

A Brief Introduction to the Book of James

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Introduction and Background

James is one of the seven General Epistles in the New testament (along with 1 and 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude). They are so named because they are not addressed to specific locations (the exceptions being Second and Third John). The General Epistles may get less attention than Paul's epistles, but they are an integral part of the Bible and contain vital information and guidance for Christians.

There are two major themes in the Bible. The first is to help people find the way to God. Within this theme God directs the "dead" sinner as to how he or she may come to know God and become "alive" in Christ. The second major theme is directed toward the person the Bible calls the "saint" or the Christian. The focus of this theme is on how one walks with the God he or she already knows.

The theme of James is the latter and the focus of his book is on *how* the believer walks with God. This is dealt with as perhaps no other book in the Bible with the possible exception of Proverbs. This is why James has been called the "Proverbs of the New Testament."¹ James was not written to establish or define the doctrines of the faith. It is not even a defence of doctrine, rather, it is an intensely practical book that assumes the reader already knows the doctrines and now needs to learn how to live in the truth.²

The book of James is unique in comparison to other New Testament books. In his writings Paul emphasizes faith and adherence to doctrinal truth as he helps us understand what to believe. Peter teaches us about how to hope. John points us to the way to love. Jude instructs us how to be pure. But James wants us to know how we are to walk - how to conduct ourselves as Christians. He is clearly concerned that we live Christian lives Monday through Saturday – not just on Sunday.

¹ It is called the book of Proverbs of the New Testament, because of its pithy, practical, and often very direct guidance regarding the importance of Christians "walking the talk." See also Lara Velez. *Proverbs of the New Testament: A Relevant Study of the Book of James (Digital Edition)*. AliBelle, nd.

² James has also been called the book of Amos (one of the Old Testament Minor Prophets) of the New Testament, because of its strong "in your face" rebuke of sin and hypocrisy and his strong condemnation of social injustice.

The Cross is not mentioned in this book nor is the resurrection or even the Holy Spirit. As a matter of fact the name of Jesus appears only twice (1:1 and 2:1). The reason for this is that James is a practical book that assumes the readers already know their doctrine – it is now an issue of *living*, not just knowing, the truth.

Therefore, it is no surprise that James is the least doctrinal and most practical book in the New Testament. However, this in no way diminishes its value or importance for Christians and churches in the twenty-first century. After all knowing doctrine and living doctrine are two sides of the same coin. More than anything else the book is a manual of basic Christian living that assumes that its readers are already people of faith. Proof of the practicalness of James is found in the fact that it has 108 verses and 54 of them are imperatives or commands – verses that tell us to *do* something. In almost every other verse James is saying "do this," "do that," or "don't do this"!

Sadly, this lack of emphasis on doctrine has led to much misunderstanding of the book. It is well known that Martin Luther was not a "fan" of James. He wrote, "Therefore, St James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others [epistles], for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it."³ At one time he wondered if it belonged in the canon because he thought it preached so little of Christ.⁴ "In the famous Luther Bible, published throughout Europe in 1522, Luther arranged to have James placed at the back of the volume without a page reference in the Table of Contents (though, in later editions, he thought better of this idea)."⁵

Donald Guthrie says that in the nineteenth-century there was a tendency "to regard James as a product of an inferior Christian outlook in contrast to the strong meat of Pauline theology."⁶ However, he goes on to say, "...the Epistle of James can be rightly understood only within the context of the whole New Testament Scriptures."⁷

Luther and others have clearly misunderstood the focus of the book of James. James does not proclaim "works" as being necessary to salvation, but rather emphasizes the biblical truth that "works" *will* take place in the life of the man or woman who has genuinely surrendered their life to Christ. Faith is the "root" and works are the

³ Luther's Works 35, 362. [document on-line]; available from <http://pllowas001.thrivent.com/lo/384/FSLO-1330564384-111384.pdf>

⁴ Ibid, 396. However, he never rejected James and included many positive things in his writings about the book alongside his concerns.

⁵ Dickson, John. James: The Wisdom of the Brother of Jesus (*Reading the Bible Today Series*) (Digital Edition). (Sydney South: Aquila Press. 2006), 52.

