

# CENTER POINT BIBLE INSTITUTE: FALL 2006

## EPISTLE OF JAMES

### Message

Mature faith is developed by exposing and rejecting wrong attitudes and actions and by embracing right attitudes and actions.” To borrow from the title of G. H. King’s commentary on the epistle, James is about “a belief that behaves.”<sup>1</sup>

### Authorship

The first verse of the epistle identifies the author as “James” or perhaps more accurately Jacob (Ἰάκωβος). Several other internal clues help to identify this “James.” First, the Jewish flavor of the book and the identification with the Jewish audience suggests that the author was Jewish. Second, since the author merely identifies himself as a bond-servant (δοῦλος) without further explanation one could assume that this James would be sufficiently prominent to need no further identification. With these clues in mind, we will examine four men named James that appear in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

First, there is James the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). This may also be the same one as James the Less (probably in contrast to James the Son of Zebedee, the son of Mary (not the mother of Jesus; Mark 15:40), and the brother of Joses (Matt 27:56; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10). But this James seems to be too obscure to be a suitable candidate for authorship of the epistle.

---

<sup>1</sup> Guy H. King, *A Belief That Behaves* (Fort Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> There is some disagreement concerning the exact number of James’s in the New Testament. Identifications typically range between four and six. For the sake of this discussion we suggest there are four.

The Second is James the father of Judas (not Iscariot; Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). Once again the obscurity of this James makes this person an unlikely candidate for authorship.

Third, a better option is James the son of Zebedee and brother of John<sup>3</sup> (Matt 4:21; 10:2; 17:1; Mark 1:19, 29; 3:17; 10:35; 13:3; Luke 9:28; Acts 1:13; 12:2). This James appears to be prominent enough since he was part of Jesus' inner circle within the Twelve. The major problem with this James is that he suffered martyrdom under Herod Agrippa I around A.D. 44, before this epistle was likely written (Acts 12:2).

Fourth, the most likely candidate is James the half brother of the Lord (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3; Gal 1:19; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Cor 15:7). Although this James does not appear to play a prominent role prior to Jesus' resurrection, both Scripture and extra-biblical writings suggest that he does become one of the leaders of the early church. Paul singles out James as one of the witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15:7). By A.D. 44 James appears to have become the recognized leader of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 12:17). In Galatians 2:9 Paul refers to James as one of the pillars of the church. James also plays a pivotal role in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Later church tradition referred to him as James the Just. A strong case can be made for identifying this James with the author of the epistle. For example Donald Guthrie identifies six reasons and two considerations in support of this option: (1) "The author's self-identification," (2) "The author's Jewish background," (3) "Similarities between James and Acts," (4) "Similarities with the teaching of Jesus," (5) "Agreements with the New Testament account of James," (6) "The conditions within the community," that is, "The rather abrupt reference to 'fights and quarrels' would have been highly relevant to the explosive conditions of internecine strife in the period just before the siege of Jerusalem. And again the thoroughly

---

<sup>3</sup> This James is never mentioned apart from John his brother. If this James is the author of the epistle it would be the only place in Scripture where he would be named apart from his brother.

Jewish background of the letter is evidenced by the absence of any allusion to masters and slaves.”<sup>4</sup> To Guthrie’s argument might be added the support of a number of early Church Fathers including Origen, Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, and Augustine who also identified James the Lord’s brother with the epistle.

### Date

The date of James is closely related to the issue of authorship. Some who reject James the Lord’s brother as the author date the writing of the epistle to the second century. But the tone and content of the letter make a second century date unlikely. However, if one embraces James the Lord’s brother as the author then the epistle must have been written prior to A.D. 62, the date of James’ death (see Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1.). Other clues can help to narrow the date even further. For example, the apparent absence of Gentile believers would suggest a date before Paul’s missionary journeys, the first of which was undertaken in A.D. 49. Similarly, the lack of conflict between Jews and Gentile might suggest a date before the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 49. The reference to the *diaspora* in James 1:1 might refer to Christians who scattered after Stephen’s martyrdom (A.D. 35) or perhaps even to the death of James the brother of John (A.D. 44).<sup>5</sup> Taken together then, it seems likely that the Epistle of James was written between A.D. 45–48. If this date is correct then it would make James one of the earliest if not the earliest New Testament document to be written.

---

<sup>4</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 726-33.

<sup>5</sup> This latter option is tenuous since a dispersion of the church in Jerusalem is not recorded in Acts 12.

