

New Testament Survey—James

Certain books of the Bible have a special place in our lives for various reasons. As we turn our attention to the epistle of James, it takes me back to my youth. Shortly after I became a Christian, James became my favorite book of the Bible, partly because it was so straightforward and practical.

To do: The book of James has a Jewish flavor. It was written by a Jew to Jewish Christians during the early years of the church when it was primarily Jewish. Scan the book and find evidence to support this.

1:1 To the twelve tribes

1:12 "Blessed is the man" [the book is rich in OT figures of speech, references to Prov.]

1:25 Reference to "the perfect law of liberty" [Torah]

1:27 Look after orphans and widows [Deut. 14:29]

2:2 Comes in to your "meeting" [Greek term from which we get "synagogue"]

2:8 "Royal law"

Note: "Law" is mentioned 10 times in the book.

2:21 "Was not *our ancestor* Abraham...?"

Note: References to OT characters: Abraham, Rahab, Elijah, Isaac, Job

5:14 Call the "elders" [comes out of synagogue]

- **Who wrote the book?**

--James

There are four men named James mentioned in the New Testament.

1. There is the father of Judas, one of the apostles (not Iscariot) (Luke 6:16).

2. There is James, the son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3), probably known as James the Less (Mark 15:40). If he had been the author, he probably would have mentioned his apostleship.

3. There is James the son of Zebedee and the brother of John (Matt. 4:21). He was murdered very early (A.D. 44; Acts 12:2), and is an unlikely candidate for authorship.

4. There is James, the half-brother of Jesus. Quite likely, this James is the author of the book (for the following reasons).

## What do we know about James? (see *NIVsb*)

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

Note: According to tradition, James died a martyr's death, though we're not sure how. Two options are mentioned (Gromacki, 337):

1. The early church historian, Eusebius, said that Paul's opponents turned on James after Paul went to the imperial city. They commanded James to renounce Christ. When he refused to bow under the pressures of the priests and elders, he was forced to the temple roof and thrown over. He lived for a short while after impact, but was finally beaten to death.

2. Josephus, the early Jewish historian, claimed that James was martyred during a Jewish insurrection in the interval between the death of Festus, the Roman procurator of Judea, and the arrival of a new governor, Albinus. According to Josephus, James was executed by stoning.

However it happened, James apparently died a martyr's death, probably around A.D. 62-63.

### • **When was the book written?**

--Before A.D. 50 (*NIVsb*)

--A.D. 45-50 (Gromacki)

Note: This would make James possibly the first NT book (depending on the date chosen for Galatians).

Discuss: What indicators in the book point to an early date?

- a. It's Jewish flavor (see intro) suggests a time when the church was primarily Jewish.
- b. In 2:2, the Greek term "synagoge" ("meeting" or "synagogue") is used to describe the meeting place of the church.
- c. The book reflects a simple church order (officers of the church are called "elders", 5:14, and "teachers", 3:1).

## Who received the Book?

see 1:1--What does this tell us?

Q: What does "twelve tribes" refer to?

Q: What does "scattered" indicate? These were persecuted Jewish Christians?

One suggestion is that these were Jewish Christians from the early Jerusalem church, who had to flee for their lives after Stephen's death, and were scattered as far as Phoenecia, Cyprus, and Syrian Antioch (Acts 8:1; 11:19; *NIVsb*).

- **Why was the book written?**

James was written to encourage and instruct Jewish Christians as they faced the challenge of living for Christ in a time of oppression.

We don't know specific details about the background of the book. We can surmise the following:

1. It was a time of suffering (1:1; 5:10-11).
2. It was a time of moral laxity (4:1-11). The moral problem was rooted, in part, to doctrinal confusion (there was a false concept of God; 1:13-16).
3. It was a time of uncertainty (5:7, 10)

So James wrote as a pastor to minister to his fellow, Jewish Christians, seeking to use God's truth to motivate, instruct, and correct the readers.

Think about it: In the book of James, the Savior is mentioned only twice directly (1:1; 2:1) and twice indirectly (5:7, 8). If the title "Lord" refers to the Son rather than to the Father, then also in 4:10, 15; 5:10, 11, 14, 15). There is no reference to Christ's incarnation, death, or resurrection.

Discuss: Why not? Some have said that James should not be in the canon for such reasons. Why is this not a necessary conclusion to draw?

- **What is the outline of the book?**

(adapted from Gromacki, p. 341)

- I. The Nature of True Faith (1:1-:3:12)
  - A. True faith is purified by trials (1:2-12).
  - B. True faith does not attribute evil to God (1:13-18).
  - C. True faith obeys the Word of God (1:19-27).
  - D. True faith does not show partiality (2:1-13).
  - E. True faith produces good works (2:14-26).
  - F. True faith controls the tongue (3:1-12).
- II. The Nature of True Wisdom (3:13-5:20)
  - A. Definition of true wisdom (3:13-18)
  - B. Wisdom in the spiritual life (4:1-12)

- C. Wisdom in the commercial life (4:13-17)
- D. Wisdom in the use of wealth (5:1-6)
- E. Wisdom in waiting for the Lord (5:7-12)
- F. Wisdom in the prayer life (5:13-18)
- G. Wisdom in restoring an erring Christian (5:19-20)

- **What is the message of the book in one sentence?**

James is a practical book that shows us how to respond to problems God's way.

- **What contribution does the book make to biblical theology (that is, how does this book relate to the rest of the Bible)?**

1. *There is a striking resemblance between the book of James and the Sermon on the Mount.*

Discuss: How so? James either heard the Sermon personally, or at least had talked with those who did. Note these comparisons (Gromacki, 340):

- a. Mere profession is not enough to allow one to enter the kingdom (2:14-26 // Matt. 7:21-23).
- b. Hearing and doing go together (1:22 // Matt. 7:24-27).
- c. The character of a person is made evident by his actions (3:11-12 // Matt. 7:16-20).
- d. We are warned against judging (4:11-12 // Matt. 7:1)
- e. We are warned against the wrong use of money (5:1-6 // Matt. 6:19-24)
- f. We are warned against swearing (5:12 // Matt. 5:34-37).

2. *James provides us with much practical counsel on how to live the Christian life.*

Discuss: What issues are addressed?

- a. We learn about proper use of the tongue (ch. 3).
- b. We learn about proper response to trials (1:2-8).
- c. We learn about how to deal with favoritism in the church (2:1-13).
- d. We learn about the process of temptation (1:13-15).

What is the difference between testing and temptation?

- e. We learn about pure religion, and the care of widows and orphans (1:26-27).
- f. We learn about dealing with church fights (4:1-12).

g. We learn about the danger of materialism and the right attitude towards money (5:1-6). Read this text. What is James saying to *us*?

3. *James teaches us about the relationship between faith and works.*

Note: The word "works" appears 13 times in the book, all but one of these in chapter two.

Key: James 2:14-25 is a key text to respond to the type of person commonly called a *backslidden* (or *carnal*) Christian--to the person who made a profession of faith yet whose life hasn't changed. Let's walk through the passage.

Q: In v 14 James asks, "Can faith save him?" What kind of faith?

Q: In v 15, James gives the example of a person with a legitimate need. What is true of a person who expresses concern but then does nothing about that need? Vv 16-17

Q: According to v 19, there are different kinds of faith. What is an example of a deficient type of faith? That which the demons exhibit.

Q: In what way was Abraham an example of the relationship between faith and works in verses 20-24?

Q: In what way did Rahab illustrate this relationship? Verses 25-26

Discuss: How much change should be seen in a person's life if true faith exists? How much "works" must be evident in a person's life to show they have genuine, saving faith?