

Study 1: Introduction to James

Introduction

James is a very practical book that gives us much instruction on dealing with the circumstances that we find in our lives as we live in the real world. The underlying theme of the book is not our individual relationship with God, but rather our relationships with our fellow brethren in the church.

Body of the Study

The Recipients of the Letter

The Author of the Letter

Date and Occasion of the Letter

The style of the letter

Outline of the letter

Selected Bibliography

Key points – Introduction & Conclusion

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the whole book in a single sitting, and a few days later read chapter 1 again.

Read the notes as a review of the study

Review the introduction and conclusion, (page 6 of the notes) and find the key words & thoughts. Put these together into a “story” to find the key things that James wants to tell us about the letter.

Count how many times James uses the term “brethren” in the letter. What things is he telling them? - What is the key message?

Notes for study 1: Introduction to James

James is the first of the “general epistles” in the New Testament. It is “general” because it is not written to a specific person (as were Timothy, Titus, and Philemon), or a specific church (Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians), or a specific group of churches (Galatians). Although it can be said that the epistle to the Hebrews is general in nature.

The writer makes a very brief introduction “...*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings...*” (1:1 NKJV).

Acceptance of James as a part of the New Testament Canon has been challenged more than any other book. Some of this relates to the author (discussed later), and much to the content. Martin Luther described James as “an epistle of straw”. He rejected it because it did not align with his idea that salvation comes by “faith alone”, and he considered it to be in serious conflict with other parts of the New Testament.

However, some of the earliest writers regarded James as a part of the canon, the most notable being Origen (AD 185 – 254) and the fourth century church historian Eusebius.

James is a very practical book, which deals with the practical application of our faith in the challenges of the real world.

The Recipients of the Letter

The letter is general in its nature, and addressed to “...*the twelve tribes scattered abroad...*”. The “twelve tribes” has the hint of being written to Jewish Christians. If the letter is written at an early date (more on this later), then the *scattering* could refer to the dispersion of Acts 8, and at that time they were all *Jewish* Christians (Acts 11:19).

Paul reminds us that it is through faith that we come into a relationship with God, and the true Jews are the spiritual Jews, not those who were the physical descendants of Abraham (Rom 2:28). Quite clearly, the letter is addressed to Christians, and James uses *brethren* many times in the letter. Cogdill¹ says “...James was not writing to Jews nor just to Jewish Christians, but that his letter was addressed to the Church of the Lord generally which had been “scattered abroad” from Jerusalem and throughout the nations of the earth under very severe persecution...”

Roper² adds “...there is its distinctly Jewish flavour – as it refers to such things as the twelve tribes (James 1:1), the synagogue (James 2:2), the law (James 2:11), and Old Testament worthies (James 2:21, 25; 5:17) – while it remains Christian to the core...”

That the recipients were “scattered abroad” has a reference to the displacement of the Christians after the dispersion (diaspora) some time after Paul’s persecution of the church (Acts 8:1), and as the church grew throughout the world.

The Author of the Letter

The writer simply claims to be “*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*”. He gives us no clues as to which James he is.

There were three James’ recorded in the New Testament:

- ***James the son of Zebedee***, and brother of John. He was prominent among the apostles along with his brother and Peter. He was the first of the apostles to die, being killed by Herod around AD 44 (Acts 12:2). He certainly had the characteristics and prominence to be the author, but if this were the case, then James would have been the first part of the New Testament to be written (more on this under “Date and Occasion”).
- ***James the son of Alphaeus***. Very little is known about this James. He is often confused with James the Lord’s brother (being referred to as “James the Less”). He was the brother of

¹ Cogdill, p.142

² Roper, p.9

Lebbaeus Thaddaeus (Lk 6:16), also called “Judas not Iscariot. As an apostle, the things he taught, spoke, and wrote were authoritative, and he would be a strong candidate to be the author of the epistle. Many dismiss him as the author because we know little about him. However that alone is insufficient reason for dismissal.

