings”](#)

⁴ [Doctrine and Covenants 46:11-12](#)

⁵ [Genesis 49:3](#)

PROTECTIVE. The people of Reuben are noted as being very protective. This is an admirable spiritual quality that suggests self sacrifice and loyalty. For instance, Reuben stood up against his brothers when they wanted to kill Joseph, their younger brother.⁶ Another example of the protective nature of Reuben was in his relationship to his mother, Leah, to whom he was fiercely loyal. Reuben challenged his father's unfairness toward Leah. He despised Jacob's treatment of her and stood up for her.⁷

OUTLIERS. The people of the tribe of Reuben tend to be outliers. That means that they are on the extremes of many things. They view the world through a unique lens, offering perspectives that others often overlook. This distinct way of thinking enables them to devise innovative solutions that escape the notice of most people. Outliers are often misjudged and misunderstood. For instance, every family has a firstborn child, a Reuben. By default, this makes the eldest child an outlier among their siblings. Parents gain their initial experience in child-rearing through their firstborn, often adjusting their parenting style with subsequent children. As families grow, the oldest child is typically expected to shoulder significant responsibilities, playing a pivotal role in helping the family thrive.

Reubenites, like many firstborns, are natural pioneers. They experiment with new ideas, introduce trends, and test boundaries—often blazing trails that their younger siblings are either encouraged or discouraged from following. Their growth is shaped by trial and error, and they often bear the weight of learning life's hardest lessons firsthand.

COMMUNICATORS. Reubenites are praised as effective communicators when they want to be. Using patience, love, and kindness, they were able to avoid contention and even outright war. One story tells how the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an altar near the Jordan River after returning to their land east of the river. The other Israelite tribes, assumed the altar was for unauthorized sacrifices, and prepared to go to war, believing that rebellion had motivated Reuben's actions. However, a delegation led by Phinehas confronted the eastern tribes, who explained that the altar was a memorial to affirm their shared faith and unity with Israel, not a place for offerings. Satisfied with this explanation, the conflict was resolved peacefully, and the altar was named "Witness." This story emphasizes the dangers of misunderstanding and the importance of open communication in resolving conflicts. The altar symbolized unity and identity, reminding future generations that all Israel shared the same covenant with God, despite geographical separation. It serves as a timeless lesson on avoiding assumptions, fostering dialogue, and prioritizing reconciliation to preserve community harmony.

WARRIORS LOYAL TO THE PROPHET. The Tribe of Reuben was highly skilled in all instruments of war, so they were comfortable in any situation of battle. They were also obedient to Moses, the prophet of God.

⁶ Genesis 37:18-30

⁷ Reuben's loyalty to his mother is *implied* rather than directly stated in the Bible as illustrated in the instance where Reuben brings mandrakes to his mother, which shows his concern for her wellbeing and status in the family. See Genesis 30:14-16

The tribe of Reuben made a promise to Moses that they would cross over Jordan with all of Israel and fight for the other tribes to possess the land and they are specifically credited for their obedience:

And the children of Reuben, and the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh, passed over armed before the children of Israel, as Moses spake unto them: About forty thousand prepared for war passed over before the Lord unto battle, to the plains of Jericho.⁸

When the land of Canaan was eventually sufficiently conquered, Reuben and the others were released from their obligation to fight, and they returned back to inhabit the land East of Jordan. Again, this is another recognition of their obedience.⁹

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF REUBEN

MISUNDERSTOOD. People of the tribe of Reuben are often misunderstood. This was a burden that Reuben carried his entire life. Referring again to the patriarchal blessing Jacob's gave to Reuben, Jacob heaped praise on Reuben because he was a source of inspiration, excellency, dignity and strength. But then Jacob leveled a sharp indictment against his son, saying, "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel; because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou it: he went up to my couch." Jacob's observation of his oldest son was simply that Reuben was unstable in life. He probably started many new ventures, proposed great ideas, and tried his hand at many new things. But apparently Reuben didn't 'stick to his knitting.' Each shiny thing that caught Reuben's eye diverted him away from what should have been his focus.

ADULTERY. Reuben, the firstborn son of Jacob, was accused of committing adultery with Bilhah, one of his father's concubines and the mother of two of Reuben's half-brothers, Dan and Naphtali. This incident is mentioned briefly in Genesis 35:22:

"While Israel (Jacob) was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept with his father's concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it."

