

THE LETTER OF JAMES – PART 1

OVERVIEW

- I. The letter of James was likely written by James, a relative of Jesus Christ and the first bishop of Jerusalem, probably with some assistance, at first as a general epistle to Jewish converts to Christianity.

- A. The letter attributes itself to "James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."
 1. The term a "slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" is actually a claim to authority as their servant. St. Paul sometimes used that title for himself in letters emphasizing the need for obedience to God and humility in imitation of Jesus. See Romans 1:1, Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1. The Second Letter of Peter and the Letter of Jude use similar beginnings. Likewise in the Old Testament, such figures as Abraham, Moses, and King David, the prophets in general, and the Suffering Servant are also called servants of the Lord. See Joshua 14:7; Ps. 89:4, 105:42; Is. 52:13-53:12; Jer. 2:4, Amos 3:7.

 2. There are four James referred to in the New Testament: (1) James the Greater, an apostle, with St. John a son of Zebedee, see Matt. 10:2, Mark 1:19; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13, 12:2; (2) James the Lesser, the son of Alphaeus, also an apostle, see Matt. 10:3, Mark 1:20; Luke 6:15, Acts 1:13; (3) James a relative of the Lord, see Matt. 13:55; Mk. 6:3; Gal. 1:19; (4) James the bishop of Jerusalem, see Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18; Gal. 2:9. Almost all scholars agree that the latter two James are the same person.
 - a. Furthermore, it is traditionally believed, although disputed especially by modern scholars, that that James the son of Alphaeus is also James the bishop of Jerusalem, on the grounds that after the death of James the Greater around 43-44 A.D. there seems to be only one prominent James in the Christian community. See Acts 12:7, Gal. 2:9, 12; cf. "Introduction to the Letter of James" in The Catholic

Letters of The Navarre Bible 14; contrast with Thomas Leahy, "The Epistle of James" in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary 909.

- b. Because St. James the Greater was martyred by Herod Agrippa around 43-44 A.D., see Acts 12:2, and the letter seems to be clearly written after that, he would not have been the author.

 - c. Thus, James the relative of Jesus and bishop of Jerusalem seems to be the James the letter identifies itself with. If there is a difference between James the bishop of Jerusalem and James the Less he would very likely be the author because he was more prominent in the early Church, and the author seems to assume that his identity is well known.

 - d. Eusebius, the court historian of the Emperor Constantine, who wrote his famous Ecclesiastical History in the late 310s to early 320s A.D., attributes the letter to James, both the Apostle and the relative of the Lord. He calls him James the Just because of his great virtue and describes his martyrdom by beating in 62 A.D. See Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History. Book II, chs. 1, 23; see also Josephus Antiquities Book 20, ch. 9.
3. Some have also argued that it was not St. James himself, but an associate who wrote the letter to summarize the teachings of St. James, or more generally of the Church in Jerusalem that he led. The argument is based mostly on: (1) the excellent Greek that the letter uses, Greek that a working class Galilean would presumably not know; (2) the fact that its canonicity was debated from an early time, which presumably it would not have been if James was clearly the author; and (3) the view that it was written well after 70 A.D., an argument based upon the lack of any reference to Jewish rituals or strict legalism and the claimed opposition to St. Paul's emphasis on salvation by faith,

especially prominent in his letters to the Romans and Galatians, written in 54 and 58 A.D, an opposition that is not evident in the life of St. Paul. See Leahy at 909. However, supporters of Jacobian authorship, such as Fr. Daniel Harrington in the Sacra Pagina edition of James, respond that there is little evidence to oppose the historical understanding. First, St. James could easily have learned the Greek or used a secretary. Second, some early Christian writers, such as the author of the first century Pastor of Hermas, the first century Pope Clement, and the second century martyrs St. Justin and St. Irenaus, seem to have referred to this letter; and the third century commentator Origin clearly considered it canonical. The lack of any reference to Jewish rituals can be explained by the fact that the letter was to Jews in the Dispersion who would have been less concerned about rituals. And the supposed opposition to the doctrine of St. Paul can be seen as more or a complementary teaching.