### **Original Recipients**

According to James 1:1, the epistle was addressed to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations (διασπορά).” Although some would dispute the fact that a Jewish Christian audience is in view here the evidence does not support this view. The term *diaspora* is generally used in the LXX in reference to the Jews (e.g., Deut 28:35; 30:4; Isa 49:6; Jer 41:17; Ps 146:2) as it is in John 7:35. Even if one were to grant that 1 Peter 1:1 uses the term in reference to Gentile believers there is still the reference to the “twelve tribes.” It is unlikely that “twelve tribes” would refer to Gentiles. The Jewish tone and flavor of the book would also argue for a Jewish audience (e.g., the reference to the synagogue [συναγωγή] in 2:2; “our ancestor Abraham in 2:21, etc.). That being said, the exact location of this Jewish Christian dispersion is unknown.

### **Historical Setting**

The historical setting of James is related to the issues of authorship and date. But these issues can only take the reader so far. Even if one assumes that the author is James the Lord’s brother, and that the epistle was written to dispersed Jewish believers around the mid-to-late forties A.D., the reader is still dependent upon internal clues to determine the historical setting. For example, it appears that the believers were still associated with the synagogue (2:2). Apparently, the believers were facing difficult trials (e.g. 1:2–8), oppression (e.g., 2:1–13), and poverty (e.g. 1:9–11). The contents also suggest that these believers were struggling with perseverance (e.g., 4:7–11), obedience (1:19–27), and faithfulness (e.g., 2:14–26).

### **Canonicity**

James’ place in the canon has its challengers both ancient and modern. According to the early church historian Eusebius (ca. 265–340), some questioned its authenticity because few

early writers had quoted from it (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.23).<sup>6</sup> James is not included in the Marcionite (ca. 140) or the Muratorian (ca. 170) canons. Generally speaking, the Eastern Church tended to be more receptive to James than their Western counterpart. Perhaps the most famous challenger of the book was Martin Luther who called it “a right strawy epistle” in his 1522 German translations of the New Testament.

Men such as Luther who doubt James’ place in the canon do so for a variety of reasons. Some question the authorship of the book. These questions concern the uncertainty regarding the author’s identity, or in the case of James the Lord’s brother, his lack of apostolic status. There are also concerns about the content of the book. These concerns run the gamut from its brevity, to its general audience (no specific person or church), its perceived lack of Christological or theological content, or in the case of Luther its apparent contradiction with the idea of justification by faith most clearly expressed in the Pauline Epistles.

Nonetheless, the church did come to recognize James’ place in the canon. Eusebius, Jerome, and Athanasius (ca. 340–420) accepted the book as did the Councils of Rome (382) and Carthage (397, 419). Even Martin Luther tempered his challenge in later writings. Ultimately, there is insufficient warrant to question James’ place within the canon.

### **Purpose**

The lack of certainty regarding the specific historical context makes identification of the purpose of the book even more challenging. One must rely on mirror-reading to identify the purpose(s) of the book. Concerning the general tone of the book it seems apparent that the author was concerned with practical matters of life and faith. Theology is more implicit than explicit. In this sense James bears resemblance to the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. Based on James

---

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius also lists it among the disputed books (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.25).

2:14–26, some have suggested that the epistle was an attempt to correct Paul’s view of justification. But this assumption is unwarranted in that James 2:14–26 should not be seen as contradicting Paul’s teaching but is in fact complementing it.

What then is the purpose of the book? It seems fairly clear that James’ primary concern is with the practical outworking of faith in the lives of his audience. Thus, James seeks to expose attitudes and actions which are detrimental to the development of a mature faith on the one hand and exhort believers to pursue right actions and attitudes which promote a mature faith on the other.

### **Contribution**

Arguably the greatest contribution that the Epistle of James makes is its insistence that faith and practice are inseparably linked. James also shatters the idea that one can separate their secular practice from their spiritual practice. Verse for verse no book in the New Testament can match James’ pithiness.

### **Literary Features and Structure**

Although the Book of James is typically considered an epistle, a number of common characteristics associated with other New Testament epistles are absent. First, although there is an opening salutation there is no blessing (typically grace and peace). Second, there is a general lack of personal references in James. Third, James does not contain a proper epistolary conclusion. Instead, the book ends rather abruptly.

Others have suggested that the book bears resemblance to Greek diatribe.<sup>7</sup> Dibelius suggested that James most resembles a genre he called paraenesis.<sup>8</sup> Still others have advocated

---

<sup>7</sup> James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, ed. C. A. Briggs, S. R. Driver, and A. Plummer, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh,: T. & T. Clark, 1916), 12.

the idea that James is best characterized as wisdom literature.<sup>9</sup> It is also possible that James is sermonic or at least contains sermonic elements.<sup>10</sup> Along this line, some have argued that James is best understood as a pastoral encyclical.<sup>11</sup> In conclusion it seems likely that James is a hybrid genre, a cross between epistle and sermon.

