

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 1 Introduction

James 1:1

Date: June 15, 2014

I. Opening Remarks

Of the 27 books of the NT, 13 were written by Paul, 5 by John, 2 by Luke (a gentile), 2 by Peter, 1 by Matthew (probably), 1 by Mark (who is telling Peter's gospel story), 1 by Jude, 1 by an unknown author and this one by James. Of course, all were really written by men but they really are the words of the Holy Spirit, who used these unique men to address certain topics in their own personal style and in their own words, yet recording exactly what God wanted said – cf. II Tim. 3:16; II Peter 1:21; and this epistle by James is no exception.

James provides us with a very early picture of the young church as she struggled to live out God's mandate for believers in a world that had only experienced the church as an entity for between 10 & 15 years. This precedes the [thought to be] seminal "Jerusalem Council" outlined in Acts 15 (circa AD 48-49), which so many theologians gravitate to as the place where much church polity was first laid down by early 'church pillars' such as Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, Silas, Judas Barsabbas, John Mark & other unnamed apostles. Interestingly, John Mark was the one over whom Paul and Barnabas had a parting of the ways by the end of Acts 15.

It is clear from the letter that "James wrote to a church beset by a number of problems. These included divisiveness, intolerance, favoritism, & the overpowering desire for wealth and status."ⁱ On top of that, even early in the church, there were [both accidental and purposeful] false teachers making the rounds and some within the church who (Jas. 4:4) wanted to keep one foot in the world, and one foot in the church. Double-mindedness is a cause to repent if one truly wants to serve God. As well, persecution was rampant from the Jews and Romans against Christians at this time.

Question to consider: Why have there always been false 'gospels' within the church?

Scot McKnight points out, "James is a one-of-a-kind document. At the literary level, there is no real parallel among ancient letters, essays and homilies. At the historical level, there is nothing quite like it among the early Christian documents, even if its connections and origins are deeply disputed. James is at least in a traditional sense, the earliest Christian document we have and in many ways anticipates or precedes theological developments."ⁱⁱ

When we compare, (as many inevitably do) James' style and content to Paul's, we find that Paul's letters are more about soteriology (salvation / how we are saved), as he explains salvation in sweeping, logical detail [Romans, Galatians]; whereas James tends to focus on the relationship between faith and works – a more ethical approach to Christianity – more like, "how should saved people live?". Furthermore, Paul is quite openly Calvinistic, while James points to God's sovereignty without question,

but with his Calvinism more of a background theme. James provides a “mediating influence in the larger picture of the first churches.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In fact, the theology of James created a struggle within the leaders of the Reformation because at times, what he says seems to be at odds with the doctrine of Sola Fide [By faith alone], although when properly exegeted, his epistle is right on and explains what real faith looks like rather than how we acquire it or vying for a faith generated by works. In fact, Martin Luther himself was no fan of this epistle; “In fine, St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle, - these are books which show thee Christ, and teach thee everything that is needful and blessed for thee to know even though thou never see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore is St. James’s epistle a right strawy epistle in comparison with them, for it has no gospel character to it.”^{iv}

When we compare James to Paul, James Hamilton makes the a somewhat related point that we should be looking at Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians; “In I Corinthians Paul addresses what he has heard from the Corinthians about the difficulties facing the church: schisms, immorality, idolatry, and then the misbehaviour when the church gathers for worship. Paul confronts each of these threats to the Corinthian church with the truth of the gospel. Thus, if Romans is the letter where Paul most systematically explains his gospel, I Corinthians might be the one that most directly applies the gospel to Christian life in a church.”^v And I would add to that, and so does the Epistle of James.

Question to consider: Why is it that so many are concerned when 2 writers of Bible books seem to disagree when really, only their perspectives are different, yet their theologies are both Biblical?

II. Author

James 1:1

This James who wrote the letter is the same trusted and respected believer who speaks with no little authority at the Jerusalem Council – cf. Acts 15:13-21 – and who succeeds Peter as head of the church at Jerusalem.^{vi} We’ll see below how we arrive at who this James is. It is definitely not James the apostle, brother of John, because he had been martyred in AD 44 by Herod Agrippa according to Acts 12:1-3, and the letter of James was written after that, and James appears at the Jerusalem council after this event. Herod’s ugly death, recorded in Acts 12:21-23 occurs the same year the Apostle James was killed.

This James was the leader of the ‘Mother church’ at Jerusalem, and is listed as one of the pillars in Gal. 2:9. His authoritative words close off the famous Jerusalem Council – Acts 15 – and when Paul arrives in Jerusalem for the last time – Acts 21:18 – James is the first ‘pillar’ he meets.

Since he starts his letter off with “James, a servant [HCSB – ‘slave’] of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...”, he expected the recipients of the letter to know who he was and with what authority he spoke. But can we be certain that in 2014, we know who he is? This is not as simple an answer as one might expect. Although there is

conservative scholarly agreement about it, there are a lot of liberal leaning scholars who disagree.

