



The Twelve Tribes of Israel

I am reading the Letter of James and in it, the very first verse, I was hit by something that I never truly grasped before as I have read James previously. In this first verse, James says something that I never really gave much thought about. James 1:1 reads as such, *“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.”*

That would seem simple enough and then I usually would go on and continue to read. However, I just got stuck there. I got stuck on the section of this scripture that simply states, *“...to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad...”* Now, you may be wondering why this got my attention. Why didn't I just read on.

What got my attention was simply what James had written. He was writing to the **“twelve tribes”** of Israel. This may not be a stumbling block for all of you but when I read this at this time it stood out to me. What did James mean when he wrote that he was writing to the “twelve tribes?”

I knew the scriptures in the Old Testament and it tells of Israel becoming divided after the rule of King Solomon. It was divided into two separate “kingdoms” – the Northern Kingdom which was referred to as Israel and the Southern Kingdom which was referred to as Judah. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) was made up of the ten tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Manasseh, and Ephraim. The Southern Kingdom (Judah) was made up of Judah, Benjamin and some members of Levi, the priestly tribe, which did not have its own territory but were set aside for the service unto the Lord in His Tabernacle/Temple.

The Northern Kingdom was conquered first by the Assyrian Empire and they were taken away as captives from their “homeland” to the area of Assyria. There they were forced to intermarry with other nations and religions, that were taken in captivity by the Assyrians, thereby losing the main concept of Yahweh God as their one and only true God.

A few years later, The Southern Kingdom fell and the people were taken away out of the land and brought to Babylon where they were under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar. Babylon then fell to the Medo-Persians under the rule of Cyrus. A few years later, if you read Ezra (especially Ezra 1:1-5), Esther and Nehemiah, we see that the Jewish people were miraculously allowed to return back to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple and to live in the region of Judah and Benjamin.

Those from the Northern Kingdom were also allowed to return back to Israel. However, they were now a “mixed breed” of people and not of pure Jewish descendance. They were not allowed, by the Jewish people that came from Persia, to settle in or go into Jerusalem. This was because they were looked upon as “half-breeds” by the Jewish people. They were not looked upon as being Jewish. They actually were looked upon by the Jewish people as being even below the Gentiles on their “scale” of how they viewed people. These people ended up inhabiting the area just north of Jerusalem and south of the region of Galilee. This region became known as Samaria and they became known as “Samaritans.”

We need to understand that the term “Jew” or “Jewish” was never really given to all the people of Israel as a name by God. We see in the Biblical text that they were originally called “Hebrews” because Abraham had come from the area known as Eber. “Hebrew” is a transliteration of the word Eber. They then became known as “Israel” or the Israelites because they came from the 12 sons of Jacob whose name was changed by God to Israel. So technically they are really to be called either “Hebrews” or “Israeli.”

The term “Jew” or “Jewish” was given to them when they became separated from the Northern Kingdom. They were from the Southern Kingdom which was known as Judah. It really started out as a derogatory term for the people from Judah and Benjamin (the Southern Kingdom) as they were referred to as “Jews” by those, the Babylonians, who had captured them as prisoners and took them out of Israel back to Babylon. Therefore, the people from that region of Judah and Benjamin, the Southern Kingdom known as Judah, were referred to as “Jews.”

At the time of Jesus, the area just north of Jerusalem became known as Samaria. The Samaritans and the “Jewish people” from Judah were always at odds with each other even as we see, in the Gospel accounts in the New Testament. The same is still true today between the two. We read, however, that this did not stop Jesus from going to the area of Samaria and teaching them about who He was.

I knew the account of Jesus and the woman of Samaria. We see this in John 4:2-26 when Jesus met a Samaritan woman at the well. This was very strange for a Jewish man to go into Samaria. However, Jesus did not care about what others might think of Him. He came to save – everyone. We read that she, along with many of the Samaritans, believed in Jesus from that moment on.

It did not matter who the person was or their lineage or background. Jesus knew the hearts of the people, all people, and that they were truly ready to hear, and they needed to hear, the Good News of Salvation that came in and through Him. He ultimately told this “hated Samaritan woman” that He was indeed the Messiah – and she believed Him.

However, she was a Samaritan and yes salvation would be open to them as well as to the Jewish people and to all the world. This did not, however, answer my question about what James wrote in his letter. I had always thought that this was simply the facts and that was it. However, then I read that section in James where he refers to the “twelve tribes.” Well, this got me to thinking and to looking in the scriptures. What was I missing or not getting???

So I went looking back into the Old Testament and found some interesting scriptures that I never really grasped as I read them before. What I found was that the 10 “lost tribes of Israel” were never really lost. We see in the Old Testament scriptures, that actually none of the “twelve tribes” were lost. This is because some people from **each of those 10 tribes** were actually living in the Southern Kingdom, the Kingdom of Judah, at the time the Assyrian army took captive and deported the Northern Kingdom.

When we read 2Chronicles 15:9; 30:18; and 34:6, we discover that people from the northern tribes of Ephraim (son of Joseph), Manasseh, Issachar, Zebulun, Naphtali, Simeon, and “from **all the remnant of Israel**” were present in the Southern Kingdom, the kingdom of Judah. We see that in 2Chronicles they were referred to as “strangers.” This was because of the rift that had happened between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. However, many from those tribes were still living in the Southern Kingdom and not the Northern Kingdom when the Northern Kingdom was taken away captive.

