

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Epistle of James

(SB_James_Introduction)

Author: The author of the book is widely agreed to be the half-brother of Jesus. There are other men named James in the Bible; however, the arguments against them as the author of the book are very strong.

- James, the brother of John, both sons of Zebedee (Mk 1:19) – martyred in A.D. 44 by Herod (Acts 12:2)
- James, the father of Judas (not Judas Iscariot; Lk 6:16; Acts 1:13) – too obscure a person to be a serious candidate.
- James the Less, a.k.a. the son of Alphaeus (Matt 27:56; Mk 3:18; 15:40; Lk 24:10) – also, too obscure a person to be a serious candidate.

Some, especially Roman Catholics, equate the son of Alphaeus with the Lord's brother. They claim that James was really Jesus' cousin through Mary of Cleopas (Alphaeus), the Virgin Mary's sister. This contention, however, violates a literal interpretation of "brother" and is clearly an attempt to support the invention of the perpetual virginity of Mary. It seems clear from Scripture that children were born to Joseph and Mary after the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is called "her firstborn" (Luke 2:7), implying that others were born thereafter. The Scriptures state that Joseph had no union with Mary, that is, no normal physical relationship, "until" (sūheo) after the birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:25). Repeated references are made to the Lord's half brothers and half sisters and four of His brothers are named: James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Matt. 13:55).¹

For purposes of our study, we will assume that James, the Lord's half-brother was the author of this epistle. Arguments in favor of this James include the following:

- The tone and authority of the writer presupposes a respected figure – not an unknown or obscure figure.
- This is consistent with the portrait we get of James from Acts 15:13-21; 21:18ff.
- There are physical notices in the epistle which point to a Palestinian situation for both the readers and the writers:
 - The writer is not far from the sea (1:6; 3:4)
 - His land is blessed with figs, oil and wine (3:12)
 - There is reference to the hot wind which is common in Palestine (1:11)
 - There is reference to the former and latter rain which is also common in Palestine (5:7)
- Finally, there are marked similarities between the Greek of the epistle and the speech of James to the Jerusalem Council, e.g. James 1:1 cf. Acts 15:23; James 1:16, 19 cf. Acts 15:25; James 1:27 cf. Acts 15:14, 29; James 2:4 cf. Acts 15:14, 25; James 2:7 cf. Acts 15:17; James 5:19-20 cf. Acts 15:19.

Apparently, James, the Lord's half-brother, did not become a believer until after the Lord's resurrection (Jn 7:5).

¹ J. Ronald Blue, "James" in John F. Walvoord, and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament* (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1983, 1985), 815.

Date & Recipients: Most theological material dates the writing of this epistle around A.D. 45 or so.² This dating is principally due to the fact that there is no mention of the Jerusalem Council in which James had such an active role to play (see Acts 15:13ff). The Jerusalem Council occurred around A.D. 50 which means that the epistle would have been written prior to that date.

However, the fact that James makes no reference to the Gentiles and the fact that he doesn't show any awareness of the kind of evangelism that is typical of the Pauline mission has suggested to some that James was written at a date prior to the Gentile outreach that is recorded in Acts. This fact would suggest a date as early as the middle or late A.D. 30's.³

For our purposes, we are going to simply acknowledge that James was the first New Testament epistle to be written. This is significantly related to the following observations and points:

- James would almost certainly have made reference to Gentiles had he written the epistle at or about the time of the Jerusalem Council (ca. A.D. 50).
- In addition, we must remember that the Jerusalem Council followed Paul's first missionary journey into Gentile dominated lands.
- Also, Paul's first missionary journey was preceded by the conversion of Cornelius (a prominent Gentile, Roman centurion) by Peter which in turn followed Peter's vision (Acts 10) of the "unclean" animals and the command to eat.
- There is nothing in the epistle of James that goes beyond or outside of the events documented in Acts 1-9.
- If the crucifixion occurred in A.D. 33 and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus occurred about a year or so later in A.D. 34-35 (Acts 9), then the reference by James in verse 1 to "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" takes on specific reference to the dispersion that followed the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8). More will be discussed in this regard later.
- The epistle of James contains no reference to church leaders that we now term "pastors." He only references "elders" (Jas 5:14) and warns his readers that not many of them should become teachers (3:1).

