

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

“Book of Faith, or an Epistle of Straw?”

BIBLE STUDY COURSE - SESSION #1

A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JAMES:

The Epistle of James is one of the most practical, hard-hitting books of the New Testament. To James, faith was an expression of daily life; something to be lived in submission to Divine revelation. The key verse to an understanding of the entire book is found at James 1:22 – “***But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.***” In 108 verses there are 54 imperatives (*commands*), for which reason some call James “*the Amos of the New Testament.*”

Some commentators have referred to the Epistle of James as “*the gospel of common sense;*” but, not all biblical scholars share such a positive assessment. Numbered as chief amongst James’ later critics was the great reformer, **Martin Luther** (1483-1546), who wrote that St. James’ epistle is really an “*epistle of straw.*”

Historically, the book of James was slow to be recognized as part of the New Testament, mostly because of an apparent contradiction with the writings of the apostle Paul over the relationship of faith and works. It may also have been slow to receive acceptance because it was a book written to Jewish Christians, a fact that may not have pleased some Gentile churches.

AUTHORSHIP:

JAMES identifies himself (1:1) as [*doulos*] “***a slave/servant of God and of the Lord (and Master) Jesus Christ.***” There are at least five men named “James” in the New Testament:

1. **James, the brother of Judas** (*not Iscariot*) the apostle. (see *LK 6:16 & Acts 11:3*); an otherwise obscure person, except for these references.
2. **James, son of Zebedee and brother of John.** A fisherman called by Jesus (*MT 4:17-22*) who later became an apostle (*MT 10:2; MK 3:17; LK 6:14; Acts 1:13*). Together with his brother John, they were nicknamed “*Sons of Thunder*” because of their impulsiveness (*MK 3:17; LK 9:51-56*). He was killed by Herod at an early date [44 A.D.] because “*he belonged to the church*” (see *Acts 12:1-2*).
3. **James, son of Alphaeus.** He, too, was one of the apostles (*MT 10:3; MK 3:18; LK 6:15; Acts 1:13*). Very little is directly known about him; he was likely the brother of Matthew/Levi (see: *MT 9:9 and MK 2:14*) who in the preceding references is also identified as a son of Alphaeus.

4. **James, the Younger**, whose mother, Mary, was among the women named at Jesus' crucifixion and tomb (*Mt. 27:56; Mk. 15:40; Mk 16:1, Lk. 24:10*). In John 19:25, this Mary is called the wife of Clopas.

5. **James, the "half-brother" of Jesus** (*Mt. 13:55; Mk. 6:3*); he is also identified as brother of Jude (*see Jude 1*).
 - a) During Jesus' life, James was not a follower/believer (*Jn. 7:5, 10*). During Jesus' ministry it is clear that his family did not understand him and even wished to restrain him. (*see MT 12:46-50; MK 3:21, 31-35; JN 7:3-9*)

 - b) However, James became a follower after he was a witness to the resurrection (*1 Cor. 15:7; Acts 1:14*); and, he awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit [*on Pentecost*] with those assembled in Jerusalem.

 - c) James eventually became a prominent member, most probably the leading elder, in the church at Jerusalem (*Gal. 2:9; Acts 21:8*). How this development came about is never known.
 - He was visited by the apostle Paul [35/36 A.D.], after Paul had spent three years in Damascus and Arabia (*Acts 9:26, Gal. 1:18-19*).
 - After his imprisonment the apostle Peter sent him a special message to make sure that James was informed about his release (*Acts 12:17*)
 - James is identified as presider over the Jerusalem Council, a meeting held to discuss whether or not the practice of circumcision should be bound on the Gentiles who were obeying the Gospel (*Acts 15:13-21; Gal. 2:1-10*)
 - Some Jews presented themselves as being sent by him (*Gal. 2:12*)
 - He was in attendance, with the elders, when Paul returned to Jerusalem with the offering from the Gentiles for needy saints (*Acts 21:18-25*)
 - Many early historians identify him as the first Bishop of the Church in Jerusalem

 - d) James was put to death as a martyr in 62/63 A.D.
 - Josephus, the famed Jewish historian, reports that James was martyred – by stoning - during a Jewish insurrection in the period of time between the death of Festus (*Roman Procurator of Judea*) and the arrival of the new governor, Albinus.

