

A Survey of the Letter of James

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Author:

The book of James claims to be written by “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (**James 1:1**). The name James is the English form of Jacob. There are at least four men called James in the New Testament. Of those four, James, the Lord’s brother, is the best candidate for authorship and it is accredited to him by most early church scholars (**Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3**).

It should be noted that James was an unbeliever during the Lord’s ministry (**John 7:5**). It was only after a special resurrection appearance did James come to believe (**I Corinthians 15:7, Acts 1:14, 2:4**). This certainly helped the case for the resurrection because Jesus’ own brother, a former doubter, had now become a disciple. After his conversion James became an early leader in the church at Jerusalem (**Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18, Galatians 1:19, 2:9, 12**) and a very influential member of the fellowship of Christians. He is called a “pillar” in the church by Paul (**Galatians 2:9**). It seems that he assumed this role after Peter left Palestine (**Acts 12:17**).

According to tradition, James was put to death by the Jewish High Priest at Jerusalem in 62 AD. James’ letter was among the last to be given a place in the Bible. In 323 AD it was listed as one of the disputed biblical books but read anyway in most churches because of its content and the connection to Jesus and the Jerusalem church. The book is considered the most “Jewish” of the books in the New Testament.

Date:

It is generally accepted to have been penned when the church was in its infancy. It may have been written in the mid to late 40’s or early 50’s AD. There are no clues within the book to help us with a point of reference. The most conservative scholars put a date of 44-45 AD with it because of James’ influence in Jerusalem at that particular time. It also seems to be void of any of Paul’s teachings, which reveals that James may not have been aware of Paul’s writings and influence.

There are other scholars that think it may have been written just prior to James death (58-62 AD) in an effort to correct some of Paul’s theology. They seem James asserting himself with the likes of the other gospel writers, specifically the apostles John and Peter, and the apostle Paul. This seems to be without merit because if that were James’ intent it would have been made clear in the writing of this book and it is nothing like that is present.

Theme:

The theme of the book is common sense Christianity or practical Christianity. He clearly wants Christians to see that our faith is not merely a series of religious steps, but an outward faith that compels us to perform good works. Faith must be living and active. Is this in conflict with Paul’s thoughts on being saved by grace? Of course not! Paul is the one who introduced us to the fruit of the Spirit, planting and watering seeds, and growing in Christ. Our works alone cannot save us, but they help us to bring glory to the Father, as Jesus intended.

There is clearly a “pastoral” flavor to the book. As an elder of the Jerusalem church, a protégé to Peter, and brother of Jesus, he would have had great power to wield within the church. Instead of pushing doctrine or tradition, he uses this letter to encourage and challenge.

Audience:

The letter does seem generic and impersonal, but it is addressed to the “twelve tribes of the dispersion” (**James 1:1**). This is a reference to the tribes of Israel. The early Christians thought of themselves as the true Israel (**Galatians 6:16**), the true circumcision (**Philippians 3:3**), and the true seed of Abraham (**Galatians 3:29, Romans 4:16**). Therefore, it is not surprising that Christians outside of Palestine considered themselves as the “twelve tribes of the dispersion” (**James 1:1**) that were still part of God’s covenant.

Since the letter is addressed to a more Jewish audience, James uses illustrations for prayer and patience but turns to Old Testament characters (i.e. prophets, Elijah, Job) instead of the teachings of our Lord. In fact, he makes no reference to the great events of Jesus’ life, omits any reference to the death or resurrection of our Lord, and Jesus is only mentioned by name twice (**James 1:1, 2:1**). It is also interesting to notice the similarities with the Sermon on the Mount (Goldman):

James 1:2	↔	Matthew 5:10-12
James 1:4	↔	Matthew 5:48
James 1:5	↔	Matthew 7:7ff
James 1:20	↔	Matthew 5:22
James 1:22	↔	Matthew 7:24ff
James 2:10	↔	Matthew 5:19
James 2:13	↔	Matthew 5:7
James 3:18	↔	Matthew 5:9
James 4:4	↔	Matthew 6:24
James 4:10	↔	Matthew 5:5
James 4:11ff	↔	Matthew 7:1-5
James 5:2ff	↔	Matthew 6:19
James 5:10	↔	Matthew 5:12
James 5:12	↔	Matthew 5:33-37

Key Verses:

James 1:2, 1:12, 1:17, 1:22, 1:27, 2:1, 2:10, 2:18, 2:24, 3:8, 3:13, 4:7-8, 4:12, 4:13, 4:17, 5:8, 5:12, 5:13-14, 5:16, 5:19-20

Outline:

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| I. <i>Genuine Perspective – James 1:1-11</i> | VI. <i>Genuine Wisdom – James 3:9-18</i> |
| II. <i>Genuine Religion – James 1:12-27</i> | VII. <i>Genuine Humility – James 4:1-7</i> |
| III. <i>Genuine Love – James 2:1-13</i> | VIII. <i>Genuine Judgment – James 4:8-17</i> |
| IV. <i>Genuine Faith – James 2:14-26</i> | IX. <i>Genuine Behavior – James 5:1-8</i> |
| V. <i>Genuine Speech – James 3:1-8</i> | X. <i>Genuine Prayer – James 5:9-20</i> |