

Twelve Tribes in the Dispersion

The letter of James is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” What does that mean? For Christians, these terms had both literal and metaphorical levels of meaning.

	Literal	Metaphorical
Twelve Tribes	Jewish descendants of Abraham	Christians, who are the new Israel, under the twelve apostles
Dispersion	Jews who live outside of Palestine	Christians who live on earth, apart from their home in heaven

Most scholars think that James uses these words in a way that combines the literal and metaphorical senses. The letter was written not for Jews (the “twelve tribes” in a literal sense) but rather for Christians (2:1). Still, it may have been written for Jewish Christians (i.e., Christians who belong to the literal twelve tribes), or at least for Christians who have a strong appreciation of their Jewish heritage. And as for the Dispersion, even if the letter can be read as speaking generically to Christians who live anywhere on earth (in a diaspora from heaven), its original application may have been for Christians who lived outside of Palestine, where the Jesus movement had begun.