Therefore, the epistle of James was a pastoral letter written to the dispersed Jewish believers from Jerusalem possibly at a time even prior to Paul's initial mission to the Gentile world (i.e. Arabia – Gal 1:17). It probably had no single destination; rather, it was probably circulated from congregation to congregation so that it could be read in each assembly of believers. When the believers in Judea, Samaria and greater "Palestine" fled from these areas during the Jewish War with Rome (A.D. 66-70), the original manuscript (if it still existed) was probably taken with them. If this was the case, then the letter of James probably became known in the wider Christian community during this period of time – a period of several years after the martyrdom of James in A.D. 62.⁴

Canonicity: Since the Jerusalem church and even churches throughout Judea, Samaria and Palestine virtually ceased to exist after the Roman war, it took a period of time for those outside of this region to accept it into the canon of Scripture. The epistle of James as well as the letter to the Hebrews and the two epistles of Peter were omitted from the Muratorian Canon, a fragmentary list of the books of the New Testament which were acknowledged by the believing

² See J. Ronald Blue, "James" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, 816 for example.

³ Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James – Proven Character Through Testing* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 10.

⁴ Ibid., 10-12.

community in Rome around A.D. 200. The earliest Christian writer to mention the letter as the work of James, the Lord's brother was Origen (ca. A.D. 254). A short period later, another early church leader, Athanasius (ca. A.D. 296-373) seems to have accepted it as canonical. So, even though the western churches of Rome and Carthage may have doubted the canonicity of the epistle, it was in use from an early date by the eastern churches of Jerusalem and Alexandria and is included in the Scriptural books in Asia Minor.

Our understanding of the doctrinal evolution that occurred in the decade following our Lord's crucifixion as well as our understanding of the effects of the transition from one dispensation to another during the period from our Lord's crucifixion until A.D. 70 bolsters our understanding of the debate surrounding the canonicity of the book. It is easy to see why the believing community after A.D. 70 which consisted of a large concentration of Gentiles and who had come to understand and accept the Pauline teaching in regard to grace and the temporary setting aside of Israel, the Jews and Jewish tradition would have had difficulty accepting the relevance of such Jewish-centric letters as James and Hebrews. However, we should value the content of these letters much more when we understand the historical context and the audience to whom they are addressed.

Literary Style: The letter is as much of a lecture as it is a letter. It lacks the personal references we see so often in Paul's letters and it has no concluding benediction (compare to Paul's epistles). It was obviously prepared for public reading as a sermon to the congregations to whom it was to be read. The tone is authoritative – James includes 54 imperatives in the 108 verses of the letter – an average of one call for action in every other verse. The sentences are short, simple and direct and filled with metaphors and similes. It has been observed that the book of James probably has more figures of speech, analogies and imagery from nature than all of Paul's letters.⁵

This style reflects the mind of a man who was well-read and well-versed in Hebrew culture and literature. He makes a number of references to people such as Abraham, Rahab, Job, Elijah, the Law and the Ten Commandments, and he includes allusions to passages in 21 Old Testament books.⁶

It has also been observed that James' teaching strongly resembles that of John the Baptist. For instance, compare the following passages – James 1:22, 27 cf. Matthew 3:8; James 2:15-16 with Luke 3:11; James 2:19-20 with Matthew 3:9; James 5:1-6 with Matthew 3:10-12. No doubt, James had heard John the Baptist's preaching. In addition, there are very obvious parallels between James' letter and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). While James did not quote the Lord's words, he obviously had internalized the Lord's teachings and reproduced them with spiritual depth.⁷

<p>But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. (James 1:22) This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of <i>our</i> God and Father, to visit orphans and</p>	<p>"Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance. (Matthew 3:8)</p>
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⁵ J. Ronald Blue, "James" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, 816-817.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 817.