⁶ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction (Revised Edition)*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 722.

⁷ Ibid.

“fruit” which are a natural product of the root.

Author

It is obvious that James is the author (1:1), but the question is which James? Two things become obvious by the way author identified himself. “First, he must be a prominent, well-known leader named James, since he limited the introduction of himself to his first name and gave no other qualifying features. Second, he reflected Christian humility by identifying himself as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸

There are several persons named James in the New Testament: James the father of Judas (not Iscariot) (Acts 1:13); “James the younger” (Mark 15:40); James the son of Zebedee (Mark 3:17); James the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:18); and James the half-brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55; Galatians 1:19). Of these, only two appear to have the role and influence to have written the book. We have to assume that the author was someone with significant authority within the church.

James the son of Zebedee is a serious candidate, but his early death at the hands of King Herod (see Acts 12:2) seems to eliminate him as the author. In addition, references to James by Paul (1 Corinthians 9:5, 14; 15:7; Galatians 1:15 – 2:12; Acts 15:13–21) make it very clear James the brother of Jesus had a prominent leadership role in the early church. “The Book of Acts portrays James as a mediator of the Jerusalem Council and as head of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13-21; 21:18-26).”⁹ With this background I believe it is almost certain that the author is “...James , the Lord’s brother.” (Galatians 1:19).

James was not a Christ follower during Jesus’ public ministry (John 7:2 – 10). After seeing the risen Christ, he became His follower (1 Corinthians 15:7). He was among those “joined together constantly in prayer” waiting for the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). At the Jerusalem Council he supported Paul and his position that keeping the Law was not a condition for the salvation of the Gentiles (Acts 15:12–21).

Eusebius, the church historian of the fourth century, says James “used to enter alone into the temple and be found kneeling and praying for forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel’s because of his constant worship of God”¹⁰

⁸ Thomas, Lea and David Alan Black. *The New Testament: Its Background and Message* (Digital Edition), (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 511-512.

⁹ Alex Varughese (ed.), *Discovering the New Testament* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2005), 312.

¹⁰ Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2. 23. 6. Quoted in Simon J. Kistemaker, *James and the Epistles of John* (Baker New Testament Commentary) (Logos Edition), Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1986), 10.

(which is why he was known as “camel knees”). James was known as a very righteous man of deep faith. He was given the title “James the just” because of his faithfulness to the law and commitment to prayer.¹¹ As leader of the Jerusalem church, James became a popular and respected person, especially among Jewish Christians.¹²

James was martyred in 62 AD. The Sanhedrin¹³ accused him and others of breaking the law and James was sentenced to death by stoning. Instead, some of the priests threw him from the roof of the temple. Amazingly, he survived the fall, but he was then stoned and beaten to death with a club.¹⁴

Date

We know James was martyred in 62 AD so it is obvious that the book could not possibly have been written later than that date. The fact that James makes absolutely no reference to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) which probably took place somewhere between 47-49 suggests a date before the council took place. Surely James, in a letter addressed to Jewish believers, would have spoken of the Jerusalem Council if it had already taken place. In addition, an earlier date is suggested by the lack of any reference to Gentiles, Gentile churches, or Gentile-related issues (e.g., circumcision, or the eating of meat sacrificed to idols). I support a date of 45-48 AD based on the above evidence. Most, but by no means all, evangelical scholars propose dates between 44-50 AD¹⁵ which would make James the first the New Testament book to be written.

The Original Readers

James begins his letter by addressing “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (1:1). This is an example of Pastor James fulfilling his role as a shepherd to

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo. *James: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) (Logos Edition). (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 21.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ In the New Testament the Sanhedrin appears to be the highest court of the Jews which met in Jerusalem and consisted of a council of leaders – both chief priests and scribes.

¹⁴ Kistemaker, 10.