- Eusebius, an early church historian, reported that those who conspired against the apostle Paul turned on James after Paul, under Roman custody, went to Rome. When James refused to renounce Christ before the priests and elders of the Jews, he was taken to the temple and thrown off. He lived for a short while after the impact, so they beat him with clubs, and/or stoned, him to death. It is reported that as he died, he prayed, as did Jesus, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

e) CONCLUSIONS about AUTHORSHIP:

- Many contemporary scholars identify James, *“the Lord’s brother,”* as the most likely author of this epistle.
- Tradition describes James as a man of prayer, which may explain the emphasis on prayer in this letter. It is said that James prayed so much, his knees were as hard as those on a camel!
- However, along with Luther, your facilitator finds it strange that such a book should only have two incidental references to Jesus and none at all pointing to the Resurrection.
- A further serious difficulty stems from the fact that the quality of the Greek language used in the book is exceptionally good! James’ mother tongue was Aramaic and not Greek; it is difficult to conceive his actually having *“penned”* this letter all by himself.
- Further exploration during this course of study will reveal that the Book of James more closely resembles a sermon. It is possible that, in substance, this was a sermon, preached by James, taken down by someone else (*perhaps an admirer and follower*), then translated into excellent Greek, and given the name *“James” (a regular and frequent practice in early Christianity to show special respect for a revered person.)*
- This suggestion about the book’s sermon quality also explains the scarcity of references to Jesus, to his Messiahship, and to the Resurrection. In just a single sermon, it would have been unlikely for any one preacher to have included the whole gamut of *“orthodox theology”* that Martin Luther found lacking in the book.

THE RECIPIENTS:

1. James' epistle is addressed to "***the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad***" [*among the Gentiles in the dispersion* — from AMPLIFIED BIBLE]
2. That phrase [*the one in bold type above*] lets us know that Jewish Christians, probably those living outside the land of Palestine, were most likely the intended readers. Jews at this time in history were known to be scattered in different countries, and had been since the days of the Assyrian (722 B.C.) and Babylonian (586 B.C.) captivities. (*Think of the biblical account of how the Jews had come from many places to Jerusalem for Pentecost - see Acts 25:11*). A third compulsory *deportation* took place much later, when Pompey, The Great Roman General and statesman, conquered the Jews and took Jerusalem captive (63 B.C.), then took thousands of Jews back with him to Rome, many of them forced to work there as slaves.
3. History provides evidence that great numbers of Jews also left Palestine of their own free will for more comfortable living conditions and more profitable lands in Egypt (*south*) or in Syria (*north*). In Alexandria (*Egypt*), alone, there were known to have been more than 1,000,000 Jews; and, about 50 B.C. a temple, modelled on the Jerusalem one, was built at *Leontopolis* for the Egyptian Jews.
4. Many Jews who were in Jerusalem at the time of that first 'Christian' Pentecost event were converted (*Acts 2:41, 47*); as these people went back to their homes they had need for instruction and guidance.
5. While still Jews, the epistle makes it clear that they were all considered "*brethren in the Lord*" (*i.e. they were Jewish Christians; a sect within Judaism*). On 19 different occasions James calls them "brethren" and on at least one of those times he definitely means those who were brethren "*in the Lord*" (*see 2:1*).
6. Jewish Christians were also scattered abroad as a result of the persecution that arose following the stoning of Stephen (*Acts 8:1-4; 11:19*). Driven out of Jerusalem and Palestine, they lost jobs, homes and most of their possessions. Separated from family and friends they had to make a new start in unfamiliar places. They were hated by both Jews and Romans: (1) it seemed to other Jews that in becoming Christians they had deserted the faith of their fathers; and, (2) the Romans hated them because they were loyal to a King other than Caesar.
7. Many Jewish Christians were very poor and severely burdened. Being Jews, they were rejected by Gentiles on the basis of faith; ethnically, as Jews, they were a segregated

group, barred from interacting with many of their own countrymen. We have further reason to believe they were also being economically oppressed by the rich (*James 2:6-7*)

