

Introduction

Times, Troubles and Trajectory

A Book, a Man and a People

The book of James was essential for the struggling churches in the early days of the church. And, the message of this book has been needed by the church in every age in history. The truths and admonitions and encouragements of these epistles speak to us in our own day. It has been given by God for a reason and we need to be careful that we do not neglect its message.

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

Its Author

First of all, there is no doubt that this letter was written by someone named, James. The author identifies himself in James 1:1.

But, there were several men named James in the early church. The question is, which of these men named James is the author of this epistle? There are really only two main possibilities.

James, the brother of John

James, the brother of John was one of the twelve disciples. (Matt. 4:18-22; Matt. 10:2) James and John along with Peter were very close to the Lord Jesus. (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51; Luke 9:28) James, along with the other apostles, was present at Pentecost and certainly instrumental in the early years of the church in Jerusalem. But, this James, the apostle, was martyred at the hand of King Herod Agrippa I in the year 44 A.D. (Acts 12:1-2)

*About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some
who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of
John with the sword,*

It is generally acknowledged that this epistle of James was written approximately 46 to 50 A.D. This eliminates James, the brother of John as the writer of this letter.

James, the half-brother of Jesus

The second main possible author of this epistle is James, the half-brother of the Lord. It is this James that appears to have been the writer of this letter. James was one of the sons of Mary and Joseph, which would make him Jesus' half-brother. We find a list of the names of these brothers in (Matt. 13:55). It seems that during Jesus' earthly ministry, James and his brothers did not believe in Jesus (John 7:5).

John 7:5 "For not even His brothers were believing in Him."

In this context, we see that his brothers certainly saw and understood that Jesus was doing mighty works. They knew that Jesus was no ordinary brother. Like so many

others, it appears that they thought Jesus was perhaps destined to lead some sort of revolt against Rome. But, James and his brothers did not believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament Scriptures.

James probably became a believer when Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (1 Corinthians. 15:7). After Jesus' ascension, James was present with his brothers and the apostles in the upper room (Acts 1:14). In Acts 12:17 we are given a very important detail. After Peter's release from prison, he instructs that the account of his release was to be given to James and the rest of the church. The clear implication is that Peter was passing on the main leadership position of the Jerusalem church to James.

Acts 12:17 "But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place."

The next time James is mentioned we see him in a very important leadership role and we see great respect given to him during the assembly at Jerusalem (Acts 15:13) where the subject of circumcision and Gentile believers was being discussed.

One other note that I think is helpful in studying this epistle. The New Testament reveals that the apostle Paul had a long relationship with James. Paul talks about meeting with James shortly after his conversion (Galatians. 1:19). Paul commends James for reaching out to him and accepting him as a brother. Paul names James and Peter as important figures in the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9). Paul continued a strong relationship with James and the church in Jerusalem. We find Paul once again reporting to James and the other elders after his third missionary journey and just prior to his arrest in Jerusalem. (Acts 21:18)

It was this James, the half-brother of Jesus that was the author of this epistle.

Its Recipients

Who was this letter addressed to?

In **James 1:1** the writer addresses his letter "to the twelve tribes who are dispersed".

The Twelve tribes

The term "twelve tribes" is usually a reference to those of Jewish nationality. The first large conversion of Gentiles into the church did not take place until Paul's first missionary journey which took place in 47 and 48 A.D. There was no large scale persecution of Gentile Christians at the time of James' writing. This, along with the content of the letter and the designation "to the twelve tribes" makes it clear that James was mainly writing to Jewish Christians. But, unlike almost all of Paul's epistles, there is no mention made of the geographical location of these believers. James does tell us that these Christians had evidently been dispersed from their original homes.

There is also a sense in which James is writing to the largely Jewish church in Jerusalem. There are indications that he has in mind some issues and difficulties right at home. So the trials and troubles that needed wisdom was also connected to difficulties in the church. Those difficulties arose from conflict between the have's and have-

not's in the church. So as the book was read and being sent abroad, it landed at home in the church in Jerusalem.