⁷ *Ibid.* See also Thomas Constable, "Notes on the Book of Acts" at www.sonlight.com

widows in their distress, <i>and</i> to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27). ⁸	
If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for <i>their</i> body, what use is that? (James 2:15-16)	11 And he would answer and say to them, "Let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise." (Luke 3:11)
You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. 20 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? (James 2:19-20)	And do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. (Matthew 3:9)
COME now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. 2 Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! 4 Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, <i>and</i> which has been withheld by you, cries out <i>against you</i> ; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. 5 You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and put to death the righteous <i>man</i> ; he does not resist you. (James 5:1-6)	And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 "And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:10-12)

Very Basic Outline: We will develop a more complete outline as we progress through the book; however, the following outline will suffice for now just to reflect the basic flow of the letter.

- Preface or prologue (1:1-18)
- Thematic statement (1:19-20)
- Body (1:21-5:6)
- Epilogue (5:7-20)

Salutation (1:1)

Note that James, the half-brother of our Lord, simply refers to himself as a slave of Jesus Christ. This acknowledgment can only be made by a man who has been spiritually broken – a man who has realized the extent of his unbelief (Jn 7:5) and come to the point where he trusts fully in God's provision through Jesus.

Even though James was Jesus' half-brother, he does not claim any authority on the basis of his genetic connection to Jesus. To have done so would have revealed a latent arrogance that had still yet to be excised from his life by the Lord – an illusion that his credentials somehow elevated him into special standing. James had internalized the fact that we all stand before God

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation) 1977.

apart from any claim of worldly credentials. James realized that the true spiritual believer will be involved in a life of service to other believers. He had appropriated and internalized the Lord's teaching and example of servitude. James had no illusions regarding his own personal situation before a totally righteous God.

Principle: We will never be all that Jesus taught believers to be unless we become spiritual servants of others – no matter their race, culture, age, church affiliation, nationality, etc.

Principle: We will never become all that Jesus taught believers to become until we cease to lay claim to superiority over anyone due to our own goodness – self-discipline, wealth, social status, career credentials, standing in respected organizations, etc.

James addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes which are scattered.” We discussed this phrase in our introduction. However, a little more elaboration is in order. If the letter was written in the mid A.D. 30's to mid A.D. 40's – a date range that represents the dating of most theologians – then James is addressing the true believing remnant of Jewish within the larger nation of unbelieving Israel. These are the believing Jews who later would have listened and followed the guidance of the leadership of the Jerusalem church when they opined upon the issue of Gentiles who were responding to Paul's gospel. They would have been Jewish believers during the Transition period who had not yet been exposed to Pauline theology and who would have not yet grasped the shift from a Jewish-centric to a new Gentile-centric dispensation. They would have been of the same opinion as Peter in regard to Paul's teachings.

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, 15 and regard the patience of our Lord *to be* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, 16 as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:14-16)

The dispersion to which James refers is not the Diaspora to which reference is most commonly made, i.e. the dispersion of the Jews all over the Roman Empire that took place over the preceding centuries. As has been noted, this was the dispersion of believing Jews that followed the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8) whereby these believing Jews had settled into various assemblies of believers throughout Palestine and even beyond. They constituted a minority among their unbelieving Jewish counterparts. James' letter is addressing the temptations and trials they face. As such, we should read the letter with this context in mind and look for the parallel truths applicable to our present situation as Gentile believers who live with a fuller understanding of the breadth and depth of the spiritual status and assets at our disposal.

In our next session, we will continue with an examination of the contents of this wonderful letter of encouragement to persevere in trust in the midst of trials and troubles.