

The EPISTLE *of* James

Title and Author

The author of this letter identifies himself as James. Though several different people named “James” are mentioned in the NT church, it is almost certain that the author of this book is James the brother of Jesus. The author assumes a position of authority in the church, which certainly was accorded to James the Lord’s brother, who was a leader of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 1:19) and who presided at the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). He was considered one of the pillars of the church, along with Peter and John (Gal. 2:9). The NT lists James as one of the sons of Mary, Jesus’ mother (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). James, along with his brothers, was skeptical of Jesus during His earthly ministry (John 7:5), but was converted when he became an eyewitness of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7). The early church historian Hegesippus identified him as “James the Just,” testifying to his extraordinary godliness, his zeal for obedience to the law of God, and his singular devotion to prayer. It was said that James’s knees became so calloused from prayer that they resembled the knees of camels. Josephus records that James was martyred in a.d. 62. Eusebius says he was beaten to death with a club after being thrown from the temple parapet; Hegesippus also records that he was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple.

Date and Occasion

James was written between a.d. 44, the beginning of the persecution that spread to Jewish Christians living in the Diaspora as well as to Gentile believers (Acts 12), and a.d. 62, the year of James’s death. Since no mention is made of the controversy leading to the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), it is possible that James was written before a.d. 49. Thus, James may be the earliest NT writing. The letter is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” which likely refers to churches spread throughout Asia Minor (on the meaning of “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” as a way of referring to the churches, see note on 1:1). Since this is the case, the letter was probably intended to be a circular letter that would be read by many congregations in many places, and as such, it treats issues and problems that would have been common to all of the recipients, problems that impacted Christian congregations wherever they were located.

Genre and Literary Features

James has been variously considered an epistle, a sermon (to be read aloud in the churches), a form of wisdom literature, a diatribe, and a moral exhortation. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and there are elements of all these forms in James. It most closely resembles Jewish “diaspora letters,” such as the letters of Gamaliel to Jews living outside of Israel. The literary structure of parallelism is used (1:9, 10), along with aphorisms, concrete images drawn from nature, and groups of sayings that have a clear similarity to the style of Jesus.

Characteristics and Primary Themes

The epistle has a markedly Jewish flavor and refers frequently to the OT. It shares a number of characteristics, for example, with OT Wisdom Literature. These similarities have led many to refer to James as the “NT book of Proverbs.” As such, James is characterized by its focus on practical Christian living. James does not settle for right doctrine if that right doctrine is not resulting in godly character in which faith bears fruit. We are not merely to be hearers of the word according to James, but doers (1:22–24). The nature of true faith as bearing the fruit of loving service to others, therefore, is central to this epistle (2:14–26). James is clear that although we are not justified—declared righteous before God—by our works, good works are the necessary and inevitable demonstration that the faith we profess is genuine.

Among the most important themes in the book of James is perseverance in the midst of trials. The faith of Christians is under constant attack, and James encourages believers to stand firm, to not be double-minded (1:6, 7). He calls believers to patiently persevere in faith (5:7–11). One aspect of godly perseverance involves the way in which we use our speech, another major theme of the epistle. Again and again, James confronts believers who use their tongues to lie, gossip, and tear down others (1:19–21, 26; 3:1–12; 4:11, 12; 5:12; cf. Luke 6:45).

The final judgment is another of the major themes found in James’s epistle. He repeatedly refers to future judgment and uses it as a motivation for ethical exhortation (1:11; 2:10–13; 3:1; 4:12; 5:3, 9).

Theology in James

Though one may say the same of every book of Scripture, it is important to observe that James is a God-centered book. God is the One who is the giver of wisdom (1:5). He is holy and cannot be tempted with evil (1:13). Every good gift comes from God, whom James describes as “the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17). God has chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith (2:5). He is also the One who has given the moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, and He is the great Judge (2:11, 12; 4:12). He is “one” (2:19), and He is worthy of our faith (2:23). He is our Lord and Father (3:9), and He is gracious, merciful, and compassionate (4:6–8; 5:11).

James opens his epistle with a statement that sheds much light on his understanding of Christ: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). This simple opening places God and Jesus Christ in parallel, indicating that they share the same authority. If there are any doubts among his readers about the identity and status of Jesus Christ, James removes them in ch. 2, when he refers to Jesus as “the Lord of glory” (2:1). If this translation of 2:1 is correct (see study note on the other possible translation of the Gk. phrase), it is reminiscent of David’s description of God as the “King of glory” (Ps. 24:7–10). In any case James speaks of Jesus as “Lord in 2:1,” and this is important because God is “Lord” (3:9).

The eschatology of James is centered on the expectation of the coming judgment of God. This coming judgment forms the background to James’s ethical admonitions. The coming judgment is closely associated with the coming of the Lord (5:7, 8). Those who persevere through the trials will be rewarded and receive the crown of life (1:12) because perseverance is the fruit of saving

faith, the faith by which alone we are granted entrance into God's kingdom. The faithless and merciless will be condemned (2:13; 5:1).