- **James the Lord’s brother.** This James was also known as “James the Less”. There is much confusion about who *James the Less* was. Many have tried to attribute James the Less to the son of Alphaeus. The thought is propagated by the “12 apostles song” that we sing in bible class. The term “James the Less” only appears once in scripture (Mk 15:40). The scene is the crucifixion, and the gospel writers tell us who was there. By a simple comparison, we can see that John tells us that Jesus’ mother Mary was there (along with some other Mary’s). Mark omits describing Mary as the mother of Jesus, but describes a Mary who was the mother of James the Less and of Joses. Mark also tells us that two of Jesus’ brothers were named James and Joses. This is not absolutely definitive, as it is possible that Mark omits Jesus’ mother Mary altogether, but tells us about another Mary (who perhaps could have been the mother of James the son of Alphaeus, and also had a brother named Joses). The conclusion that James the Less was James the Lord’s brother, then is the most reasonable outcome.

Jn 19:25	Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.
Mk 15:40	There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome.
Mk 6:3	Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?

Authorship of the letter is most often ascribed to James the Lord’s brother. Whilst he was not one of the twelve, he was prominent in the church in Jerusalem, and chaired the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15). Paul referred to him as an apostle (Gal 1:19). This could mean that if he was commissioned as an apostle, then there were more than 12 (in my *opinion*, unlikely); or he was regarded as an apostle in a general sense; or as a leader with the apostles in Jerusalem.

Eusebius³ records that he was thrown from a wing of the Temple and then beaten to death with a club. This was shortly after Paul had left for Rome and also shortly after the death of Festus. Festus died in office in AD 62⁴, so if it was written by James the brother of the Lord, this places the time of writing before AD 62. Concerning James the brother of the Lord, Eusebius adds⁵:

“These accounts are written respecting James, who is said to have written the first of the epistles general, (catholic;) but it is to be observed that it is considered spurious. Not many indeed of the ancients have mentioned it, and not even that called the epistle of Jude, which is also one of the seven called catholic epistles. Nevertheless we know, that these, with the rest, are publicly used in most of the churches.”

Date and Occasion of the Letter

Date:

The date of the letter could be somewhat determined if we knew which James wrote it (or *vice versa* – if we knew the date, we might be able to eliminate some of the possible authors). The options are:

- James the brother of John Before AD 44
- James the brother of the Lord Before AD 62
- James the son of Alphaeus Unknown, but probably before AD 90

The content of the letter can also help us to understand the date. The epistle of James does not deal with the Jew-Gentile controversy (at least to any significant extent). This suggests that the

³ Ecclesiastical History, chapter 23

⁴ See Acts study 37, (p.234 of those notes).

⁵ *Ibid.*

book might have been written *before* it became an issue (before the conversion of Cornelius in AD 37, or at least before Paul's return from the first journey in AD 51). The dispersion occurred in AD 34, and a general epistle to those who were scattered could fit that timeframe and events.

Alternately, a later date for the epistle could suggest that the Jew-Gentile controversy had been settled and no further instruction was needed. In his final letter (2nd Timothy), written shortly before his death in AD 68, Paul makes allusions to the problem (1:11; 3:2-5; Timothy well understood where Paul stood, whilst the Judaisers were trying to discredit him). This suggests that the controversy was still around up to 68 AD, although it was not the major problem being faced by Timothy. James would then have to have been written after (say) AD 60.

Occasion:

The occasion of the letter is not so hard to identify. The Christians had been scattered, and were in need of both encouragement and instruction on dealing with their practical problems.

The style of the letter

James is not an easy book to read. On the contrary, at first it appears to be a lot of thoughts or short essays that are not connected to one another. The general outline is given in chapter 1, and throughout the letter James uses some threads or "chains of thought" to hold things together. Everett⁶ says:

"...For instance in ch. 1:2-3, 12, the chain looks like this: temptation – endurance – perfect and entire – crown of life. James puts it this way so that one's attitude toward time of temptation can be joy instead of discouragement. In this way, the one whose faith is being tested is able to see the desired end from the beginning. It is also implied that if the chain is broken, then one cannot count different forms of temptations as joyous. Notice that if the middle link is broken thusly: temptation – no endurance – the chain of thought is destroyed. In such instances temptation causes grief.

