

Who Are the Twelve Tribes of the Dispersion?

[James 1:1](#)
James, Day 1

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:
Greetings.*

- James 1:1, ESV

Did you ever read someone else's mail by mistake? We sometimes get our neighbor's mail accidentally delivered to us, and sometimes I don't realize it's not mine until after I open it. It's mostly junk mail, and I've gotten more careful, but it's kind of shocking to start reading something only to realize that it's not meant for you.

James addresses his letter "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion." This is very similar to the way Peter opens 1 Peter: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood." These greetings - "twelve tribes in the Dispersion" and "elect exiles of the Dispersion" - are very Jewish greetings. The twelve tribes refers to the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Dispersion refers to the Jewish diaspora, the scattering of God's holy nation that began with the Assyrian conquest around 702 B.C.

So, are the letters of James and 1 Peter written to Jewish people? Are we reading someone else's mail when we read them? No. These letters are written to believers in Jesus, to Christians living among the world. Peter goes on in his letter to remind his readers "you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers," something he would not have written to Jewish people, but to Christians who had formerly been pagan idolaters.

The fact that Peter and James can write to Christians using such Jewish greetings is another of the many indications given throughout the New Testament that we who believe in Jesus are heirs of the covenant of Abraham. We are children of the promise, members of God's chosen people. We are the holy nation of God.

Why is this important? Because whenever we read any part of the Bible, if we believe in Jesus and belong to Him by faith, we are never reading someone else's mail. We are never eavesdropping on someone else's conversation. We have been grafted by grace into the one olive tree of the people of God, to use the language of Romans 11, and we are heirs of all of the promises of God.

This is incredibly encouraging because it means that the whole story of the Bible is our story. It also means God's plans and purposes have not failed. It's not that the whole Israel Project failed, and so God switched to Plan B and started the Christian church. Rather, Jesus the Messiah was the plan from the beginning. Israel's story in the Old Testament led up to Jesus, and the church's story in the New Testament continues the story of Israel with every promise fulfilled in Christ.

I remember when I first understood this truth, it opened up previously closed passages in the Bible to me. In the Psalms, when I read of Zion and Jerusalem and Israel, I was now singing these songs as an insider and not just listening in on someone else's praises and promises from the outside. So, if you believe in Jesus, you are part of what Galatians 6:16 calls "the Israel of God." Rejoice! And read the Bible as one who belongs in the story from beginning to end.