James in the Larger Story of the Bible

James addresses his readers as “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1). The language immediately evokes the OT story of Israel. The “twelve tribes” originally referred to the twelve tribes of Israel. The “Dispersion” (or Diaspora) originally referred to those Jews who had been scattered at the time of the exile throughout the Near East and then later into Europe and Africa. Here, James is using this language to refer to Christians (whether ethnically Jewish or Gentile). By doing so, James places the church in the context of the story of Israel. Because Israel has now been redefined in terms of Jesus Christ, the true Israel is the church comprising Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ. Some have suggested that by speaking of the church as “the Dispersion,” James is reversing the connotation of that word. Whereas the first “dispersion” was an act of judgment, this second “dispersion” is the means by which God is blessing the nations with the gospel (cf. Acts 8:1, 4).

Christ in James

The epistle teaches a high Christology and stresses the importance of dealing with affliction from the standpoint of faith. The name of “Jesus” or “Christ” occurs rarely (1:1; 2:1), though sometimes “Lord” refers to Christ (1:1; 2:1; probably also 5:7, 8) and other times it refers generally to “God” or the “Father” (3:9; 4:10, 15; 5:4, 10, 11, 14, 15). James's interchangeable use of the title “Lord” interchangeably for both Jesus and God the Father indicates Jesus' identification with the Father as “Lord,” and thus shows the deity of Jesus (note also that the Gk. word for “Lord” refers very often in the Septuagint to Yahweh). Though “Jesus Christ” is not mentioned explicitly very often, His first and second comings are assumed at key points throughout the book. James 1:1 speaks explicitly about James's being a “servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” and 2:1 refers to those who “hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” The last reference refers to Jesus' exalted state, most likely as a result of His ascension and session at God's right hand (cf. Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 8:1).

History of Interpretation

The most debated issue in the history of the interpretation of James is the relationship between James and Paul. Specifically, do Paul and James (esp. 2:14–26) teach contradictory views of justification and the relationship between faith and works? If not, how are their views to be reconciled? Orthodox interpreters of James in the early church assumed that Scripture could not contradict itself. They resolved the issue by noting that works are a result of true faith; true faith is demonstrated by good works. The same subject arose at the time of the Reformation as some appealed to James to support the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification, which states that good works are more than just a demonstration of true faith—they merit heaven when done in

cooperation with God's grace. Protestants rightly returned to the distinction made in the early church, for they recognized that even the best of our works are "splendid vices" and cannot meet the standard of perfection that God requires if we seek to be justified by our own doing of the law (Matt. 5:48; Gal. 5:3).

Special Issues

The motif of the future judgment is very important in understanding the highly contested section in 2:14–26 on the relationship of faith, good works, and justification. One key for understanding the passage is noticing how 2:14–26 relates to its surrounding context. James 1:10, 11 makes an apparent reference to the last judgment, while 2:9–13 focuses on being a "transgressor of the law" for which final judgment will come. The next verse then asks whether a person with faith but no works can be saved from this final judgment (2:14). After the contested text is another reference to future judgment: those "who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (3:1). The reference in 3:6 to the "tongue ... set on fire by hell" likely also refers to this judgment. The theme of judgment is continued later in the epistle: God "is able to save and destroy" (4:12), and 5:1–9 warns those who oppress others that "the coming of the Lord is at hand" (v. 8) and "the Judge is standing at the door" (v. 9), a reference respectively to the imminent expectation of the end and the judgment to come at the end; 5:12 also warns people not to "fall under condemnation."

In light of the surrounding context and its emphasis upon future judgment, it seems that 2:14–26 mainly addresses the issue of how faith and works relate to the final judgment at the very end of one's life. Genuine faith will produce and be accompanied by good works; such good works will be evidence at the last day of a genuine faith. False faith, or "dead faith," is empty belief, like that of the "demons" (2:19; purely cognitive recognition of who God is without a desire to trust and to obey Him).

Therefore, the reference to being "justified" by works together with faith in vv. 21–24 probably has this final judgment in view. The Gk. word *dikaiōo* in Paul has the sense of "vindicate." Sometimes Paul uses it in the sense of (1) "vindicating" a person from the guilty verdict of their sin by which a relationship with God is established through Christ during the present age, and sometimes in the sense of (2) "vindicating" such people before God's judgment seat at the end of the age against the unjust verdict of the world. James has this second meaning in mind, namely, that good works demonstrate that the verdict of the world against God's people—that God's people are foolish and enemies of the common good—is false and unjust. Good works will vindicate others at the last day because they will demonstrate the reality of faith in the only wise God, whose plan and purpose is for His creation is wholly good. They will show that we are united to Christ by faith alone and therefore share in His goodness and wisdom (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30, 31).

James 2:24 offers an axiom based on the example of Abraham: "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." Notice the plural "works" here that indicates that the many good works of Abraham's whole life vindicated the true nature of his faith. Thus, the works of a

person's entire life are displayed *at the final judgment*, not in order to receive God's verdict that we are righteous in our sight, but to prove that we possess the kind of faith by which we lay hold of the righteousness of Christ, which is the only basis for God's justifying verdict (cf. Rom. 3:21–4:25; 5:12–21; 2 Cor. 5:21). For James, good works done throughout a person's life serve as evidence of genuine faith (2:14, 18)

Sproul, R. C. (Ed.). (2015). [*The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version \(2015 Edition\)*](#) (pp. 2223–2226). Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust.