

INTRODUCTION

My first introduction to the book of James was in a Bible class at a Christian school my sophomore year of high school. For much of the school year we studied James. The next year, the Bible curriculum was changed, new teachers were hired, and somehow we ended up studying James again. It is a compliment to the power of the book of James that I was not discouraged by that double introduction. Instead, I found the book interesting and challenging both years. Since then James has profoundly shaped my preaching, teaching, and my Christian walk. The book of James is maligned by some and neglected by many. My prayer is that this commentary will help others discover the call to radical discipleship, to rejection of the values of the world, and to friendship with God made by this faithful leader in the apostolic age.

AUTHORSHIP

The writer identifies himself as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). The name “James” (Greek *Iakobos*) comes from the Hebrew name “Jacob.” It was a popular name for Hebrew men, recalling the rich heritage of Jacob, the founder of Israel. There are five persons named James in the New Testament who could have written this letter.

1. James the brother of Jesus. Some think this is the same James as the son of Alphaeus or “the less” (see below), but that is unlikely.

2. James the apostle, the son of Zebedee. Not only was he

an apostle but (along with Peter and John) was part of the inner circle of Jesus who witnessed the Transfiguration and the agony in Gethsemane. However, this James was beheaded by Herod Agrippa I around A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2), making it unlikely he wrote the letter (unless it is by far the earliest New Testament book). Also, if this James wrote the letter, it is strange he did not call himself “an apostle” but only “a servant.”

3. James the apostle, the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3; Acts 1:13). The same objection, the author does not call himself an apostle, applies here. Although this James was an apostle, little is known about him.

4. James “the less” (or “the younger,” Mark 15:40). Little is known of this James also, making it unlikely that he would write a letter accepted as authoritative. This may be the same James as #3.

5. James, the father of Judas (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). He too is obscure.

There are two other possibilities for authorship.

6. It is written by another unknown James.

7. It is written by someone who uses the name James to increase the authority of his letter. This practice of pseudonymous authorship, that is, of writing in the name of a famous teacher, was known in the ancient world. The central argument for this position is that the Greek of the letter of James is too elegant to have been written by a Palestinian peasant such as the brother of Jesus. It must, therefore, have been written by a more literate writer who used his name. However, recent scholarship has shown that Palestine was quite cosmopolitan in the first century. So, it is impossible to say how fluent a Palestinian Jew might be in Greek.

Others claim that James 2:14-26 is reacting to the teaching of Paul’s epistles on faith and works. Thus, it must be written after Paul’s letters and so after the lifetime of James the Lord’s brother. If this is the case, some argue, then the letter is pseudonymous. However, it is not clear that James reacts to Paul (see the commentary on James 2:14-26 below). Even if he

is, he could be responding to Paul before Romans and Galatians are penned.

It is likely then that the letter was written by a well-known James. The son of Zebedee and the brother of Jesus were the two most famous persons with this name in the early church. James the son of Zebedee was martyred too early to have written this letter. Therefore, James, the brother of Jesus and Jude, is most likely the author. This has been the traditional consensus of the church through the ages.

The content of the letter is consistent with the view that James the brother of the Lord is its author. The writer is well-known and speaks authoritatively. He knows the teachings of Jesus. He knows the climate, vegetation, and social setting of Palestine. Specifically he mentions the scorching wind (1:11), good and bad water (3:11), figs, olives and grapes (3:12) and the need for early and late rain (5:7). Such knowledge does not prove that the book was written by someone from Palestine but does make it plausible.

THE BROTHERS OF JESUS

The brothers of Jesus, including James and Jude, were prominent leaders in the early church. There is some disagreement over the meaning of “brothers.” Some scholars, particularly Roman Catholics who believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary, think the word refers to cousins or other relatives of Jesus. However, the Greek word rarely permits this meaning but is used just as our English word “brother.” It is possible that these are Joseph’s sons by a previous marriage but more likely that these are the younger children of Joseph and Mary.

These brothers are named in Matthew 13:55 (also Mark 6:3): “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us?” Since Matthew and Mark were written several years later than the events they portray, it

is likely they mention the brothers of Jesus by name because they were well known in the early church. James is the first name on this list in both Matthew and Mark, so we assume he is the oldest brother next to Jesus. Judas (or Jude) is last in Matthew but next to last in Mark; thus, he is one of the youngest brothers.

John plainly says the brothers of Jesus did not believe in him during his ministry (John 7:5). On one occasion they actively opposed him: “When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind’” (Mark 3:21). Thinking Jesus was crazy, they sought to have him committed. No wonder Jesus later disclaims his mother and brothers when they come to see him. “‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mark 3:32b-35). His brothers’ lack of faith may explain why Jesus on the cross committed his mother to John’s care, not to theirs (John 19:26-27). The memory of their unbelief may also be behind the refusal of James and Jude to call themselves brothers of Jesus in their letters, preferring the title “slave of Jesus Christ” (James 1:1; Jude 1).

However after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, his brothers were with the apostles and others at prayer in the upper room (Acts 1:14). What changed them into believers? They had seen the risen Lord. Paul tells us Jesus appeared to James after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7), and although we are not specifically told, it seems likely he appeared to his other brothers, perhaps as part of the five hundred who saw him at the same time (1 Corinthians 15:6).

James was the best known of the brothers and a leader of the Jerusalem church. When Peter is miraculously released from prison, he wants it reported to “James and the brothers” (Acts 12:17). The judgment given by James wins the day at the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. As leader of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, James persuades Paul to perform a purification

rite in the temple to prove his loyalty to the law (Acts 21:17-26).

The unity between Paul and James in Acts is less evident in Galatians, where Paul calls James one of those in Jerusalem “who seemed to be important” and “reputed to be pillars” (Galatians 2:6,9), perhaps implying that James was not as important as he thought himself to be. Later, men come from James and lead Peter and Barnabas into hypocrisy over refusing to eat with Gentiles (Galatians 2:12). However, the differences between James and Paul should not be overstated. James is concerned that Jewish believers continue to obey the Law as they should. Paul does not want the Law to be forced on Gentiles. In both Acts and Galatians, James and Paul agree that God has called one to minister to the Jews, the other to the Gentiles (Acts 15; Galatians 2:9).

Although James was the best known, the other brothers of Jesus were also Christian leaders. Paul claims the right to take a believing wife along on his journeys as do “the Lord’s brothers” (1 Corinthians 9:5). Thus, the brothers of Jesus, including James and Jude, were traveling missionaries in the early church, and so were known and respected by many. Because of their childhood memories of growing up with Jesus and their later experiences of serving the risen Lord, James and Jude are uniquely qualified to speak to Christians in the letters that bear their names.

DATE AND OCCASION

The question of the date of James is connected with the discussion of its authorship. Some who think it is pseudonymous would date it quite late in the first century. However, if it is by James the brother of the Lord, then it must date somewhere between the time he became a leader of the Jerusalem church (about A.D. 40) and his death (about A.D. 62). If it is before the Jerusalem meeting of A.D. 50 (Acts 15), then the dispersion he refers to in verse 1 might be the scattering of the

church during the persecution by Saul (Acts 8:1). If it is dated that early, it is chronologically the first book of the New Testament. However, James refers often to quotations from the Sermon on the Mount in his letter.¹ He most likely is quoting from an oral tradition of the Sermon but possibly is familiar with Matthew's account. If he indeed knew Matthew's Gospel, then James wrote his letter toward the end of his life.

There are few hints in James of its setting or destination. James the Lord's brother was a leader of the church in Jerusalem. Many scholars thus find a Palestinian setting for the letter. As shown above, the content of the letter is consistent with a Palestinian setting. It is addressed to "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (v. 1). This broad address makes it impossible to define the situation of the recipients of the letter. James is truly a general or catholic (that is, universal) epistle. Since we do not know the specific circumstances of the original readers, this commentary will not speculate on that subject but will focus on the universal application of James's teaching for the church throughout the ages.

STRUCTURE, THEMES, AND STYLE

James is a letter in form; it has a greeting, refers to its readers often as "brothers," and identifies its author by name. However, it is a letter in form only; there are no greetings to persons by name and no mention of the circumstances of author or readers.

