

J The Book of James

Session One:
September 14, 2004

Setting: Who, When, and Where?

❖ Who is this James anyway?

Several possibilities exist—there are at least five people named James in the New Testament, not to mention the possibility that we have a sixth James here, who is none of the above. The ones we know of are:

-James, the father of Judas (not Iscariot), one of the twelve (see Luke 6:16)

-James, the son of Alphaeus, also one of the twelve disciples

-James, the younger (see Mark 15:40)

-James, the brother of John, one of the sons of Zebedee (and also a member of the inner circle of Jesus' closest disciples—Mark 3:17)

-James, the brother of Jesus (see Mark 6:3)

This last James is probably the one signified by the opening verse, “James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” But why **this** James?

-James, “the Lord’s brother” became a leader of the early church in Jerusalem in the first decades after the resurrection (see especially Acts 12:17, Gal. 1-2)

-This James became very quickly a part of early Christian tradition (see 1 Cor. 15), which remembered him as James “the Just”—this fits well with the concern for social justice in the Book of James

*-Several features of the book have a very Jewish flavor (concern for the Jewish Torah, stylistic devices like *diatribe*, and themes from Jewish wisdom literature), all of which fit with the early Jerusalem church*

-Paul gives us the impression that James, Jesus’ brother, along with the Jerusalem church, retained a strong concern for issues within Judaism and the conditions of the poor, both of which are central issues for the Book of James

However, there are only two references to Jesus and no mention of familial ties in the entire letter. Together with a polished Greek style and the possibility that the book refers to Paul’s teachings on “faith” and “works,” these factors could suggest that a later editor who was a disciple of James, the Lord’s brother, compiled remembered teachings of the Jerusalem church leader for the continuing life of the church in Antioch, another strongly Jewish Christian center in the 1st century. Some suggest that James (whose name in Greek is actually closer to “Jacob”) is actually a Jewish document written in the name of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob that was “borrowed” by Christians and peppered with Christian phrases. Most likely, however, is that this is a thoroughly Christian document, but one that arises from a Christianity still steeped in the concerns and language of Judaism; it is also most likely that the James of the Jerusalem church stands behind most—if not all—of the book we call James.

❖ Setting and Date

Working with the assumption that the Book of James stems from the real brother of Jesus, this material probably came out of the teachings of James in Jerusalem in the 40s-60s, a time when Christians probably still met within synagogues, when tensions between Roman sympathizers and rebellious Zealots were rising, and when oppression of the poor was a significant problem. Even as the material was shaped for the church later in Antioch, these concerns remained in the background of the first audiences.

❖ So what does any of this information *mean*?

James, as a leader of the church, was caught between forces that wanted to fight violently against Rome and those who were sympathetic to the relative peace of the status quo. James takes on both, advocating radical concern for the poor and oppressed on the one hand, but refusing to play by the Zealots’ and Rome’s rules of violence on the other. The early setting of the James

material also gives us a glimpse into the earliest life of the church, even if it was later shaped and modified for the second generation of Christians. So while there are no explicit quotations of Jesus (we might wish for something like, “As my brother Jesus said once...”), there is a great deal of material steeped in the actual teachings of Jesus. This also reflects a setting in which the abstract theological doctrines that came to be a major part of Christianity were still being thought out and arrived at through *practice*. Therefore, James is not satisfied if you *only* believe the right facts about God; he calls us also to *live* as followers of Jesus and children of God.

❖ Audience

The opening verse refers to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” a reference to the people of Israel spread out in all the nations. It is probably James’ intent, however, to refer to Jewish Christians outside of the original Jerusalem church. Precisely who these people where and where they lived is difficult to say—they were almost certainly Christ-believers, but they were very much still a part of the Jewish community (which again, makes the early Jewish-Christian city of Antioch a likely guess).

Purpose and Form: What and Why?

❖ What are we reading?

The first verse fits the form of a 1st-century Greco-Roman letter, like the epistles of Paul. There are, however, none of the traditional closing features of a letter (see the greetings and blessings at the ends of almost all Paul’s letters). So it is quite likely that what we call the book of James was compiled into this generic letter form as it was preserved, even though the material inside was not necessarily first written to a particular congregation to address a specific problem, as Paul’s letters were.