The Bible does not provide additional details about the incident, but this was considered a grave sin, not only because it violated moral and sexual boundaries but also because it was a challenge to Jacob's authority. In ancient cultures, such actions could be interpreted as an attempt to usurp power within the family hierarchy. Jacob did not address the matter immediately, but on his deathbed, he referred to it when blessing Reuben. Jacob said,

⁸ [Joshua 4:12-13](#)

⁹ See [Joshua 22:1-6](#)

*"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power. Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your father's bed, onto my couch and defiled it."*¹⁰

This act cost Reuben his rights as the firstborn. The birthright, which included leadership of the family and a double portion of the inheritance, was later passed to Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.¹¹

Apostle Robert D. Hales said this about Reuben; "Reuben was the eldest. He should have had all of the birthright, but he was "unstable as water." What did his father mean by "unstable as water?" I have thought about that since I was a young man. We have been told that we should be true and faithful and endure to the end, but here was Reuben and his father told him that he is "unstable as water." When water gets hot, it evaporates. When it gets cold, water freezes. When water is uncontrolled, it brings great damage in floods, erosion, mudslides, etc. How do we make sure that we have great stability? We must understand that great blessings came to Joseph because of his obedience, and all the blessings that were rightfully Reuben's could not be given to him because of his moral conduct. As we are tested in life we show whether or not we will be obedient. Reuben struggled with obedience, hence Jacob said he was as 'unstable as water'. Whether disobedience is a product of our own actions or the intentional failure to endure to the end when we are given a trial to suffer from our Heavenly Father, we must be stalwart and obedient. Let us not be slothful because of the ease of the way.

THE BILHAH AFFAIR: ANOTHER MISUNDERSTANDING? According to certain Jewish writings, Reuben did not sleep with Bilhah but he did overstep his boundaries when he insisted that Jacob move to Leah's tent following the death of Rachel. Rabbi Rashi explains that Reuben actually moved Jacob's bed from Bilhah's tent to Leah's, and for this act Reuben was later punished.

"Rashi explains that apparently, after the death of his beloved Rachel, Jacob moved his own bed into Bilhah's tent, as Bilhah was Rachel's lifelong handmaid whom the barren Rachel had given over to her husband as a wife. According to Rashi, Reuben did not sleep with Bilhah. Reuben's improper act was that he went into Bilhah's private tent and lifted his father's bed out of there, thus audaciously defiling his father's sleeping place. The Talmud explains that Reuben, Leah's firstborn, ever-protective of his mother, wishes to spare her the brunt of the insult that her husband prefers even her dead sister's maid to Leah herself. The reader will recall that years before it was Reuben who, as a young child, brought Leah the dudaim (mandrakes). The Talmud explains that Reuben, now an adult, was acutely aware of his mother's humiliation caused by her husband's habitually making his bed in Rachel's tent. The additional indignity concerning Bilhah following Rachel's death cut Reuben to the heart, and he hastily removed his father's bed from Bilhah's tent, and placed it in Leah's before his mother could suffer from the affront. The reader can well appreciate Reuben's protective outrage on Leah's behalf. For if we follow

¹⁰ Genesis 49:3–4

¹¹ 1 Chronicles 5:1–2

*Rabbi Bachya's configuration of the matriarchs' sleeping arrangements Bilhah's smaller tent was situated within Leah's larger one, Jacob could not enter Bilhah's tent time after time without passing through Leah's domain. This was perhaps the affront to his mother's honor that Reuben could not bear."*¹²

Reuben's actions, if understood in this light, reveal a complex interplay of loyalty, impulsiveness, and a deep sense of justice. His desire to protect Leah from further humiliation demonstrates his strong devotion to his mother, but his method—moving Jacob's bed without permission—was an overreach that disrupted family dynamics and disregarded his father's authority. While his motives may have been noble, his actions underscore the challenges of balancing righteous indignation with respect for established roles. Reuben's story reminds us of the importance of addressing grievances with wisdom and communication, even when driven by love and a sense of duty.

SUMMARY

The Tribe of Reuben carries unique characteristics and spiritual gifts that contribute to the preparation for the Second Coming of Christ. These gifts include strength, protectiveness, and the ability to foster new beginnings. Reubenites are natural outliers, often misunderstood, but their distinct perspectives enable innovation and problem-solving. They often excel as communicators, using dialogue to resolve conflicts.

Reuben's story in the Bible reflects both his strengths and flaws. His protective nature was evident in his loyalty to his mother, Leah, and his efforts to spare her humiliation, even though his methods, such as moving Jacob's bed, were impulsive and destabilizing. Reuben's actions highlight the tension between righteous intentions and impulsive behavior, which ultimately cost him his birthright. His legacy, though marked by instability, emphasizes the importance of balancing devotion, obedience, and wisdom.

Reuben's place in the House of Israel is not in question. Even though the tribe of Reuben forfeited the birthright inheritance, they always have had -- and still do have -- equal standing with the other tribes in the House of Israel. Reuben encourages understanding, unity, and steadfastness in faith, reminding us all to remain strong in devotion while avoiding rash actions that may disrupt harmony.

¹² Passions of the Matriarchs, by Shera Aranoff Tuchman and Sandra E. Rapoport p. 326-327