James is thus a letter in form, but in essence it is another type of literature, paraenesis or ethical instruction. The Greek philosophers gave such moral instruction in the ancient world. Proverbs is an Old Testament book of morals. Even

¹Peter H. Davids, "James and Jesus," in David Wenham, ed. *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 5 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 63-84. See below in the introduction and the commentary for discussion of specific passages where James quotes or refers to the Sermon on the Mount.

earlier, Leviticus gives moral instruction to Israel, especially in the “Holiness Code” of Leviticus 19. James often refers to that chapter in his book:²

James	Quotation from Leviticus
2:1	19:15
2:8	19:18
2:9	19:15
4:11	19:16
5:4	19:13
5:9	19:18
5:12	19:12
5:20	19:17

James was also influenced by certain Apocryphal books that taught similar moral maxims. The Apocrypha refers to those books found in certain Greek and Latin translations of the Old Testament that are not accepted as Scripture by Jews or by Protestants. As is seen in the following chart, two of those books, Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach, written c. 180 B.C.) and the Wisdom of Solomon (written c. 30 B.C.), have passages that are strikingly similar to certain verses in James:

Topic	James	Ecclesiasticus	Wisdom
Patience	1:2-4	1:23	
Wisdom	1:5	1:26	
Doubt	1:6-8	1:28	
Trials	1:12	2:1-5	
Temptation	1:13	15:11-12	
Hearing	1:19	5:11	
Rich and Poor	2:6	13:19	2:10
Mercy	2:13		6:6
Brevity of life	4:13-16		5:8-14

²See Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Use of Leviticus 19 in the Letter of James,” *JBL* 101 (1982): 391-401.

Topic	James	Ecclesiasticus	Wisdom
Money Rusts	5:3	29:10	
Righteous Killed	5:6		2:12, 20
Pray for Sick	5:14	38:9	

Comparing these passages, it is obvious that James knew and used these books. However, he does not quote them as inspired Scripture. He is following in the same tradition of passing on moral wisdom. Thus, like these and other books of moral teaching, James is loosely organized, tying together related ethical teachings by use of repeated terms. It is difficult to find an overarching theme to the book or divide it into major sections. Instead, James continues to come back to a few important subjects. Although this commentary will proceed verse-by-verse through James, another profitable way of studying the book is to look at it topically. James addresses six major themes in the book:

1. Waiting for the Lord (1:2-4, 12-18; 5:7-12).
2. Wisdom (1:5-8; 3:13-18).
3. Rich and Poor (1:9-11; 2:1-13; 4:13-16; 5:1-6).
4. The Tongue (1:19-21,26; 3:1-12; 4:11-12).
5. Prayer (1:6-8; 4:1-10; 5:13-20).
6. Faith and Action (1:22-27; 2:14-26).

James has a vigorous and fresh writing style. He generally uses short and vivid sentences. He is fond of making comparisons to nature—waves, sun, flowers, planets, animals—to give his teaching concrete expression. He asks his readers short, penetrating questions to cause them to reflect. Sometimes he uses the form of the diatribe, a scathing denunciation of immoral behavior. All these literary uses are common in moral literature.

JAMES AND THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

There are so many parallels between James and the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5–7 and Luke 6 and 11 that James can best be thought of as a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. There are more parallels between James and Matthew, but the language of the allusions is more similar to Luke.³ This could mean that James knew the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. However, it is more likely that James knew the sermon through oral tradition, since the early church would be sure to preserve the ethical teaching of Jesus. The following chart shows that every section of James has an echo of the Sermon:

Topic in James	Sermon on the Mount
Trials (1:2-4)	Matthew 5:10-12, 48; Luke 6:23
Asking (1:5-8)	Matthew 7:7-8; Luke 11:9-10
Riches (1:9-11)	Matthew 6:19-21
God's Gifts (1:12-18)	Matthew 7:11; Luke 11:13
Listening (1:19-27)	Matthew 5:22; 7:21-27; Luke 6:46-49
Judging (2:1-13)	Matthew 5:3,5,7,19-22; 7:1-5; Luke 6:20
Faith and Works (2:14-26)	Matthew 7:21-23
The Tongue (3:1-12)	Matthew 7:16; Luke 6:44-45
Wisdom (3:13-18)	Matthew 5:5-9
The World or God (4:1-10)	Matthew 5:4, 8; 6:7-8,24; 7:7-8; Luke 6:25
Slander (4:11-12)	Matthew 5:21-22; 7:1; Luke 6:37
Tomorrow (4:13-17)	Matthew 6:25-34
The Rich (5:1-6)	Matthew 6:19-21; Luke 6:24-25; 12:33
Patience (5:7-11)	Matthew 5:11-12; 7:1; Luke 6:22-23

³For more on the parallels between James and the Sermon on the Mount, see Patrick J. Hartin, *James and the Q Sayings of Jesus* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), pp. 140-172.

