

Introduction To James

I. **Purpose**

- A. The book is primarily concerned with the practical aspects of Christian conduct; it tells how faith works in everyday life. James' purpose was to provide concrete ethical instruction. Compared to Paul, James shows much less interest in formal doctrine, though the letter is not without doctrinal statements (1:12; 2:1, 10-12, 19; 3:9; 5:7-9, 12, 14).
- B. Many subjects are discussed in the book, making it like a series of brief sayings arranged in the form of a letter. In the 108 verses of the epistle there are references or allusions from 22 books of the Old Testament. An analysis of the epistle is rather difficult because of the lack of any clearly defined thread of thought running through it.

II. **Authorship**

- A. There were four men bearing the name James in the New Testament:
 - 1. An apostle and son of Zebedee and Salome (Matthew 4:21; 27:56). He was a brother of John, and a fisherman (Luke 5:10). He was called to be an apostle (Matthew 4:21-22; 10:2; Mark 1:19-20; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13) and surnamed Boanerges by Jesus (Mark 3:17). He was martyred in A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2).
 - 2. "The younger" (also called "the less"), an apostle. He was the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; 15:40; Luke 6:15; 24:10; Acts 1:13).
 - 3. The brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; Galatians 1:19; 2:9, 12). The brother of Judas (Jude) and Joseph (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; Jude 1). A witness of Christ's resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7). He addressed the council at Jerusalem in favor of liberty for the Gentile converts (Acts 15:13-21). He sent disciples to Antioch (Galatians 2:12). He heard of the success attending Paul's ministry (Acts 21:18-19) and he wrote the epistle of (James 1:1).
 - 4. Father (or brother) of the apostle Judas (not Iscariot) (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). The elliptical text in two passages ("Judas of James" in Luke and Acts) has been interpreted in two ways: Judas was the brother (KJV) or the son (most other versions) of James. This Judas is called Thaddaeus in Matthew and Mark.
- B. Only two have been proposed as the author of this letter -- James the son of Zebedee (the brother of John) and James the son of Joseph (the half brother of Jesus). These factors suggest James the son of Joseph as a writer:

1. We know that he emerged as a leader of the early Christians, while we have no such evidence on the other James.
 2. The external evidence supports James the son of Joseph.
 3. If James, the son of Zebedee had written the letter, both prominent Jameses being alive at the time, he would have had to specify which one he was. The fact that no such identification appears suggests that the first James is dead and the second, James, the son of Joseph, now appears as a church leader.
 4. James, the son of Zebedee died quite early (approximately A.D. 44), as far as we know before any Christian literature had been produced. For someone to call himself "James" without any other designation would be tantamount to identifying himself with James, leader of the Jerusalem church.
 5. According to Hegesippus (c. A.D. 180), James' faithful adherence to the Jewish law and his austere lifestyle led to the designation "the just." It seems clear that he suffered martyrdom; Josephus places his death in the year 61 when there was a Jewish uprising after the death of Festus the procurator and before his successor had been appointed.
- C. This means the letter either belongs to the James we know or to someone who is writing in his name. The idea of an unknown James is extremely unlikely, even though James was a common name, because another James would have designated himself more clearly than this.
- D. The letter was not readily received into the collection of writings considered as authoritative scripture. It was rejected by some as late as the time of Eusebius (c. A.D. 265–340). Few early Christian writers refer to it. It was accepted in the West later than the East.
1. Such negative evidence could be taken as a basis for doubting the authority of the book, were it not that, after a period of questioning, the churches finally granted unanimous recognition to it as canonical. Furthermore, there are reasonable explanations for the late acceptance of the letter. Eusebius himself explained that denials of the book's canonicity came not because of any fault in the book itself, but merely because it had not been widely used.
 - a) Late and incomplete attestation could mean the letter is late and nonapostolic, or there could be another explanation. There is a tendency since the Reformation to regard the doctrine of the major epistles of Paul as "mainline" and to regard James' doctrine as a variant or sideline on the faith.
 - (1) For this reason, and since James is mainly ethical rather than doctrinal, it is somewhat neglected now among established scholarship.

- (2) It is at least possible that some of the reasons for modern neglect fostered a similar neglect in ancient times.
- (3) Especially, if James was written to Jewish Christians who were soon to become a minority group within the church. Then it could easily have been neglected in the ancient church as it is in the modern church.
- b) Other reasons why this condition existed include its brevity, the question of James's identity, the fact that it was not written by one of the twelve apostles and its general address (sent to no specific person or church).
- 2. However, in due time, such authorities as Eusebius and Jerome (c. A.D. 340–420) placed their stamp of approval on the book, and the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) recognized its canonicity. Ultimately, churches everywhere were reading it as authoritative scripture.