Another literary aspect of James that merits some attention is the close parallels between James and the teachings of Jesus. For example, note the oft recognized parallels to the Sermon on the Mount.

#### The Epistle of James and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7)

<u>Epistle of James</u>	<u>Common Topic/Theme</u>	<u>Sermon on the Mount</u>
1:2	Joy in trials	5:10–12
1:4	Exhortation to perfection/maturity	5:48
1:5	Asking God to supply needs	7:7
1:20	Warning against anger	5:22
1:22	Hearing and doing God's Word	7:24
2:10	The whole law to be kept	5:19
2:13	The importance of showing mercy	5:7
3:18	The importance of peacemaking	5:9
4:4	The incompatibility of worldliness	6:24
4:10	The importance of humility	5:5
4:11–12	Warning against being judgmental	7:1–5
5:2	Disintegration of riches	6:19
5:10	References to the prophets	5:12
5:12	Taking oaths	5:33–37

---

<sup>8</sup> Martin Dibelius and revised by Heinrich Greeven, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. Michael Williams, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 1-11.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Witherington, III, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 238-47.

<sup>10</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 22.

<sup>11</sup> See James Adamson, *James: The Man and His Message* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), Richard J. Bauckham, *James*, ed. John Court, New Testament Readings (London: Routledge, 1999), 116-18.

Other similarities between James and the teachings of Jesus include James 1:6 and Matthew 21:21, James 2:8 and Matthew 22:39, James 3:1 and Matthew 23:8–12, James 3:2 and Matthew 12:36–37, James 3:6 and Matthew 15:11, James 4:4 and Matthew 12:39, James 4:12 and Matthew 10:28, James 5:9 and Matthew 24:33, James 5:19–20 and Matthew 18:15, etc.

Another literary aspect worth noting is the author's skill. It is generally acknowledged that the James' Greek is polished. The style is vivid with over fifty-four imperatives in 108 verses. Furthermore, the epistle is stylistically sophisticated. Some of the literary devices used by James include rhetorical questions (2:4, 5, 14–16; 3:11–12), vivid imagery, and unique vocabulary with over sixty New Testament *hapax legomena*.<sup>12</sup>

The question of the structure of James is widely debated. Opinions range from no discernable structure<sup>13</sup> to fairly elaborate structures including chiasm.<sup>14</sup> It is probably not as pessimistic as the former nor as confident as the latter. There appears to be some structure at a broader thematic level. However, such a structure is not as neat as one might like. Nonetheless Guthrie's caution is worth noting: "It is likely that attempts to discern a design will lead to a somewhat artificial approach to the epistle."<sup>15</sup>

### Analytical Outline

- I. James introduces his epistle with a salutation (1:1).
- II. A mature faith must endure life's challenges (1:2–18).

---

<sup>12</sup> Davids, *James*, 58-9.

<sup>13</sup> Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, Anchor Bible, vol. 37 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1964), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Davids, *James*, 25-6.

<sup>15</sup> Guthrie, *Introduction*, 757.



- A. A mature faith endures life's challenges with joy and patience (1:2–4).
  - B. A mature faith endures life's challenges by seeking God's wisdom (1:5–8).
  - C. A mature faith endures life's challenges with a right perspective (1:9–11).
  - D. A mature faith endures life's challenges by understanding how temptation works (1:12–15).
  - E. A mature faith endures life's challenges by trusting in God's providence (1:16–18).
- III. A mature faith must hear and obeys God's Word (1:19–2:26).
- A. A mature faith must control its temper according to God's Word (1:19–21).
  - B. A mature faith must be spiritually perceptive in response to God's Word (1:22–27).
  - C. A mature faith must reject partiality in obedience to God's Word (2:1–13).
  - D. A mature faith works as demonstrated by God's Word (2:14–26).
- IV. A mature faith must speak and act wisely (3:1–18).
- A. A mature faith must speak wisely (3:1–12).
  - B. A mature faith must act wisely (3:13–18).
- V. A mature faith must recognize God's sovereignty in all things (4:1–17).
- A. A mature faith must recognize God's sovereignty over one's material possessions (4:1–5).
  - B. A mature faith must recognize God's sovereignty by humble submission (4:6–10).
  - C. A mature faith must recognize God's prerogative to judge (4:11–12).
  - D. A mature faith must recognize God's sovereignty over one's plans (4:13–17).
- VI. A mature faith waits on God to set things right (5:1–12).
- A. A mature faith waits on God to judge the abusers of wealth (5:1–6).
  - B. A mature faith waits on God by exercising patience (5:7–12).
- VII. A mature faith trusts God in relation to sickness and sin (5:13–20).
- A. A mature faith trusts God through prayer and confession in sickness (5:13–18).
  - B. A mature faith trusts God through restoration of the wayward (5:19–20).

