

James: An Overview (James 1:1-4)
By Pastor Jeff Alexander (4/25/2015)

Introduction

1. Probably the first NT book written, it is listed following Hebrews with the general epistles in the NT canon.
2. The date of its writing is generally accepted to be between A.D. 46 and 50, before the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).
3. The style is that of an OT prophet, and the content is Jewish.
4. The Greek of the epistle is highly polished, and its content reflects Hellenistic, not Hebraistic, thinking.
5. The theme is the “perfect man” (1:4; 3:2).
6. The key verse is 4:17: *“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin”* (ESV).
7. While generally accepted as Scripture, some, notably Martin Luther, have rejected the letter because it seems to contradict Paul’s teaching on faith and works (Gal. 2:16 contra James 2:17, 18).

I. The Author

1. James, actually Jacob (*Iakōbos*, “supplanter”). Did the translators choose to translate Jacob as James to honor King James?
2. Three possible authors
 - a. James, the elder brother of John, son of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21)
 - 1) Zebedee had a house in Jerusalem and was known to be a friend of the high priest, Caiaphas (John 18:15).
 - 2) His mother, Salome, according to tradition, was a sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus.
 - 3) He was executed by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1, 2), making him the second Christian and first apostle to be martyred.
 - b. James, the son of Alphaeus, an apostle (Matt. 10:3)
 - 1) He was called “the Little” due to his stature(?).
 - 2) Tradition lists him as a tax gatherer. Was his father, Alphaeus, the same as the father of Levi (Mark 2:14)?
 - 3) Nothing is recorded of him save his name.
 - c. James, half-brother of Jesus, “the Just” (Matt. 13:55)
 - 1) Some (the Roman church) want to argue that this James is “b” above, not the son of Mary (holding Mary to be a perpetual virgin).
Scripture, however, is clear on the issue.
 - 2) James never mentions his relationship to Jesus as a brother but only as a slave (1:1). Indeed, Jesus is mentioned only twice in the letter (1:1; 2:1).
 - 3) It cannot be James, the brother of John, who was martyred before the epistle was written.
 - 4) Jesus’ brothers were unbelievers before His resurrection (Matt. 13:57; note 1 Cor. 15:7).
 - 5) James became a pillar in the church at Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18, 19).
 - 6) He was known for his piety, being called James, the Just.
 - 7) He was also known for his power in prayer, being the man with the camel’s knees.
 - 8) He suffered a cruel martyr’s death at the hands of the scribes and Pharisees who threw him off the pinnacle of the temple. When the fall did not kill him, they stoned him and beat him with a fuller’s club.

There is a tomb in the valley of Jehoshaphat called the “Tomb of James.”

II. The Recipients

1. As identified: *“To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion”* (v. 1; see also 1 Pet. 1:1)
 - a. Three possibilities
 - 1) The tribes of Israel that were scattered in the Assyrian conquest (722 B.C.)
 - 2) Jews living outside of Judea but culturally and religiously faithful to Judea, some of whom were converted on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:5-13)
 - 3) Jewish Christians scattered by Jewish persecution who settled in Gentile cities throughout the Roman world (Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19)
 - b. The recipients were clearly Jewish Christians.
 - 1) They appear to be true believers who lived in Gentile communities but maintained their Jewish culture.
 - 2) They met in synagogues (2:2). The doctrine of the church is not well defined in James (note 5:14).
 - 3) James refers to Abraham as “our father” (2:21).
 - 4) There is a strong emphasis on the Law.
 - 5) Although Jesus is seldom mentioned, there are strong allusions to His teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount.
2. The recipients were believers who faced great problems.
 - a. They were being persecuted for their faith in Christ.
 - b. They were being plagued with their own sinfulness.
 - c. They needed to grow up in their faith, their trials being God’s means to that end if they understood and obeyed His will.

III. The Outline

1. The Perfect Man Suffering (1)
2. The Perfect Man Serving (2)
3. The Perfect Man Speaking (3)
4. The Perfect Man Separating (4)
5. The Perfect Man Waiting (5)

*Outline based on Dr. Warren Wiersbe, *Expository Outlines on the New Testament* (mimeographed publication of Calvary Book Room, Covington, KY, 1965)

In light of the message—

1. Are we prepared to examine James’ teaching in light of our own sins, shortcomings, and idols?
2. Are we willing to repent, confess, and forsake everything that keeps us from being the “perfect” man/woman?
3. In preparation for this series, may I urge you to read James through every day and ask the Lord to open your understanding so that you may obediently apply its truths to your own experience.