Yes, they were still in the Southern Kingdom and they still continued to worship the one true God. This reveals to us that the men, women, and children **from each of the northern ten tribes** were **actually living** in the Southern Kingdom at the time the Assyrians invaded the Northern Kingdom.

- 2Chronicles 15:9 - *“And he gathered all Judah and Benjamin, and the strangers with them out of Ephraim and Manasseh, and out of Simeon: for they fell to him out of Israel in abundance, when they saw that the LORD his God was with him.”*
- 2Chronicle 13:18 - *“For a multitude of the people, even, many of Ephraim, and Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun had not cleansed themselves, yet did they eat the Passover otherwise than it was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them saying, The good LORD pardon every one. “*
- 2Chronicles 34:6 – *“And so did he in the cities of Manasseh, and Ephraim, and Simeon, even unto Naphtali, with their mattocks round about.*

Those living in the Southern Kingdom were not taken captive and deported by the Assyrians. However, years later they were taken, along with the Southern Kingdom (Judah and Benjamin along with some of the Levites) to Babylon. This is telling us that not all of the ten tribes were lost. Yes, the tribes and their territories were lost to the Assyrians. However, not all of the people in those ten tribes were taken away captive to Assyria and assimilated into and with other peoples. This means that the **ten tribes were not lost**. Some of them were living in the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Also, in Luke 2:36 we read that the prophetess Anna was from the “tribe of Asher,” a tribe from the Northern Kingdom. She was in the Temple in Jerusalem, praying before God. This is one more example that the tribes were not lost. Nehemiah 11:20 also tells us that men from “all the tribes” from the northern kingdom of Israel (*“the residue of [the Kingdom]of Israel”*) were living in the cities of Judah – the southern kingdom. The book of Nehemiah was written at the time the Jews were returning from the Babylonian and Persian captivity. This reveals to us that none of the tribes were truly lost.

That is what James is referring to in his letter in verse 1 when we read, *“to all the tribes (Genesis 35:22-26) which are scattered...”* This is therefore telling us that in reality, none of the tribes were truly lost-even at the time of Jesus. Yes, Jesus did go to the Samaritans, yet we now have a greater understanding that He went to all Israel first, not just to those referred to “Jews.”

We must remember that when we hear the word “Jew” or “Jewish” in relation to the people of Israel, it actually is not just referring to those who came from the line of Judah and Benjamin. It is not only referring to only those who came from the line of Judah or Benjamin but actually, even though it may seem strange to us, it truly does refer to everyone who God chose to call “Israelites” as it is discussed in the first five books of the Bible – the Pentateuch. It is referring to all the 12 tribes, as well as the Levites.

These Israeli people were dispersed and scattered throughout the “known world” at the time of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple (70 AD). The Romans took over all of Israel and the people all fled to other nations at that time. That is why now there is a great influx of people from all the tribes returning to Israel at this present time. They are returning back to their “homeland.”

We must realize that this is a move of God. It is a move of God because, first, the nation was reestablished in 1948. The scriptures predicted that the nation of Israel will return some day back to the land that God had established for them. Not just a portion of Israel will return, but all of Israel. As stated, their return started in 1948 and continues to this day.

Now, all the Israelites are returning back to their homeland. Not just those from Judah and Benjamin (who were called Jewish) but also those who have been dispersed throughout the world from the other ten tribes who are not really “Jewish” (from Judah and Benjamin) but yet they are truly people who are descendants of the Israelites (Hebrews) – the original twelve tribes of Israel.

This was and is God’s plan all along. That is why we must really change our thinking and our vocabulary in how we refer to them. I know that I have always referred to them as being Jewish. However, we must start to recognize them as God really sees them. They are really all Israelites or Hebrews – referring to all the twelve tribes. They are all true descendants of Jacob (Israel) who came from Isaac who came from Abraham and Sarah.

This might not mean anything to you. However, this clears up many of my questions about Israel. We must realize that each of the twelve tribes of Israel are all in existence today some where in the world. Many of them are returning back to their homeland - Israel.

We must realize that the experiences of the people of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah are spiritual “messages” for us, today. God will deal with each us differently when we sin just as He did with the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah. Many of us are from Gentile lineage so we may not look at what we just discussed as being important. However, it truly is important for us to see that God does indeed have a plan. He will definitely deal with the sins we now commit as His children. He loves us so much. He will show (chasten us) and deal with all of our faults (sin) and point us to make things right. It tells us this in His Word. (Hebrews 12:4-11)

We must all truly realize that now, as a believer in Jesus, that we are no longer Jew, Gentile, male or female. No, the scriptures are clear with who we truly are today as believers in Jesus. We are the “One New Man in Christ.” We are no longer separated by name or culture. No, we are now one in Christ. However, all people—Jew, Gentile, male or female—must believe in Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord to become a part of the family of God.

It may be hidden from us or we just may be slow in seeing it as I was and still am in many ways. But... God is so faithful in that He will reveal things to us as we are ready to hear them. Each day we receive so many blessings from Him. His blessings are rich and precious. He meets our daily needs in so many ways. Yet we often forget and become more interested in the things He gives us. We end up, many times, worshipping His gifts – not Him. Hmmm.....

God is so, so, so GOOD!! Lamentations 3:21-23 tells us, *“This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD’S mercies that we are not consumed, because **his compassions fail not**. They are new every morning: **great is thy faithfulness**.”* God is faithful to constantly show us and reveal to us His never ending and forever Word. Thank you my God – Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Help us to always keep our eyes on you and your Word and to be open to learning more and more of who you really are.