8. Because the Book of James was not addressed to a single or specific church, or to an individual, it has been categorized as a “*General*” or “*Catholic*” (*in the sense of universal*) epistle along with 1 & 2 Peter, 1 John and Jude.

TIME/PLACE OF WRITING:

1. Many historians believe that the Epistle of James was written relatively early in the first century A.D., possibly as soon as 45-50 A.D. Such an early dating would make it the very first New Testament book written.
2. However, there is no mention in this book of the Jerusalem Council [49 A.D.] which is recorded in Acts chapter 15. Other biblical scholars suggest that the Epistle had to have been written prior to 62/63 A.D., the date of James’ death; all modern biblical scholars generally conclude that it was certainly written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.
3. It is not known conclusively where the book was written. The best possibility is the city of Jerusalem, where James is traditionally placed after his conversion to the Christian faith. James 5:7 uses a specific phrase: “**early and later rain,**” which may well refer to the rainy season that is very common in that part of Palestine; but, we just don’t know.
4. It is equally possible to assign an early date and a late date to writing of the Book of James. There is support for both positions. When written, it is clear that the hope of a Second Coming of Jesus Christ was still very much anticipated (*see 5:7-9*). Your facilitator tends toward a late writing for these two reasons:
 - a) The message of James is primarily concentrated on the inadequacies and imperfections, the sins and mistakes, of the members of the Church. Early Christian preaching focused on the grace and glory of the Risen Christ. Later preaching was more directed to the flaws and imperfections of the members of the Church.
 - b) Condemnation of the rich is a recurrent theme (*see 2:1-3; 5:1-6*). The flattery of the rich and their arrogance seem to have become real problems when this letter was being written. In the early church there were few, if any, rich men. Yet, the message of James seems to indicate that at a later time, some church members had achieved a degree of affluence and they were exhibiting too great a spirit of worldliness!

WHY THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN:

The Epistle of James deals with a variety of themes, with a major emphasis on the practical aspects of the Christian life. Some of the subjects include handling trials and temptations; practicing 'pure' religion; understanding the relation between faith and works; the proper use of the tongue and the display of true wisdom; being a friend of God rather than a friend of the world; and, the values of humility, patience and prayer.

While some of the subject matter above may seem unrelated, all these themes are crucial to the growth and development of a Christian. For this reason, I suggest that James' purpose was to instruct all Christians concerning true and practical religion; to get Christians to live their professed faith by obeying the Word of God; to practice what they preached; and, to become perfect in Christ.

Robert Gromacki, a noted New Testament scholar has suggested, in the following outline form that James was written to:

- a) Admonish them to take the proper attitude toward trials and tribulations (1:2-18)
- b) Encourage them to properly receive the Word of God (1:19-27)
- c) Forbid them to show partiality to others (2:1-13)
- d) Demonstrate that faith without works will not save them (2:14-26)
- e) Warn against the sins of the tongue (3:1-12)
- f) Set forth the nature of true and false wisdom (3:13-18)
- g) Rebuke them for quarrelsomeness, worldliness and pride (4:1-10)
- h) Instruct them to be considerate toward their brethren (4:11-12)
- i) Scold them for their attitude and conduct in their business life (4:13 – 5:6)
- j) Encourage them to patiently endure the ills of life (5:7-12)
- k) Tell them what to do in times of affliction (5:13-18)
- l) Show the importance of restoring an erring brother (5:19-20)

A TIME FOR GENERAL DISCUSSION:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the Historical-Critical Method of Interpretation to study this book?