- B. The letter was written, probably in the 50s or early 60s to the Jews living outside of the Holy Land, but indirectly to all Christians as the new Israel.
1. Assuming that St. James was the author, it would have had to have been written by his death in 62 A.D. Because the letter refers to those who are oppressing Christians in areas outside of the Holy Land, see James 2:6, and this oppression does not seem to have started until at least the late 40s, it would not have begun before then. If the letter was written by an associate shortly after St. James' death to summarize his teachings it would probably date from the early to mid 60s. Scholars who favor another author who used James as a pseudonym sometimes date the letter in the late 1st century.
 2. The letter is written by its terms to the "twelve tribes in the dispersion." That dispersion referred to Jews living outside of the Holy Land. In the first century, there were no longer twelve tribes of Israel, but the reference is to the whole of the Israeli community, which the prophets said would be restored again. See, e.g., Jer. 31:31-34; Ez. 37:1-28, 47:13-23. The Church would become the new Israel, journeying back to her homeland in heaven. See, e.g., Gal. 6:16; Rev. 7:4-8, 21:2, 12. The image is of this life as a sort of exile and pilgrimage to the new and eternal Jerusalem. See, e.g., Heb. 11;13, 1 Pet. 1:1, 2;11.

3. The references to the Old Testament, which the author does not feel the need to explain, also indicates that the immediate audience was primarily of Jewish converts. In addition, the letter denounces vices such as favoritism, slanderous speech, and judgmentalism that would have been more the subject of Jewish preaching, see, e.g., Matt. 5-7, and does not describe the impurity and idolatry more common in pagan lands, see, e.g., 1 Cor. 5-6, 10:14-22.

II. Largely because of debates about authorship, and the fact that the letter refers by name to Jesus only twice, the canonicity of the letter was debated from an early time.

A. Several early authors, such as St. Clement, the author of the Shepherd of Hermas, St. Justin the Martyr and St. Irenaeus seem to have relied on the letter of James for some of their teachings. Origin, the leading Scriptural commentator of the third century considered the letter canonical. On the other hand, there are many references to the letter early on in Church history, and the Muratorian Canon, a second century list of books used in liturgies in Rome, does not include this letter.

B. Eusebius said that the letter was a part of Scriptures, but that that fact was debated. See Ecclesiastical History Book III, ch. 25. The synods of Laodicia in the 360s and Carthage 397 A.D. confirmed the canonicity of the letter, and St. Jerome, the great translator of the Bible and leading Biblical scholar of the late 4th an early 5th century, considered it to be a part of the Bible. Under their influence, this letter came to be universally accepted as a part of the Bible.

C. As the Protestant Reformation began in 1519, Martin Luther at first dismissed the letter as "an epistle of straw" having "nothing of the nature of the gospel about it." He objected that it opposed the teaching of St. Paul regarding salvation by faith and because of its few references to Jesus by name. He placed it in the Bible, but only at the end as an exhortation to good works. John Calvin and many other Protestants, on the other hand, accepted it. In 1546, the Council of Trent, in its Decree on Sacred Scriptures declared infallibly that the letter of James, along with all of the books in the Vulgate of St.

Jerome are the inspired word of God, and that they (and they alone) constitute the Bible.