¹⁵ John MacArthur suggests 44-49 AD (*James, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* [Digital Edition], Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015, 4. Douglas Moo proposes 45-47 AD, Moo, 35. Gromacki leans toward 45-50 AD (R.G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Logos Edition). (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1974), 339.

those who formerly attended the church in Jerusalem.¹⁶ They were Jewish Christians who had escaped the persecution in Jerusalem after the death of Stephen (see Acts 8:1) and were now living in Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (Acts 11: 19– 21).¹⁷ He writes to his oppressed and scattered flock to encourage, teach, and admonish them. He writes to Jewish Christians because at that time in the history of the church, there were no Gentile Christians.

The Theme of James

Finding a single theme that ties together the warnings and commands of James is difficult, almost impossible. There are times when he displays the heart and attitude of a caring pastor as he shepherds his scattered flock through trials (1:1–18). At other times he speaks with the passion and fire of an Old Testament prophet as he warns, denounces, and exhorts changed behaviour (1:19–27; 4:1–12). It may be easiest to see James as a loose collection of messages that address various issues.

1. How to Face Trials (1:1–18)

After a short, almost impersonal introduction (1:1), James jumps right into a discussion of the trials encountered in one's Christian walk. There is a difference between the trials discussed in 1:2–4 and those discussed in 1:13–18. In the former passage he focussed on external afflictions, persecutions, or various hardships in life. James's advice as we face these trials is that we must let them accomplish the divine purpose in our lives (1:4). His discussion of the experience of temptation and trial in the latter passage dealt with enticements to sin. James warned against blaming the enticements on God (1:13). He clearly pointed out that encouragement to sin comes from a personal response to evil (1:14). Believers must resist being led astray by their own desires.

In 1:5–8 James discussed the relationship between wisdom and prayer. Christians must have wisdom in order to successfully face their trials and he encouraged his readers to ask God for that wisdom in faith. The believer who prays in faith will receive wisdom generously from God, but when one prays with doubt he or she can expect nothing.

In 1:9–11 James focused on a specific example of a type of trial. He exhorted those who are humble and poor to rejoice in the spiritual wealth that is available to obedient believers (see Matthew 5:3, 5). They should not see their poverty as a trial that cannot be overcome. He goes on to remind the wealthy that their wealth is temporary (1:11).

¹⁶ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 354.

¹⁷ Chris A. Vlachos. *James* (Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament) (Digital Edition). (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 741.

2. Responding to God's Word (1:19–27)

This section is divided into two parts. The first part addresses the need to control our speech and anger (1:19–20). James urged his readers to be quick to listen but slow to speak. In addition, they were also to be slow to indulge in any anger that does not produce God's righteousness.

The second part focuses on "doing" God's word (1:21–27). In this context the term *word* refers to the verbal communication of Scripture. James warned his readers of the danger of hearing the message but not living it. He uses the image of a person who sees their face in a mirror but quickly forgets what they saw to those who do not obey the word they hear. He refers to the message of Scripture as the "perfect law that gives freedom" (1:25) and encouraged his readers to continue to obey it.

James brings this section to a close with two examples of the kinds of works that please God. First, caring for those in need reflects God's own love and concern for them. Second, living above the corrupt value system of the world speaks of the value of maintaining a pure heart. James' emphasis is that a person's religion must be more than just formal religious activity. The distinctive qualities of love for others and holiness before God are the signs of being a genuine child of God.

3. Avoiding Partiality (2:1–13)

In verses 1–4 James forbids any "hint" of favouritism toward the rich and discrimination toward the poor. He presented two reasons for this prohibition. First, such behaviour is in stark contrast to God's treatment of the poor as "rich in faith" (2:5–7). Second, the "royal law" (Leviticus 19:18) condemned such favouritism (James 2:8–13) by commanding believers to love the poor as well as the rich.

4. Producing Good Works (2:14–26)

Three times in this section James made it very clear that genuine faith produced works (vs. 17, 20, 26). A faith that did not result in works was dead.¹⁸

James began this section by using a scene demonstrating that faith without action was dead. Kind words spoken to a hungry, poorly dressed man or woman without providing him or her with needed food and clothing (vs. 14–17).

¹⁸ Many evangelicals look to this passage to help answer the question, "Must Jesus be Lord to be Savior?" For the view that James demanded a works-producing faith as the basis for salvation, see John F. MacArthur, Jr., "*Faith According to the Apostle James*," *JETS* 33 (March 1990): 13–34. Be sure to also read the responses to MacArthur by Earl D. Radmacher and Robert L. Saucy, *ibid.*, 35–47.

