



Introduction to James

Author and Title

The title of this book derives from the name of its author, James the Just as he was called, the brother of Jesus: **<<Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?>>** (Matthew 13:55), and a key leader of the early Jerusalem church, see Acts Chapter 15.

There is general consensus regarding his authorship, although some have challenged this on the grounds that:

1. The Greek is too polished and the rhetoric too Hellenistic for someone who never left Judæa.
2. The author never refers to himself as Jesus' brother.
3. The author seems to be interacting with Pauline issues on faith and works, justification and freedom, and so had to write much later than James could have written, since he was executed in AD62.

There is no good reason, however, to deny that James is the author. As scholars now recognise, there was substantial contact between Jews and Gentiles on a professional but not social level, especially in Galilee, where James grew up. Also, the region had been Hellenised since the time of Alexander the Great.

Moreover, James is not reacting to Pauline issues, but rather addressing similar themes in his own church. It is not possible that he is addressing a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching, as he wrote in the early 40's AD before Paul started his ministry in Antioch, and the earliest letter we have of Paul is Galatians, which most hold that he wrote in AD48. Therefore, James is writing so early that he would have no knowledge of any of Paul's letters.

There are a couple of accounts of the martyrdom of James but many hold to that given by 1st Century Jewish historian Josephus, who writes that, following the death of the Roman governor of Judæa Porcius Festus in AD62, the High Priest Ananus gathered the Sanhedrin, accused James of violating the Law along with some others and had them all stoned. As a consequence, the new governor Luceius Albinus removed Ananus from the position of high priest upon his arrival.

The historicity of James is well attested to in historical literature, e.g. Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 20.200-201; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.23.

Date

Since James died in AD62, the letter had to precede that date. Further, if this had been written after the apostolic council in Jerusalem (AD48-49), it surely would have mentioned the issues from that momentous occasion. Thus the letter was most likely written in the early to mid-40s.

Theme

James' primary theme is living out one's faith, being a doer and not just a hearer of the Word. This theme is developed in view of the social conflict between rich and poor, and the spiritual conflict between factions in the church. James rebukes his readers for their worldliness and challenges them to seek divine wisdom in working out these problems, in order to be right before God.

Purpose of James

The audience for James' letter is almost certainly Jewish Christians, as evidenced by the designation: <<**To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations**>> (James 1:1b), and: <<**your meeting**>> or assembly, Greek *synagōgē*, in James 2:2, the Jewish reasoning throughout, and James' frequent reflection on the Mosaic Law.

If the scattering or Dispersion in some translations is literal, as well as metaphorical, then these are a group of Jewish Christian house churches outside of Judæa, which fits the situation of persecution and poverty in the letter. More than that cannot be said, but the social situation can be gleaned from the letter.

As a result of the troubles, conflict has entered the churches, and they have splintered into fighting factions. Moreover, some have fallen into a worldly lifestyle: <<**Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world**>> (James 1:27), and: <<**You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God**>> (James 4:4), and have failed to put their faith into practice: <<**My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does. If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless**>> (James 1:19-26), with the result that: <<**he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does**>> (James 1:8). They are wavering between God and the world: <<**Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded**>> (James 4:8).

Salvation History

Since Christ has accomplished salvation, believers are to hold fast to him and reject false ways. They are called to remember that there is only one route into eternal salvation.

Writing Style

Even though James begins with an epistolary salutation, the rest of the book does not have the format of an epistle but rather is a collection of wisdom sayings, much like the genre of wisdom literature as seen in the OT. The generic format of that wisdom literature is the collection of proverbs. Additionally, the book of James belongs to an ancient Greek form of satire known as the diatribe, the traits of which include: imaginary dialogues, including question and answer constructions; apostrophe, direct address to absent people or things as though they are present and can hear; metaphors taken from nature and everyday life; allusions to famous people from the past, i.e. stock instances or well-known representations of the qualities that are under discussion; harsh addresses to readers; and heightened contrasts.

The most pervasive technique in the book of James is the proverb or aphorism, in the mode of ancient wisdom teachers. Next in frequency is the rhetorical device of direct command, expressed in the imperative mood of the verb, e.g. to be doers rather than hearers of the Word as in James 1:22.

In fact, there are over 50 imperatives in the book's 108 verses. This abundance of commands is a signal that the writer has a practical bent and is interested in action rather than mere belief as the distinguishing characteristic of Christians. There is also a strongly persuasive stance as the author seeks to move his readers to action. The tone is continuously energetic, and satire is never far from the surface, sometimes couched in a somewhat scolding manner.