❖ Forms

James makes use of several literary forms and devices to make his points. There are a few that are worth knowing in advance:

-diatribe—This is like having an argument with an imaginary opponent to make your point; James will raise a potential objection of a listener and then argue against his own objection to show how he is right. This technique not only draws the audience into James’ discussion, but also may be referring to real problems James is aware of within his own congregation. See James 2:18 for a really good example.

-midrash—When rabbis gave their running commentary of Scripture passages, they were engaging in midrash. This can involve direct quotation of an Old Testament passage followed by interpretation (see 2:8-11, for example) or a broader allusion to a story (Rahab in 2:25, Job in 5:11, and Elijah in 5: 17, for example). James uses both kinds to talk about the meaning of the Abraham story in 2:21-23, too. James assumes his audience is not only familiar with these stories but also understands them to be authoritative parts of their own story. Often, James uses his midrashic commentaries to illustrate an example he wants to commend to his readers.

-illustration—James uses a lot of examples—from nature, from commerce, from common experience—to make his points. This kind of illustration was common in both Jewish and Greco-Roman writing. Even when James isn’t specifically using an object lesson, his language is very often figurative and sensory.

❖ Do all of these pieces fit together?

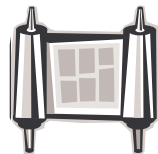
With all of the various forms and pieces that come together in James, lots of commentators speculate about whether the book we know as James is really a single, coherent work or whether it is just a loose compilation of generic advice. However, as we’ll see (and as plenty of other scholars agree), while there is not a rigid or tight structure, the book is held together by several recurring themes and presents a coherent message, suggesting that we would do well to treat it as a whole with its own integrity.

❖ Purpose

Historically, James of Jerusalem, the Lord's brother, is concerned about the way believers in his community are living out their faith while caught between competing forces—the oppressive but alluring wealthy elites, the increasingly violent Zealot movement (which would eventually erupt in to a revolt in the late 60s AD and led the Romans to crush the resistance), other, self-serving and corrupting Christian leaders, and the pressures to form factions within the church. Perhaps after James was martyred in the 60s, a disciple of James collected his sermons and teachings and found them especially fitting in addressing his own new setting within the Christian community in Antioch.

James is especially concerned to articulate a whole, complete way of living as God's people; he is concerned about fellow believers who compartmentalize their faith in any way—as head knowledge, as an end which will justify violent means, as indifferent to the way one treats others. He is concerned about how we *live, and so he intends to change not only the propositions we believe, but also the ways we act and face life.* Finally, that also means that **James is a practical and pastoral theologian**—he is not impressed by abstract systems of theology that do not change who we are as people, and he addresses theological questions insofar as they deal with how followers of Jesus live their lives.

Themes: What's It All About?



❖ Completion/Wholeness of Life

James is consistently calling for believers to be consistent—that is, that actions match their words, that they not be divided between allegiances, and that and complete obedience to the will of God. He uses the language of being made perfect or complete, but this has both a present and future sense: he believes we can strive to have this integrity and genuineness of character, but that ultimately, the gift of being made

complete is God's gift to us that will come to fullness in the future at the return of the Lord.

How is this good news? James might say we are now freed from living fragmented and disconnected lives.

❖ Wisdom

How does one live such a life of integrity? For James, the key is in wisdom. But wisdom is not secret, abstract knowledge; rather, it is again the **gift of God** that guides us to live day to day. Wisdom is a way of making sense of life when it seems senseless and of living out that life in its fullness. Wisdom is that practical insight that enables us to integrate our selves into coherent and whole people.

How is this good news? James might say that the hope of God's wholeness and peace is not reserved only for some far off day in heaven, but is given to us now, even if only in part, as God gives us wisdom.

❖ Faithful Suffering

James writes to a church whose members are facing real hardship, and so he writes a good deal on how to make sense of suffering in light of God's reign over all things. And for James, that is the key—remembering that God still promises to faithfully uphold us and shape us even through suffering.

How is this good news? James might borrow from Douglas John Hall—"all the evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, God reigns." Because of that, James says, we can "consider it all joy" in the face of suffering (1:2).

❖ Torah

While Paul can be hard on "the Law," James upholds the traditional position of Judaism that the Torah is **not a restrictive law or requirement to earn salvation** but ultimately the gift of God which frees us for lives of wholeness. And like Jesus, James is concerned for the heart of the law in love for God and neighbor—loves which are made possible only because God first "gave us birth by the word of truth" (1:18).