The name, “James” is mentioned 40 times in the NT, but the list is narrowed down to 5 (some say 6) potentials as the James who authored this epistle.

- James, the father of Judas [LK 6:16; Acts 1:13]
- James the less – son of Mary, wife of Cleopas [MK 15:40; 16:1; MT 27:56 & LK 24:10]
- James the son of Alpheus, one of the 12 – [MK 3:18; MT 10:3; LK 6:15; Acts 1:13]
- James the son of Zebedee, brother of John, one of the 12 – [MK 1:19; 3:17, etc.] – he was martyred by Herod in Acts 12, AD 44.
- James, the half-brother of Jesus, son of Mary – [MK 6:3; MT 13:55; Gal. 1:19; 2:9,12; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Jude 1; JN 7:3-5; I Cor. 9:5]^{vii}

There is virtually no biblical or historical evidence for any of the first 3 on the above list being the author, and John’s brother was martyred too early to be considered realistically, leaving James the half-brother of Jesus as the most likely writer. Or, it is possible, but unlikely, that a completely other James we are not acquainted with, or someone who wrote under the tutelage of James is the author.

The best scholarship points to the writer of this epistle as James, the half-brother of Jesus, but if so, when did he change from unbeliever to faithful elder, the respected Bishop of the church at Jerusalem? We know from the gospels that James, along with his other brothers [MK 6:3 – Joses, Judas, Simon] was an unbeliever due to what is said in JN 7:3-5. A further evidence of this unbelief, even as late as the crucifixion of Jesus, is the fact that, Jesus, from the cross, commissions His disciple, John to care for His mother Mary, which may indicate that His brothers even at that late date were still not believers.

However, by Acts 1:13-14, Jesus’ brothers were gathered in the Upper Room [the house of John Mark?] with the other disciples. They had seen the risen Christ and were witnesses of the Ascension just prior to this gathering in that room. Since the account – v. 14 – says they were devoting themselves to prayer (unlikely for unbelievers - cf. Acts 1:9 of Saul) – by this time, James and his brothers were converts. The most likely conclusion we can draw from this is that the same event that transformed the 11 disciples into fearless preachers and evangelists – the resurrected Jesus in their midst – also converted His brothers. They had seen Him dead, and now they knew He was alive! In fact, I Cor. 15:7 centers out James for special attention as one having seen the risen Lord. The evidence leans heavily towards James’s appraisal of Jesus resurrection as the vehicle that brought about his salvation.

Paul calls James an apostle in Gal. 1:19 & 2:9,12, apparently, sometime around the mid 40’s AD he became the leader of the Jerusalem church,^{viii} right after the early dispersion of many Christian leaders & apostles from Jerusalem to escape Jewish and Herodian persecution.

According to James' words and counsel in Acts 15:13-21, he had a very settled conviction regarding the conversion of Jews and though he respected the news that gentiles were being saved by Christ he felt they should recognise the fact that Israel was chosen first and that God would rebuild Israel in the future – the same position Paul espoused in Romans 9-11. His position struck fear in Peter according to Gal. 2:12 – so in some sense, James had not left behind all his Jewish traditions he had grown up with, although there is no question about his real salvation. It is almost certain that he wrote this epistle from Jerusalem, and it is doubtful that he ever strayed very far outside of Jerusalem once his own demanding local ministry began.

James is also known as James the Just to differentiate him from other Jameses, already listed, and he was known by early Christian writers as a man who prayed so often that his “knees became calloused like those of a camel.”^{ix} His death is mentioned by Josephus who claimed “he was stoned to death”^x, while Hegesippus and Clement of Alexandria record that he was taken up to the pinnacle of the temple and martyred when he was thrown down from there, then stoned, then beaten with a club. The High Priest who ordered that was Ananus. Tradition states that this was a result of an enraged mob who took out their anger on James after Paul had appealed to Caesar through Festus (thus saving his life in the immediate), and then upon Festus' death, leaving a short power vacuum in Jerusalem and the mobs turned on James, who stood firm for Christ in the midst of a tough missionary city – Jerusalem.^{xi}

III. Date & Characteristics of the Letter

The epistle of James is a distinct, unique letter in the NT. There was a delay in adding it to the canon as a result (in part) of this uniqueness. It was not part of the canonical book put together by Eusebius and was not well known west of Jerusalem – but it was sent to the Diaspora, to Jewish churches mostly in the east. It was also neglected when compared with more doctrinally centered epistles like Paul's as far into history as the Reformation.^{xii} (1517ff in Germany; 1519ff in Switzerland)

The Greek in the epistle is called “perhaps the best Greek in the NT and as a result, many scholars believe that James the brother of Jesus could not have written with such good Greek. However, much of Galilee was bilingual and James could have been proficient in that language, or he may have dictated the letter to an amanuenses who was very fluent in Greek.”^{xiii}

The letter itself, as we will see as we work our way through it, gives us a unique perspective of early NT church times and contributes significantly to the NT. Here are 7 points from Homer Kent's commentary^{xiv} worth noting;

- It has the most Jewish flavour of any NT book, yet it is thoroughly Christian but meshes well with concepts and activities that characterized godly Jews.
- It contains no teaching on redemption through Jesus' death. It does not deny it, the topic simply does not come up in the text.