But there is also Biblical Theological/Redemptive Historical trajectory. Jesus made it clear that he selected the 12 apostles to be a fulfillment of the 12 tribes. The sense is that of being the church. Then we have 144,000 in Revelation, which is 12,000 from 12 tribes. I along with many believe this is a reference to the ingathered Jewish remnant being saved in the last days.

Who are Scattered

The question is, then, who were these dispersed Jews and what relationship did they have with James?

Well, it seems probable that these dispersed Christians had once been residents of Jerusalem and had been a part of the church there. In the book of Acts we are told that difficult persecution took place after the death of Stephen. Because of this persecution many Christians from the church in Jerusalem were scattered. (**Acts 8:1; Acts 11:19**)

***Acts 8:1** "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."*

***Acts 11:19** "So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone."*

As we read in these verses, the Christians did not all go to the same geographic location but were scattered around in many different places, not only in Judea and Samaria, but also to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. James, as pastor of the church in Jerusalem would have been very concerned for the spiritual welfare of these brothers and sisters in Christ. This letter was a pastoral letter to these scattered believers who, before the persecution, belonged to the church at Jerusalem.

This designation also evokes the exile in Babylon. James maybe thinking in a way similar to 1 Peter. The diaspora was a way to refer historically to the Jews who were scattered into the world by the Persians. They and the Babylonian exiles forehadow God's people in this age who are aliens and exiles in this world. We are far from our heaven's homeland. We are scattered throughout the world until the Lord comes, gathers us in and brings home to us.

Its Situation

The Time of its Writing

As we think about the setting of the book, it is important to understand when James was written. The order of the books in our New Testaments is for the most according to the general content. So, our New Testament organized under these four headings:

- The Historical books: (The four gospels and the book of Acts)
- The Pauline Epistles
- The General Epistles
- The Book of Revelation

But this is not the order in which they were written. Because they were inspired by the Holy Spirit, we must pay attention to their individual historical contexts. Each book must be seen in the context of the overall historical progress of the New Testament church at the time of the writing. The book of James was written sometime between 47 and 49 AD. This was after the severe persecution in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 8. The New Testament church at this time was relatively young, less than twenty years old. James was the first book of the New Testament written. The church would be primarily relying on the Old Testament. They read their Scriptures in the light of coming, of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. In addition, the letter of James would have been written at a time in church history before the establishment of Gentile churches through the first missionary trips of Paul and Barnabas. All of this helpful and is even sometimes necessary to remember as we study James' epistle.

The letters of the New Testament share two historical circumstances. The churches were facing the difficulties of persecution and the dangers of false teachers. They addressed very similar spiritual concerns for the believers in these churches. The true church has always had to face both persecution and the danger of false doctrine. The spiritual needs of believers undergoing persecution and combating false doctrine transcend time and culture. The admonitions and counsel and encouragements given by James or Peter or John are the same ones the church in similar circumstances needs to hear today.

Its Transitional Time

This letter is written to people who experiencing great change in their lives.

In the Lives of the Believers

The Jewish Christians who had been persecuted and scattered did not have an easy time trying to adjust to their new lives in a strange place. As we try to understand this letter of James, we need to keep in our minds the fact that this was the first N.T. book written. The church was only 15 to 20 years old. Many of the Christians that James was writing to were immature in the faith. There were many questions regarding doctrine and practice that the church was still trying to understand and apply.

In the Dawning Age of the New Covenant

This was not easy for many of these new Christians because they had grown up grounded in the religion of the Jewish faith of the day. Although there were certainly some devout Jews that had a true faith in God, most of these Jews had been taught and influenced by the mainly outward Jewish religion of the Pharisees. This religion taught that acceptance by God was based on outward obedience to rules and regulations. In contrast to this, the teaching of Jesus focused first of all on the heart and

true righteousness. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are poor in spirit and who mourn and who are peacemakers.” Jesus commanded his followers to “pray for their enemies”. And, Jesus taught that “his kingdom was not of this world.” This was radical teaching to those who were Jews. Their whole lives they were taught to be proud. They were taught to hate their enemies. The Jews of Jesus’ day looked forward to a Messiah that would come and rescue them from oppression and poverty. They were looking for a king that would conquer their enemies and who would bring about the rise of Israel as a great powerful earthly kingdom.

