

James

Author

The author of this book identifies himself as “James, a bondservant or slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). He was probably the half-brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15). Four men in the NT have this same name. The author of this letter could not have been the apostle James, who was the first apostle martyred (Acts 12:1-2; c. A. D. 44). The other two men named James had neither the stature nor the influence that the author of this letter had.

James was one of several brothers of Jesus and was possibly the oldest since his name appears first in the list in Mt. 13:55. At first he did not believe in Jesus and even challenged him (Jn. 7:2-5). Later he became both a believer and very prominent in the church:

1. He was one of the select individuals Christ appeared to after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7).
2. Paul called him a “pillar” of the church (Gal. 2:9).
3. Paul, on his first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem, saw James (Gal. 1:19).
4. Paul did the same on his last visit (Acts 21:18).
5. When Peter was rescued from prison, he told his friends to tell James (Acts 12:17).
6. James was a leader in the important council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13).
7. Jude could identify himself simply as “a brother of James” (Jude 1:1), because James was so well known.

He was martyred c. A. D. 62.

Date

Some date the letter in the early 60s. There are indications, however, that it was written before A. D. 50, perhaps in the mid-40s.

1. Its distinctively Jewish nature suggests that it was written when the church was still predominantly Jewish.
2. It reflects a very simple church order—the officers of the church are called “teachers” (3:1) and “elders” (5:14).
3. No reference is made to the Gentile controversies.
4. The Greek term *synagoge* (“synagogue” or “meeting”) is used to designate the meeting of believers (2:2).

If this early dating is correct, this letter is the earliest of all the NT writings—with the possible exception of Galatians.

Recipients

The recipients are identified only in 1:1 as “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” While some hold that this expression refers to Christians in general, the term “twelve tribes” would more naturally apply to Jewish Christians. Furthermore, a Jewish audience is more likely given the obviously Jewish nature of the letter (e.g., the use of the Hebrew title for God, *kyrios sabaoth*, “Lord Almighty,” 5:4). That the recipients were Christians is clear from 2:1, 5:7-8. It has been plausibly suggested that these were believers from the early Jerusalem church who, after Stephen’s death, were scattered as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch (Acts 8:1,

11:19). This would account for James's references to trials and oppression, his intimate knowledge of the readers and the authoritative nature of the letter. As the leader of the Jerusalem church, James wrote as pastor to instruct and encourage his dispersed people in the face of their difficulties.

Theme

The theme which ties this epistle together is practical, vital religion which manifests itself in the behavior of the "works" of those who profess to have faith. Tests for a genuine and living faith are examined in a manner reminiscent of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, especially the Book of Proverbs. The idea that James contradicts Paul's view of justification by faith (2:14-26) is without foundation and fails to account for differing perspectives and purposes for the two writers. James 1:3 provides a good summary of the book.

Edmond Heibert says "tests of a living faith" is the unifying theme. James develops a series of tests to demonstrate the reality of that faith.

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| 1. | Faith tested by its response to trials. | 1:1-12 |
| 2. | Faith tested by its response to temptation. | 1:13-18 |
| 3. | Faith tested by its response to the Word of God. | 1:19-27 |
| 4. | Faith tested by its response to partiality. | 2:1-13 |
| 5. | Faith tested by its production of good works. | 2:14-26 |
| 6. | Faith tested by its production of self-control. | 3:1-18 |
| 7. | Faith tested by its reactions to worldliness. | 4:1-5:12 |
| 8. | Faith tested by its resort to prayer. | 5:13-18 |
| 9. | Faith tested by its recovery of an erring brother. | 5:19-20 |

Special Features

Though quite similar to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, James is not simply a gathering of loose and unrelated moral teachings. The book, written in an excellent Greek style, reads very much like a number of sermon summaries, all of which are related to the central theme of a genuine faith which works. The book is well suited for public reading in worship and is remarkable in its parallels with the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7; see chart, "The Parallels and possible Allusions of James to the Sermon on the Mount"). Also called "the Amos of the New Testament," James, in 108 verses, peppers his work with 54 imperatives to communicate the need for urgent action on the part of his audience.