- As letters go, it is quite impersonal. There are no individual greetings or personalized references and only general references to situations are given. It seems to have been a circular letter bound for many churches.
- It contains a lot of references to nature. For example, 1:6,11 (surf, waves and wind of the sea); the sun (1:11,17); grass & flowers (1:11); horses (3:3); other animals, birds and sea creatures (3:7); a fountain (3:11); figs, olives, grapevines (3:12); agriculture (5:7), and rain (5:17-18).
- There are a lot of parallels to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount although he does not directly quote from it.
- It is high quality Greek.
- The letter's approach stresses practical aspects of Christian commitment – ie) application of our faith. James' purpose was clearly to show that Christian faith was to demonstrate itself through godly living.

Homer Kent also makes six points to prove an early date of writing for this book – in the early to mid-40's AD:^{xv}

- James does not quote from any of the Gospels which many NT writers do, so it is likely that they were not written yet^{xvi}, yet he does allude to the Sermon on the Mount – perhaps he was there.
- A lot of attention is given to economic inequities between the poor and rich among the recipients. This condition was rectified in 66-70 AD during the Jewish-Roman war.
- No elaborate church structure is mentioned – the only mention of a leader is “elders” in 5:14.
- There is an eager expectation of Jesus' return – cf. 5:3,7-9 – this was very prevalent in the early church – cf. I & II Thessalonians (49-51 AD), the earliest of Paul's letters.
- There is no hint of the Jewish-Gentile controversy which was discussed as a main topic at the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 which took place in 49-50 AD, so this letter predates that.
- Since James died in 62 AD, the letter obviously predates that.

Christopher Morgan postulates that it was written between 46-49 AD, due to James's reference to severe poverty which would have followed the famine in 46 AD in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 11:28), and this letter predates the Jerusalem Council of 49-50 AD because there is no reference to some of the issues dealt with at that council.^{xvii}

IV. Recipients of the Letter

Since the letter is addressed to “the 12 tribes of the Dispersion (or ‘Diaspora’), IOW, those Jewish Christians scattered abroad, it targeted those believers in Christ from Jewish backgrounds who had seen fit to escape Jerusalem because of deadly Jewish persecution as well as Herod's campaign against Christians because he (an Idumean) wanted to be popular with the Jews. He had James the brother of John killed and would have killed Peter if an angel had not miraculously assisted Peter's escape – Acts 12. There were also Jewish mobs who hated Paul, and the Sanhedrin, Priests and Scribes who clung to their dead faith because it still provided them with political clout, wealth and prominence in the community.

The Diaspora was the term used to describe Jewish-Christian believers outside of Palestine. These people that James wrote to according to James 2:1 were those who “*had faith in our Lord Jesus, the Lord of glory*”, wherever this letter found them. Obviously, as well, it was the Holy Spirit’s intention that this letter also find its way into our hands, since its contents have been preserved for many centuries, so that we too could learn what it means to follow Jesus in a church community. With these considerations in mind, we’ll move on to actually look at what James wrote.

ⁱ David P. Nystrom, James: The NIV Application Commentary, Zondervan, 1997, p. 15

ⁱⁱ Scot McKnight, The Letter of James, Eerdmans, 2011, p. 2; NICNT Commentary Series

ⁱⁱⁱ McKnight, p. 8

^{iv} Martin Luther, cited in John MacArthur, James, Moody, 1998, p. 1 (MacArthur is quoting from James H. Ropes’s commentary)

^v James Hamilton Jr., in an essay entitled, The Lord’s Supper in Paul, from the book, “The Lord’s Supper”, Tom Schreiner and Matthew Crawford (editors); B & H Books, 2010, p. 69

^{vi} Simon Kistemaker, Acts, Baker Books, 1990 – reprint 1995; p. 550

^{vii} McKnight, pp. 14-15

^{viii} McKnight, p. 17

^{ix} Hegesippus (@ AD 180) cited in Homer Kent Jr., Faith That Works: Studies in the Epistle of James; BMH Books, 1986, revised 2005, p. 9

^x Kent, p. 10

^{xi} McKnight, p. 20

^{xii} Kent, p. 3

^{xiii} Kent, pp. 3-4

^{xiv} Kent, pp. 13-14

^{xv} Kent, pp. 11-12

^{xvi} Matthew was written in 55-65 AD; Mark 53-55; Luke 62; and John 85-95 AD.

^{xvii} Christopher Morgan, A Theology of James – Wisdom for God’s People; P & R Books, 2010, pp. 13-14