He uses a style of argument called *diatribe*, by introducing an imaginary objector who expressed a viewpoint that opposed James viewpoint (vs.18–19). James insisted that it was impossible to show faith without deeds. He used two biblical examples to support his view. Abraham’s willingness to offer Isaac (vs.21 – 23 – see Genesis 22:1-19) and Rahab’s hiding the Jewish spies (v.25 – see Joshua 2) demonstrated the genuineness the reality of their faith. James insisted that faith without deeds was dead.

Some scholars believe that in this section James may have been combatting false teachers who were familiar with Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith (Romans 3:27–30) and believed Paul promoted a faith that did not produce works. James vehemently opposed this error. James’ views of faith and justification¹⁹ were different from Paul’s but not opposed. James attacked faith that emphasized mere intellectual belief (James 2:19) and Paul emphasized faith as personal commitment to Christ (Romans 3:28). James clarified the way in which justification is seen by others – the performance of good deeds (James 2:24). Paul focussed on what justified a person before God – faith in Christ alone.

5. Controlling the Tongue (3:1–12)

James mentions the tongue in 1:19 and 1:26. In this section he expanded on his earlier statements.

First, he described the difficulty of controlling the tongue (vs.1–2). He warned people who desired to be teachers that in so doing they were in greater danger of judgment, because their ministry demanded they use the most demanding part of the body to control, the tongue.

Second, he used graphic images from nature to demonstrate the potential for evil from the tongue (vs.3–6). A small spark can cause a blazing inferno in a forest; the tongue can a “fire” that destructively influences a life.

Third, he reminded his readers that human beings can tame animals, but they cannot tame the tongue (vs.7–8).

Fourth, James taught that people are incredibly inconsistent in how they use the tongue (vs.9–12). He states that people use the tongue to praise God, but amazingly they also use it to curse those who have been created in God’s image.

¹⁹ I appreciate Dr. Wayne Grudem’s definition of justification: “Justification is an instantaneous legal [an act of God as Judge..., declaring that the sinner is just, i.e., that the Law no longer condemns him, but acquits and pronounces him to be entitled to eternal life] act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.” Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994), 723.

Blessing and cursing come from the same tongue, but James said emphatically, “This should not be” (v.10).

6. False and True Wisdom (3:13–18)

In this section James emphasized values that most Jews of his time would easily identify with. He distinguishes between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom.

He states that earthly wisdom, whose ultimate source is satanic, is personified by jealousy and arrogance (3:14–15), and resulted in every kind of evil practice (3:16).

Heavenly wisdom, on the other hand, loved peace and showed thoughtfulness toward others (3:17). It showed kindness in personal relationships and listened to others. It resulted in a “harvest of righteousness” (3:18).

7. Renouncing Worldliness (4:1–12)

As previously mentioned, James was not writing to a specific church, person, or location (hence it is a “general” epistle). However, it appears the congregations he was writing to had been infiltrated by worldly habits. In this section he described how these habits were seen within the church and challenged his audience to repent.

First, he warned that the evil desires that seemed to be rampant in the lives of his readers led to disagreements and quarrels (4:1–3). They needed to ask God for what they needed, but to be sure they were not asking with “wrong motives” (v.3).

Second, James pointed his readers toward repentance (4:4–10). He was critical of their spiritual adultery and exhorted them to submit to God (4:4, 7).

Conflict among the church members had led to slanderous, critical speech (vs.11–12). James responded to this by calling them to stop slandering one another. He warned those to whom he was writing that they were trying to assume God’s role by acting as judges, a role that they had no business fulfilling.

8. Avoiding Arrogance (4:13–5:6)

James opposed two types of arrogance in these verses. First, he denounced arrogance that resulted from planning their own life without consulting God (4:13–17). He warned his readers to avoid an arrogant, self-sufficient attitude that did not consider the uncertainty of life and reminded them that they lived under God’s will and not their own prideful planning.

Second, he warned against the arrogance that came from the abuse of wealth (5:1–6). James condemned rich landowners for their selfish accumulation of wealth (5:2–3), their dishonest treatment of workers (5:4), and their self-indulgence (5:5).

9. Encouraging Perseverance (5:7–20)

In 5:1–6 James warned the rich landowners about their oppression of the poor. Now he speaks a word of encouragement to the poor (5:7–11).

The poor may become impatient when they do not see the rich receive judgment for their evil ways. James encourages his readers to gain hope from the expectation of the Lord's return. He exhorts them to be patient and avoid grumbling against one another (5:8–9). The patient endurance of the Old Testament prophets and Job can motivate them toward perseverance.

James warned against appeal to God's name to guarantee the truthfulness of one's statements (Matthew 5:34–37). He reminds them that the truthfulness and trustworthiness of their words should be so obvious that they should not need an oath to support them.

Every believer faces the recurring circumstances of trouble, happiness, and sickness. How should followers of Jesus deal with each of these situations? James encourages those in trouble to pray. He says those who have been blessed with happiness should praise God (5:13). Those who are sick should call the elders of the church to seek prayer for physical healing (5:14–16). Any prayer for the sick must always include the acknowledgment of dependence upon God's will (see 1 John 5:14–15).²⁰ James adds the example of Elijah's bold prayers to motivate his readers (5:17–18).

James's final words in the book were a call for action (5:19–20). He wrote to his readers about the tongue, worldliness, arrogance, and greed. Now he urged them (and every believer) to help restore anyone who had strayed from the truth. He encouraged them actively to seek the return of those who left the truth and assured them that God would approve and bless their efforts.

James and the Sermon on the Mount²¹

As mentioned earlier, the Book of James is often referred to as the Proverbs and the Amos of the New Testament, but James also seems to have been influenced by the Sermon on the Mount. John MacArthur says, "The extent of the Sermon on the Mount's

²⁰ Moo, 176–87, contains helpful insights concerning the many issues involved in these verses.

²¹ For a much more extensive look at the subject of James and the Sermon on the Mount see Virgil V. Porter Jr., "The Sermon on the Mount in the Book of James (Part 1)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:647 (July 2005): 347-360. See also Part 2.

influence on James may be seen in his many references and allusions to it.^{22 23}

JAMES	SERMON ON THE MOUNT (MATTHEW)
1:2	5:10-12
1:4	5:48
1:5	7:7-12
1:9	5:3
1:12	7:14
1:20	5:22
1:22	7:21-27
2:5	5:3
2:13	5:7
2:13	6:14-15
2:14-16	7:21-23
3:6	5:22
3:10-12	7:15-20
3:17-18	5:9
4:4	6:24
4:10	5:3-5
4:11-12	7:1-5
5:2-3	6:19-20
5:10	5:12
5:11	5:10
5:12	5:33-37

²² John MacArthur Jr., *James (The MacArthur New Testament Commentary)* (Digital Edition), (Chicago: Moody Press, 2015), 2.

²³ Chart adapted from MacArthur, 2.

Conclusion

The Book of James is likely the first New Testament document written and the first existing Christian writing of any kind of which we know. James, the half-brother of the Jesus and pastor of the church in Jerusalem during the first generation of Christianity (or at least from about 44 – 62 AD), is writing to a group of primarily Jewish-Christian congregations, most likely in the mid-to-late forties, and probably somewhere in or around Syria. We are not sure where James resided at this time, but Jerusalem is obviously the best guess. James's letter joins the early chapters of Acts as a unique biblical witness, and the only firsthand testimony we have, to early Jewish Christianity. These are our "family" roots as Christians!

It is clear that faith in action, especially in social action, is a key focus for James. Like the Old Testament prophets and Jesus Himself, James sees no tension between correct belief and correct behaviour. In fact, he links them closely together like two sides of the same coin. A personal relationship with Jesus and the desire for social justice do not have to create competing brands of Christianity as is so often the case. Both are absolutely essential to the gospel. When the church practices the "social gospel" with a somewhat equal focus on both the "social" and the "gospel" we are living the Christian life as James envisioned it.

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