

Introduction to the Book of James

James 1:1

Introduction

It has been many years since we have had an exegetical study through a book of the Bible. We're going to begin today an in-depth study of the New Testament book of James. First we'll do a proper introduction to the book, considering its authorship, audience, purpose, etc., and then we'll begin a verse-by-verse study next week, Lord willing.

Internal Evidence

The most significant evidence for the introductory questions lies in the first verse of the book:

James 1:1 – James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad, greetings.

Authorship

James didn't write the book of James. Jacob did.

Ἰάκωβος θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος ταῖς δώδεκα φυλαῖς ταῖς ἐν τῇ διασπορᾷ χαίρειν.

“The name goes from Hebrew to Greek to Latin to French and finally to English, and it is the succession of changes that account for the changes. One person wrote: Ya'aqov (Hebrew) → Iacobus (Greek) → Iacomus (Latin) → Jammes (Old French) → James (English).” – Bill Mounce

This didn't happen in any other language, and it didn't happen in Matthew's genealogies. Completely inexplicable. **And this mistaken transliteration causes us to forget the thoroughly Jewish nature of the book and the Christians it was written to.**

With that settled, who was this Jacob? There are four men named James (Jacob, as above) mentioned in the New Testament.

1. James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John: A disciple and one of the three in Jesus' inner circle. He was martyred by Herod in 44.
2. James, the son of Alphaeus: Another disciple and possibly the brother of Matthew. Very little is known of him, and he disappears in the historical record soon after Jesus' death.
3. James, the father of Judas (not Iscariot) the disciple. Totally obscure.
4. James, the (half) brother of Jesus.

“A well-known James must have written the letter, and the brother of the Lord is the only James we know of who fits the profile.” – Douglas Moo

First off, I heard that Mary, Jesus' mother, remained a virgin all of her life. How could Jesus have a brother?

Matthew 13:55-57 – ⁵⁵“Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” ⁵⁷And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his home town, and in his own household.”

He did have brothers and sisters. I guess that means Mary didn't remain a virgin.

James was probably married.

1 Cor. 9:5 – Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?

And as you can imagine, during Jesus' earthly ministry His brothers did not believe He was the Messiah.

John 7:5 – For **not even His brothers were believing in Him.**

How many of you have siblings? And maybe that sibling could never do wrong? Imagine having sinless Jesus as your brother!

But something changed.

1 Cor. 15:6-7 – ⁶After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; ⁷**then He appeared to James,** then to all the apostles;

And afterward Jesus' brother James became a leader in the Christian church in Jerusalem.

Gal. 1:18-19 – ¹⁸Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹But I did not see any other of the apostles **except James, the Lord's brother.**

Lenski notes that those in the Jerusalem church called him “James the just.”

And James' ministry was to the Jewish Christians.

Gal. 2:9 – and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, **and they to the circumcised.**

In Acts 15, James (not Peter!) presided over the “Apostolic Conference” in 52, where “he was able to permit all the factions to express themselves, and then

bring peace by drawing a conclusion based on the Word of God.” – Warren Wiersbe

Another historical reference reports that “he prayed so much, his knees were as hard as a camel’s!” – Warren Wiersbe

Tradition says that James was a Nazarite, never partaking of alcohol, and a vegan.

This is the man most scholars believe wrote the letter. Note how he humbly introduces himself, “a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” He could have thrown around his proud credentials of being Jesus’ brother, but he didn’t. And that humility carries through the entire book.

At the same time, his lack of specificity suggests he was well known enough in the Church that he didn’t have to say any more.

James was martyred in Jerusalem sometime between 62 and 66.

Date

Lenski dates the writing toward the end of the period between the beginning of the dispersion of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem in 35 and the Apostolic Conference in 52. A date in the late 40s makes James arguably the first New Testament book written.

Blomberg and Kamel, in fact, point to James’ setting and say, “These are our roots!”

James was declared part of the canon at the Council of Carthage in 397. The delay was mostly due to the fact that James’ audience of Jewish Christians meant that it was not widely circulated among the much larger number of gentile Christians, and was thus less widely familiar than other epistles. It was neglected, not rejected. (Douglas Moo)

Place

James spent his entire Christian ministry in Jerusalem and did not even travel away from there as many of the apostles did. The book of James was written in Jerusalem.

Audience

James 1:1 states his audience: “to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.” As mentioned in Gal. 2:9, James’ ministry was to the Jewish Christians. James’ audience were believers. The audience could be both dispersed Jews who were visiting Jerusalem and converted on the first post-resurrection Pentecost and those believing Jews who had left Jerusalem under the persecution that arose after Jesus’ death. James became concerned about the slacking behavior

of those Messianic Jews who had left Jerusalem and wrote to them that they should act in accordance with their faith, which they clearly weren’t doing in many specific ways.

Purpose

Chuck Swindoll calls the James “The Proverbs of the New Testament.” Curtis Vaughan points out, “James exhibits greater likeness to the teachings of Jesus than any other book in the New Testament.”

“... the book is intended to give comfort, rebuke, and counsel to Christians passing through a period of severe trial – comfort for their sorrows, rebuke for their worldliness, and counsel for redirecting their lives.” – Curtis Vaughan

Warren Wiersbe – The fact that James often uses the word “perfect” (τέλειον = finished, mature) suggests his purpose may be to incite the readers to grow to spiritual maturity.

Themes / Summary

“Perhaps we would do better not to speak of a “theme” but of a central concern.” – Douglas Moo

“Real faith produces authentic deeds.” – Chuck Swindoll

“Confession must conform to creed. Profession must be matched by performance.” “Reality in religion” – Curtis Vaughan

“In the 108 verses of the letter there are 54 imperative verbs.” – Curtis Vaughan

“Like the OT prophets and as with Jesus, James sees no tension between (and indeed weds closely together) orthodoxy and orthopraxy – correct belief and correct behavior.” – Craig Blomberg and Mariam Kamell

Outline

Unlike Paul and other writers, there is no preamble. “This directness we consider part of the character of James. It is a mark of the entire epistle. Sentence after sentence is short and direct; and when the last admonition is reached, he stops as he has begun.” – Lenski

“In content, James is somewhat miscellaneous. That is to say, it treats a number of seemingly unrelated topics.

- Trials (1:2-18)
- Hearing and doing the Word of God (1:19-27)
- Respect of persons (2:1-13)

- Faith and works (2:14-26)
- Dangers of the tongue (3:1-12)
- True and false wisdom (3:13-18)
- Worldliness (4:1-12)
- God and business (4:13-17)
- Social injustice (5:1-6)
- Patience and prayer (5:7-18)
- Restoration of backsliders (5:19-20)" – Warren Wiersbe

Key Passages

1:2-3 – ²Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

1:13-14 – ¹³Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. ¹⁴But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.

1:17 – Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow.

1:21 – Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, **in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.**

1:22 – But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.

2:17 – Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

3:1 – Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.

4:3 – You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

4:7 – Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

4:8 – Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

4:15 – Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that."

4:17 – Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.

5:14-15 – ¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; ¹⁵and the prayer

offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.

5:16 – Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Conclusion

"Few things would do more to revitalize present-day Christianity than a determined effort on the part of believers to take James seriously and put his teachings into practice." – Curtis Vaughan

"As you read the letter from James, focus on those areas that he mentioned: your actions during trials, your treatment of those less fortunate, the way you speak and relate to others, and the role that money plays in how you live your life. Allow James to encourage you to do good, according to the faith you proclaim." – Chuck Swindoll