III. **Date**

- A. If the letter is pseudonymous, it could have been written at any time. Those who hold to pseudonymous authorship often opt for a date around 100-125. However, the letter is intensely Jewish:
 - 1. Christian worship is still called the synagogue (2:2).
 - 2. God is called Lord of sabaoth (5:4).
 - 3. The author shows concern for orphans and widows (1:27).
 - 4. The poor are favored over the rich (2:1-3, 5:1-6).
 - 5. There are Old Testament examples (Job, Elijah).
 - 6. James' denunciatory tone is reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets (5:1-6).
- B. If James is pseudonymous and late, it must originate from a Jewish splinter sect like the Ebionites. If so, how did it get into the regular canon?
- C. The alternate view is that the letter originated early, while Jews were the predominant Christians.
 - 1. James is so Jewish that some have even thought it was a Jewish pre-Christian work, edited lightly to make it Christian. The editing would be the addition of the name of Jesus in 1:1 and 2:1.
 - 2. However, this idea will not hold water because of the Christian contents of the letter generally: i.e., the faith and works section (2:14-26) and especially the reminiscences of Jesus' own public teaching (see below).
- D. The best setting for the work seems to be the early days of the church in Palestine, before the Gentile issue became a greater concern (i.e. in the early or middle 40's).

IV. **Language**

- A. James is written in better Greek than many of the New Testament writings, leading some to believe that a Palestinian peasant could not have produced it. However, Galilee was the most bilingual part of Palestine in the first century. It was referred to as "Galilee of the nations" in Isaiah 9:1 and it is quite likely that anyone raised there would be bilingual.
- B. Anytime these types of arguments are brought forth, one must remember that we know nothing about James' education, and we do not know if James used a scribe. Most of the arguments about the Greek language are purely speculative.

V. **Addressees**

- A. We have already discussed and dismissed the idea that the addressees were pre-Christian Jews, and that the letter we have is a Christian editing of that work. Some have suggested, however, that James is written to Jews who are not yet Christians. This idea will not work either, since there is no proclamation of the gospel and a church situation is presupposed (e.g., elders laying hands on the sick).
- B. James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, are Jude were called by the early church the "General," "Universal," or "Catholic" epistles because their addressees (with the exceptions of 2 and 3 John) were not limited to a single locality.
- C. The main question is whether James is addressed to Jewish Christians or to all Christians. In other words, when the author addresses the letter to the "Twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1), is he speaking figuratively or literally?
- D. Although there is much difference of opinion, the general conclusion is that the letter was originally a Jewish Christian letter written to other Jewish Christians. This helps explain the Jewishness of thought and tone, coupled with the fact that it seems to have lain outside the more "mainstream" epistles for some years.
 - 1. The geographical location of these Jewish Christians is not specifically identified. They are merely described as "scattered abroad" (1:1), which means they were not centered in one locality.
 - 2. Possibly they were Christians who were forced to leave Jerusalem during the persecution that followed Stephen's death.
 - 3. These Jewish Christians spread out over Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1) and even as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:19).

VI. ***The Relation Of James To Jesus' Teaching***

- A. There are very clear echoes of Jesus' teaching, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, in James:
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| 1. 1:2 | Joy in the midst of trials | Matthew 5:11-12 |
| 2. 1:4 | Exhortation to perfection | Matthew 5:48 |
| 3. 1:5 | Asking for good gifts | Matthew 7:7 |
| 4. 1:6-8 | Praying without doubt | Matthew 21:20-22 |
| 5. 1:9-10 | Humble exalted and vice versa | Luke 18:14 |
| 6. 1:20 | Warnings against anger | Matthew 5:22 |
| 7. 1:22 | Hearers and doers of the word | Matthew 7:24 |
| 8. 1:26 | Control of the tongue | Matthew 12:36 |
| 9. 2:8 | Love of neighbor as self | Matthew 12:31 |
| 10.2:10 | The whole law to be kept | Matthew 5:19 |
| 11.2:13 | The blessings of mercifulness | Matthew 5:7 |
| 12.3:1-12 | Control of the tongue | Matthew 12:36 |
| 13.3:18 | The blessings of peacemakers | Matthew 5:9 |
| 14.4:4 | Friendship of the world | Matthew 6:24 |
| 15.4:10 | The blessings of the humble | Matthew 5:5 |
| 16.4:11-12 | Do not judge another | Matthew 7:1 |
| 17.5:2-6 | Moth and rust spoiling riches | Matthew 6:19 |
| 18.5:9 | The divine Judge at the door | Matthew 24:33 |
| 19.5:10 | The prophets as examples | Matthew 5:12 |
| 20.5:12 | Forbid the use of oaths | Matthew 5:33-37 |
- B. An interesting point is that these clear echoes do not seem to be direct quotations from the written gospels. They are more likely personal remembrances of Jesus' words, or at least remembrances of His word reported orally in the earliest days of the church. This would give support to an early date and to authorship by James the Lord's brother.

VII. ***The Relation Of James To Paul's Teaching***

- A. Doctrinally, both Paul and James are making the same point in different ways. Paul does not teach the "faith only" doctrine James argues against (i.e. faith without any display of belief in action). Note Romans 1:5: "obedience to the faith" and 2:9-10: "Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil,... But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile."
- B. For Paul, faith includes works. One is saved by "active faith" alone. James operates on a minimal definition of faith (i.e. belief in God's existence). That kind of faith, which even demonic spirits hold, will not save.

C. Martin Luther did not question the genuineness of James, only its usefulness in comparison with Paul's epistles, because it says little about justification by faith, while elevating works.