Key Themes

	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Verses</u>
1.	God is seen as a gracious giver, the unchanging Creator, merciful and compassionate, a Judge, the one and only God, a jealous God, a gracious God, and a healing God.	1:5; 1:17-18; 2:5; 2:13; 2:19; 4:5-6; 5:1-3; 5:9; 5:15.
2.	Wisdom comes from above, enabling a believer both to withstand trials and to bring peace rather than discord.	1:5; 3:13; 3:17.
3.	God allows tests and trials, but temptation does not come from God but from self and Satan. The required response is patient endurance.	1:3; 1:13-14; 4:7; 5:7-8.
4.	The primary trial is poverty and oppression from the rich. The poor are the special focus of God's care and must be cared for by his people, without showing prejudice and not being ignored. The wealthy are condemned for presumptuous pride and for stealing from the poor.	1:9; 1:27; 2:1-5; 2:15-16; 4:13-17; 5:1-6.

5.	Apocalyptic themes are prevalent in terms of both future judgment and reward.	1:12; 2:5; 2:12-13; 3:1; 4:12; 5:1-9; 5:20.
6.	The power of the tongue to destroy or to bring peace dominates the middle section.	3:1-4:12.
7.	The ethical mandate to go beyond hearing the Word to living it out in daily conduct is made explicit early on and is implicit throughout the letter.	1:19-27; 2:14-26.
8.	Prayer is the proper response to trials, but it must not be self-seeking. It is to be central in life not only when afflicted or sick but also when cheerful. God has great power to heal, physically, emotionally and spiritually.	1:5-7; 4:2-3; 5:13-18.
9.	Faith, in its relationship to both works and justification, does not contradict but supplements Paul's teaching. James and Paul are united in teaching that justification comes only by the grace of God through faith but will of necessity result in works. If there are no resultant works, there was no justification in the first place.	2:14-26.

The Setting of James - circa AD40-45

The epistle of James was likely written to predominantly Jewish Christian house churches outside of Judæa, based on it being sent: <<**To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations**>> (James 1:1b), its distinctly Jewish content, and its focus on persecution and poverty. This would mean it was sent throughout most of the ancient Mediterranean world, see the image.



The image shows the region at the time James wrote his letter

Outline

- I. Greeting (1:1)**
- II. Trials and Temptations (1:2-18)**
 - a. Joy in trials (1:2-4)
 - b. Wisdom from God for trials (1:5-8)
 - c. The place of rich and poor before God (1:9-11)
 - d. Reward for those who endure (1:12)
 - e. The process of temptation (1:13-18)
- III. Listening and Doing (1:19-27)**
 - a. Hearers of the word (1:19-21)
 - b. Doers of the word (1:22-25)
 - c. True, practical religion (1:26-27)
- IV. Favouritism Forbidden (2:1-13)**
 - a. Preferring the wealthy over the poor in the assembly (2:1-7)
 - b. The royal law of love (2:8-11)
 - c. Acting in light of judgment (2:12-13)
- V. Faith and Deeds (2:14-26)**
 - a. Faith without works (2:14-17)
 - b. Response of a critic (2:18-20)
 - c. Examples of Abraham and Rahab (2:21-26)
- VI. The Sin of Dissension in the Community (3:1-4:12)**
 - a. Taming the tongue (3:1-12)
 - b. Two Kinds of Wisdom (3:13-18)
 - c. Submit Yourselves to God (4:1-12)
- VII. The Sins of the Wealthy (4:13-5:12)**
 - a. Boasting About Tomorrow (4:13-17)
 - b. Warning to Rich Oppressors (5:1-6)
 - c. Patience in Suffering (5:7-12)
- VIII. The Prayer of Faith (5:13-20)**

Luther on James

Luther did not consider James' letter to be apostolic as it does not major on the resurrection, which is central to the Gospel of Christ. These are well known views of Luther in regard to the Epistle of James, and the grounds upon which he rejected it from the canon of the NT, are presented in his comments on 1 Peter.

He was too impatient of the seeming contradiction between Paul and James upon the subject of faith, and too hastily concluded that they were irreconcilable. A careful consideration of the scope of the argument in the Epistle of James, removes the difficulty, as may be seen at large by later commentators.

There is no historical reason for casting discredit upon the Epistle of James. The early Christian writers furnish very decided testimony in its favour.

Clement of Rome has alluded to it twice. Hermas has no less than seven allusions to it, which according to Lardner is fully sufficient to prove its antiquity. Origen, Jerome, Athanasius, and most of the subsequent ecclesiastical writers quote from it, and it is found in all the catalogues of canonical books published by the general and provincial Councils. But an argument of still greater weight is the fact that it is inserted in the Syriac version of the NT, executed at the close of the 1st or early 2nd Century.

None certainly would question that the mainly Jewish believers to whom it was addressed would be the best judges of its genuine and authentic nature, and by them it was unhesitatingly accepted.