This kind of thinking did not change immediately when these Jews were saved. As the apostles through the Holy Spirit revealed more and more the doctrine and purpose and plan for the church, these Jewish believers were constantly challenged in their thinking and way of living. So, when this time of great persecution began and these Jerusalem Christians were scattered, many of them began to doubt. They were confused. They wondered how life could be so hard since they were the people of God. They wondered why God would allow such trials in their lives. And, they were tempted to change their conduct to try to lessen the impact of these trials. They needed further instruction. So, James, as a faithful pastor and leader in the church writes to them addressing a number of issues to both teach and encourage and admonish these believers in the Christian faith.

Its Occasion

All of the New Testament is written in response to a need or a situation in the recipient’s lives. While this letter is addressed to the Jews who are dispersed, it also was written for the church in Jerusalem. It had a local as well as a universal scope. This book at first seems not to have a connective inner structure. But its primary theme becomes evident in the opening verses and then throughout the book. There is a general need for all to respond to trials well. There is a general need for all to grow in spiritual maturity. But why address these particular issues.

Church Troubles

The occasion of book is because there was a person or persons who were not pleasing nor pursuing God. This person was prosperous, prominent and powerful. He was admired and deferred to but was not genuinely mature. He was immature, impatient, acerbic, nasty, divisive, controlling, manipulative and now, chastened and sick. His influence was spreading. And now he was sick, but not yet humbled.

Personal Maturity

Spiritual maturity is one of the greatest needs in churches today. Too many churches are playpens for babies instead of workshops for adults. The members are not mature enough to eat the solid spiritual food that they need, so they have to be fed on milk (Heb. 5:11-14). Just look at the problems James dealt with and you can see that each of them is characteristic of little children:

Impatience in difficulties – 1:1-4

Talking but not living the truth – 2:14ff

No control of the tongue – 3:1ff

Fighting and coveting – 4:1ff

Collecting material “toys” – 5:1ff

All this was occurring while the church was suffering persecution. They were suffering and were being scattered. This leads me to say something: Suffering, even the suffering of persecution, does not necessarily produce holiness.

Its Character

James is an epistle. It is a letter. It is written in the form of the day. Letters in that day opened with identifying the writer, the recipients and some form of greeting.

The Letter is Pastoral

James is writing a pastor. He is a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He sits to write as an elder of the church at Jerusalem. He has seen these people come to faith in Christ. He has probably baptized many of them. He has a deep pastoral concern for them as individuals wherever they may be. He is hugely concerned about the church he is serving in.

The Letter is Personal

James knows these people personally. His writing is familiar and intimate. At times it rises to fatherly admonition and warning. He is personally acquainted with is going in the church and how it is affecting those who are dispersing because of the persecution. This personal note will reach into our hearts and draw us into listening.

The Letter is Polemical

James presents powerful arguments to press home his case. These are not fueled by a desire to win the argument, but to change the hearer. God uses questions, logic, persuasion as a part of the Word. He uses it honestly however. He does not ask, "Prove that you did not..." or create straw man arguments. He is careful so that the wisdom exhibited in his persuasion is from above and will bear the fruit of peace.

The Letter is Practical

James is dealing with delicate and practical matters. He speaks to issues like temptations, money, business, discrimination, abuse of power, sickness and the confrontation of sinning Christians. They hit right at home with the initial recipients and they will hit at home with us as well.

Its Themes

Connected to the New Testament

James is one of the general epistles. These are the smaller books in the New Testament that were not written by Paul. They all address some common themes.

- The responsibility of the church to be a faithful witness for the gospel.
- The need of the church to maintain purity in the face of temptation.
- The encouragement to the church to remain steadfast while enduring times of persecution.
- The warnings to the church to value and guard truth from error and false teaching.

Core Purpose in its Message

So here is the aim of the book. James will challenge us in difficulties to please and pursue God and become mature.

Reflect and Respond

The Bible comes to us *in the midst of the mess*..

God wants us to be pleasing to Him regardless of our situation...

Let us be encouraged that our God knows our situation and has granted the grace we need to grow and mature as believers.