- III. The Letter of James focuses upon an integration of the Christian faith with practical living. Its style, which is mostly exhortative, emphasizes this point.
- A. Over and again, the letter focuses on how the Christian should approach life. The letter emphasizes that if it does not work a change in ones life, faith is dead. See James 2:14-17.
 - 1. The supposed opposition between this doctrine and the Pauline emphasis on salvation through faith is artificial. St. Paul does emphasize in Romans that salvation comes not through the law alone, but by faith. See, e.g., Rom 3:9-5:2. However, even here, he emphasizes that one can lose this freedom from sin by giving into sin and thus becoming a slave to sin again. See, e.g., Rom. 6:12-23. Likewise, in Galatians, St. Paul emphasizes that "works" and the law do not lead to salvation. See Gal. 2:16-21, 3:19-29. However, here again, St. Paul emphasizes that this freedom is fulfilled in the new law of the Spirit and of love that is violated by sin. See Gal. 5:14-26.
 - 2. Conversely, even in emphasizing the importance of good works, the letter of James emphasizing that all goodness comes from God, who freely gave us new birth and forgiveness of sins that we may live out this new life. See, e.g., James 1:16-18, 4:10, 5:14-16. James refers to faith sixteen times in the five chapter letter , indicating the importance of faith to him as well.
 - 3. They both present in complementary fashion the notion that God calls us and assists us by His free gift of grace, but that we must respond actively to His offer.
 - The fact that they both use the example of Abraham's response to God, see James 2:21-25, Romans 4:1-3 and that they use parallel language regarding faith and works, see Rom. 3:28, James 2:24, may indicate that one was responding to another. But it could also be that both were responding to the same arguments that were floating around the church at the time.

B. The letter develops this focus on living out the Christian life with a combination of several central themes:

1. James emphasizes that one receives blessings as a result of the endurance of trials and testing. See James 1:2-4, 5:7-11. But he also emphasizes that temptations do not come from God, but rather from disorders within us. See James 1:13-15.
2. The letter focuses strongly on social justice, emphasizing the need to take care of the poor and that the rich live under judgment. See James 1:9-11, 2:1-11, 5:1-6.
3. The letter also calls for prayers offered in confidence to overcome various trials. See James 1:5-8, 26, 4:7-8, 5:14-18.
4. The letter warns against being controlled by passions, which are the source of divisions. See James 1:20-21, 3:14-15; 4:1-6.
5. There are also strong warnings against sins of speech. See James 1:19-21, 3:1-12, 4:11-12; 5:12.
6. There is the call to recognize in wisdom that all good comes from God in whom we should place all of our confidence. See James 1:5, 16-18, 4:10, 13-17.

7. On a related point, the letter calls for us not to judge other and in fact to try to bring sinners back to God. See James 1:20, 2:13, 4:11-12, 5:19-20.

C. In the wisdom style of style of literature, such as that used in the books of Proverbs, Wisdom and Sirach, and by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plain, see Matt. 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, the letter presents a number of teachings all piled in together without a neatly divisible order. The major themes are all combined together in a changing kaleidoscope like fashion. Part of the idea is to emphasize that the life of faith combines all aspects of a relationship with God, and that, in living a Christian life, one cannot neatly divide them out into sections.

- As a result, commentators organize the letter in many different ways. See, e.g., Navarre Bible, The Catholic Letters 17 (dividing the letter into three sections and a conclusion); The New Jerome Biblical Commentary 910-911 (dividing the letter into 11 sections and a conclusion); Sacra Pagina, The Letter of James 38 (dividing the letter into a three part introduction, and six part body, and a four part conclusion).

D. The style combines both kind words of endearance, and harsh rebukes. On the one hand there are familial reference, e.g., to "my brothers" and "we" as "a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." See James 1:2, 18-19, 2:1, 5; 3:1, 4:11, 5:9, 12, 19. On the other hand, there are some very harsh rebukes. See James 2:20, 4:1-5, 5:1-5. The idea is likely to express both a deep love for the hearers, but also a sense of warning and judgment that will come to the unrepentant.

E. James refers to Jesus by name only twice, both times near the beginning, but there is an emphasis on His power and on our need to obey Him.

1. Both early references describe Jesus Christ as "Lord." James 1:1, 2:1.

2. The other references to the Lord presumably mean Jesus as well. See James 1:7, 5:10, 15, 5:8-11. All of these references indicate the Lord's command over all things and willingness to us the strength needed for a faithful life.

The emphasis again in recognizing our lives as directed by Jesus, but very much in the context of our choice to serve Him