Introduction (1:1)		
A mature faith endures life's challenges with joy and patience (1:2-4)	1:2-18	A mature faith endures life's challenges
A mature faith endures life's challenges by seeking God's wisdom (1:5-8)		
A mature faith endures life's challenges with a right perspective (1:9-11)		
A mature faith endures life's challenges by understanding how temptation works (1:12-15)		
A mature faith endures life's challenges by trusting in God's providence (1:16-18)		
A mature faith must control its temper according to God's Word (1:19-21)	1:19-2:26	A mature faith hears and obeys God's Word
A mature faith must be spiritually perceptive in response to God's Word (1:22-27).		
A mature faith must reject partiality in obedience to God's Word (2:1-13)		
A mature faith works as demonstrated by God's Word (2:14-26)		
A mature faith must speak wisely (3:1-12)	3:1-18	A mature faith speaks and acts wisely
A mature faith must act wisely (3:13-18)		
A mature faith must recognize God's sovereignty over one's material possessions (4:1-5)	4:1-17	A mature faith recognizes God's sovereignty
A mature faith must recognize God's sovereignty by humble submission (4:6-10)		
A mature faith must recognize God's prerogative to judge (4:11-12)		
A mature faith must recognize God's sovereignty over one's plans (4:13-17)		
A mature faith waits on God to judge the abusers of wealth (5:1-6)	5:1-12	A mature faith waits on God to set things right
A mature faith waits on God by exercising patience (5:7-12)		
A mature faith trusts God through prayer and confession in sickness (5:13-18)	5:13-20	A mature faith trusts God in sickness and sin
A mature faith trusts God through restoration of the wayward (5:19-20)		

### **Exposition**

- I. James introduces his epistle with a salutation (1:1).**

**II. A mature faith must endure life's challenges (1:2–18).**

- A. A mature faith endures life's challenges with joy and patience (1:2–4).
- B. A mature faith endures life's challenges by seeking God's wisdom (1:5–8).
- C. A mature faith endures life's challenges with a right perspective (1:9–11).
- D. A mature faith endures life's challenges by understanding how temptation works (1:12–15).
- E. A mature faith endures life's challenges by trusting in God's providence (1:16–18).

**III. A mature faith must hear and obey God's Word (1:19–2:26).**

- A. A mature faith must control its temper according to God's Word (1:19–21).
- B. A mature faith must be spiritually perceptive in response to God's Word (1:22–27).
- C. A mature faith must reject partiality in obedience to God's Word (2:1–13).
- D. A mature faith works as demonstrated by God's Word (2:14–26).

**IV. A mature faith must speak and act wisely (3:1–18).**

- A. A mature faith must speak wisely (3:1–12).

B. A mature faith must act wisely (3:13–18).

**V. A mature faith must recognize God’s sovereignty in all things (4:1–17).**

A. A mature faith must recognize God’s sovereignty over one’s material possessions (4:1–5).

B. A mature faith must recognize God’s sovereignty by humble submission (4:6–10).

C. A mature faith must recognize God’s prerogative to judge (4:11–12).

D. A mature faith must recognize God’s sovereignty over one’s plans (4:13–17).

**VI. A mature faith waits on God to set things right (5:1–12).**

A. A mature faith waits on God to judge the abusers of wealth (5:1–6).

B. A mature faith waits on God by exercising patience (5:7–12).

**VII. A mature faith trusts God in relation to sickness and sin (5:13–20).**

A. A mature faith trusts God through prayer and confession in sickness (5:13–18).

B. A mature faith trusts God through restoration of the wayward (5:19–20).

**Select Bibliography**

Adamson, James. *The Epistle of James* New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.

- Adamson, James. *James: The Man and His Message*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989.
- Bauckham, Richard J. *James New Testament Readings*, ed. John Court. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Blue, J. Ronald. "James." In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 815-36. Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications, Victor Books, 1983.
- Burdick, Donald W. "James." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John-Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas, 9, 159-205. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981.
- Davids, Peter H. *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982.
- Hartin, Patrick J. *James*. Vol. 14 Sacra Pagina, ed. Daniel J. Harrington. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003.
- Hiebert, D. Edmond. *The Epistle of James: Tests of a Living Faith*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1979.
- King, Guy H. *A Belief That Behaves*. Fort Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1988.
- Martin, Ralph P. *James* Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker. Waco: Word Books, 1988.
- Moo, Douglas J. *The Letter of James* Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.
- Moo, Douglas J. *The Letter of James* Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Nystrom, David P. *James* The Niv Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.
- Ropes, James Hardy. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* International Critical Commentary, ed. C. A. Briggs, S. R. Driver and A. Plummer. Edinburgh,: T. & T. Clark, 1916.