Topic in James

Swearing (5:12)

Prayer (5:13-18)

Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:33-37

Matthew 6:12-15; 7:7-11

These parallels are discussed in the commentary. Some are near verbatim quotations from the Sermon on the Mount; some are clear references; some are only vague allusions. However, the recognition that James is intentionally relating the teachings of Jesus to the situation of his readers increases one's appreciation for the book. As we will see below, James is no legalist but one who serves the church by calling it back to what Jesus intended it to be, a community that practices a higher righteousness (Matthew 5:20).

THE VALUE OF JAMES

There are two widespread misunderstandings of James that must be avoided to appreciate its value. One is that James is a legalistic book. Martin Luther (1483–1546) called it “an epistle of straw,” meaning it had little value because he could not find the gospel there. Luther and many after him misunderstood the teaching of James on faith and works. As we will show below in the commentary, James did not believe in works righteousness but, like Paul, taught that Christians are saved by an active faith.

A more recent version of “James the legalist” is held by scholars who say James only repeats Jewish moral instruction, so there is nothing specifically Christian in his teaching. It is true that much of James is Jewish moral teaching. So is most of the moral teaching of Jesus. Since Jesus came to fulfill the Law and Prophets (Matthew 5:17), how can it be otherwise? James repeats the moral teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. However, James (like Jesus) takes conventional moral wisdom (both Jewish and Greek) and redefines it in light of the incarnation and the sure return of Christ. James's ethic is thus eschatological (from the Greek word *ἔσχατος*, *eschatos*,

“last,” that is, the last days). He tells Christians how to live as they wait for Christ’s return. Thus, James is a thoroughly Christian book.

The second misunderstanding is that James is a practical book; it deals with people where they are and gives concrete steps on how they can improve. Of course, James is practical if one means he is concerned with Christian living. His words are certainly relevant to contemporary Christians. To show that relevance, every section of the commentary will end with a summary and application of James’s teaching to Christian living today.

However, by calling James “practical” some mean it simply enforces our own cultural values. Such could not be farther from the truth. James is a thoroughly impractical book in that he challenges our assumptions at every turn. He condemns human wisdom and is pessimistic of the ability of humans to reform themselves. He is hopeful, however, of God’s transcendent power in the believer. By calling on his readers to receive “wisdom from above” (James 3:17), he fights worldliness in the church by calling Christians to wait patiently for the Lord’s return. If we feel comfortable with the teaching of James (or rather, with the teaching of Jesus, since he is the original source of James’s teaching), then we have probably misunderstood it. It is a radical, countercultural message that the church today needs to hear and do.

OUTLINE

- I. GREETING – 1:1**
- II. ENDURING TRIALS – 1:2-4**
- III. ASK FOR WISDOM – 1:5-8**
- IV. RICHES TEMPORARY – 1:9-11**
- V. TEMPTATION NOT FROM GOD – 1:12-18**
- VI. SPEAKING, LISTENING, DOING – 1:19-27**
- VII. JUDGING BY APPEARANCE – 2:1-13**
 - A. Favoritism – 2:1-7**
 - B. The Royal Law – 2:8-13**
- VIII. FAITH THAT WORKS – 2:14-26**
 - A. Faith Without Works – 2:14-17**
 - B. Faith With Works – 2:18-26**
- IX. TAMING THE TONGUE – 3:1-12**
- X. WISDOM, EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY – 3:13-18**
- XI. FRIENDS OF THE WORLD OR OF GOD – 4:1-10**
- XII. DON'T SPEAK AGAINST A BROTHER – 4:11-12**
- XIII. DON'T COUNT ON TOMORROW – 4:13-17**
- XIV. WARNING TO THE RICH – 5:1-6**
- XV. WAITING FOR THE LORD – 5:7-11**
- XVI. DON'T SWEAR – 5:12**
- XVII. PRAYER, CONFESSION, AND SAVING THE SINNER – 5:13-20**