In a different way James forms another chain in vv. 14-15: desire – enticement – conceived sin – death. THIS CHAIN MUST BE BROKEN! While it is not a sin to be tempted, the wise man knows that he can control sin by avoiding sources of enticement which would cause the unlawful expression of desires. However, if he succumbs to enticement so that sin is conceived, he must break that link by repentance, for he knows that the next link is inevitable – "the wages of sin is death..." (Rom. 16:23; cf. Gal 6:7-8)."

Roper⁷ adds:

"...it achieves continuity by the use of an interesting literary device where a word at the end of one clause is repeated at the first of the next clause (see James 1:2-6)..."

Fee & Stuart⁸ note:

"...don't fall into the habit, which is easy in this case, of reading James as though it were addressed to individual believers about their one-on-one relationship with God and others. Nothing could be further from James's own concerns. From the outset his passion is with life within the believing community. While it is true that each must assume his or her individual responsibility to make the community healthy, the concern is not with personal piety as much as it is with healthy communities. To miss this point will cause you to miss what drives this letter from beginning to end..."

Outline of the letter

The following outline is adapted from Adamson⁹

⁶ Everett, p. iii

⁷ Roper, p. 9

⁸ Fee & Stuart, p. 399

⁹ Adamson, p. 44 – 45

- 1:1 *Salutation,*
- 1:2-11 *The Christian Faith*
 - 1:2-4 In testing, training, and fruition
 - 1:5-8 In Prayer for guidance
 - 1:9-11 In comforting the poor and chastening the rich
- 1:12-27 *The Gospel Promise*
 - 1:12-21 For faithful endurance against temptations
 - 1:22-27 For doers of the gospel, not hearers only, who watch their tongue
- 2:1-26 *The Christian Life*
 - 2:1-13 Social compassion amid social cleavage
 - 2:14-26 Christian faith expressed in Christian acts
- 3:2-18 *Some Christian Advice*
 - 3:2-12 The power and treachery of the tongue
 - 3:13-18 The contrast between the self-conceit of the tongue and the fruitful peace of true wisdom.
- 4:1-10 *Love of the world and Love of God*
- 4:11-17 *Cautions*
 - 4:11-12 Against speaking ill of one another
 - 4:13-17 Against presuming on tomorrow's programs
- 5:1-18 *Conclusion*
 - 5:1-6 The judgement of the faithless rich
 - 5:7-11 Be patient, for the Lord's return is coming
 - 5:12 Do not swear oaths
 - 5:13-18 Exercising our service within the congregation

Selected Bibliography

The following references will be used and quoted from during the studies. The full reference of the books are quoted here, and only their abbreviated title and page number will be quoted in the studies.

Everett

Everett, Jim R: "Practical Living – A workbook and Commentary on James"
The Preceptor Company, PO Box 22283 Beaumont, Texas 77720

Roper

Roper, David L: "Practical Christianity – Studies in the Book of James"
Gospel Advocate Co. P.O. Box 150 Nashville, TN. 37202 ISBN 0-89225-291-X

Cogdill

Cogdill, Roy E: "The New Testament: Book by Book – A 26 Lesson Outline series covering the entire New Testament"
Cogdill Foundation Publications, P.O. Box 403 Marion Ind. 46952

Adamson

Adamson James B: "The Epistle of James – New International Commentary on the New Testament"
William B Eermans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids MI 49503 ISBN 0-8028-2515-X

Eusebius

"The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus"
Baker Book House, Grand Rapids MI 49516 ISBN 0-8010-3306-3

Fee & Stuart

Gordon D Fee & Douglas Stuart: "How to Read the Bible Book by Book"
Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 49530 ISBN 0-310-21118-2

Key points – Introduction & Conclusion

By looking at the introduction and conclusion to the letter, we can derive some of the key thoughts that Paul wants to bring out to the readers – especially when they appear in both the introduction and the conclusion.

Take some time to circle the key thoughts in each section, and then link the common ones together. The keys to the introduction are James's use of *Therefore, my beloved brethren...* and the short conclusion with a plea for action. ... Quotation is taken from the NIV.

JAS 1:1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

JAS 1:2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

JAS 1:9 The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. ¹⁰ But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

JAS 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

JAS 1:13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

JAS 1:16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

JAS 1:19 My dear brothers, take note of this:

JAS 5:19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.