



James

The Epistle of St. James

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
----------------------------	------------	-----------------	--------------------	--------	----------------	-----------------------	-------	--------	------------------	-------------------	--------



Introduction

Authorship

Of the various New Testament figures who bore the name James (see Matthew 10:2-3; Mark 3:17-18; Luke 6:14-15), the most likely author of the Epistle of James is a relative of Jesus who is usually called “brother of the Lord” (see Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). (It should be noted that the term “brother”, in Hebraic understanding, included not just siblings but cousins and so does not impugn the Church’s teaching that Mary remained a Virgin perpetually.)

The reason for this identification is that he is a) clearly writing to his audience with a recognized authority yet b) he does not identify himself as an apostle but only as “slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). That he is a figure of great importance in the early Christian community is also attested by Jude, who goes out of his way to identify himself as a brother of James (Jude 1).

James was an eyewitness of the Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7) and the leader of the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem whom Paul acknowledged as one of the “pillars” (Galatians 2:9). In Acts he appears as the leader and elder of the Jerusalem community at the Council of Jerusalem and as a peacemaker (along with the apostles and other elders) in the circumcision controversy dealt with by that council (Act 12:17; 15:13-21). His reputation for prayer was such that he was nicknamed “camel-knees”, according to some ancient sources. According to the Jewish historian Josephus (Antiquities 20, 9, 1 201-203), he was stoned to death by the Jews under the high priest Ananus II in A.D. 62.

Date and Place of Composition

The letter was likely composed in Jerusalem. Scholars debate the date of its composition. A few have argued that it was composed in the 40s, but the majority place it toward the end of James’ life since James is apparently aware of caricatures of Paul’s teaching concerning faith and works (2:14-26) and is careful to refute such falsehoods and set the record straight. Probably a date in the late 50s or early 60s is most accurate.

Audience

The letter is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the dispersion.” Since in Christian thought the church is the new Israel, some scholars think this designates the Jewish Christian churches located in Palestine, Syria, and elsewhere. Others think the letter is meant more generally for all Christian communities, and the “dispersion” has the symbolic meaning of exile from our true home, as it has in the address of 1 Peter (1 Peter 1:1). In addition, there is yet another way of reading this address as well.

James, as we just discussed, had a prominent role in the Jerusalem church. As such, it is not unreasonable to think he felt a peculiar responsibility for outreach to Israel. But the question then is: what was on James’ mind when he thought of “Israel.” What we find when we look at the biblical record is surprising, for as modern readers, we fancy that Jews and Israelites are interchangeable terms. In reality, however, every Jew is an Israelite, but not every Israelite a Jew.





Catholic Scripture Study



Introduction (cont.)

The reason for this is that Israel was a united nation for only a very brief period of its history (about 73 years under David and Solomon). After that, the nation was split by civil war into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah and the breach was never healed. “Israel” as a united nation was an ideal, not a reality and, after the northern kingdom (the “ten lost tribes of Israel”) was deported and dispersed among the Gentiles by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., it became an unattainable ideal. Only the kingdom of Judah survived (albeit through the trauma of the Babylonian Exile which happened about a century and half later). Judah (and most specifically, the House of David) was chosen by God as the line through whom Messiah would come. Hence, the term “Jew” comes from “Judah” and has historically been applied to members of the surviving tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi, not to the entirety of Israel, which included both the northern and southern kingdoms.

And yet, through prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah God foretold that, in Jeremiah’s words, “The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”

In short, somehow or other God was going to include the allegedly lost and dispersed tribes of the northern kingdom in his New Covenant. The question of how God would do that occupies several New Testament figures, not least of which is our Lord himself, who began his ministry in Galilee (Matthew 4:12-13), the “land of Zebulun and Naphtali” (two of the lost tribes) and who appoints twelve apostles to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28).

Similarly, when Jesus calls Paul on the road to Damascus in Acts 9, he says that Paul is his chosen instrument to carry his name, not only before Gentiles and kings, but before the “sons of Israel”. And in Acts 26:6-7, Paul explains to Agrippa, “I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain.” And so, Paul shows himself to be preoccupied (as so many first century Jews were) with the question of how in the world God is going to fulfill all the promises that he made through the Old Testament prophets concerning the restoration of “all Israel.”

In Acts 15, therefore, it is not surprising to discover that James’ mind is not focused on just the salvation of the Jews, but on the salvation of all those about whom Amos prophesied in Amos 9:11-12. That prophecy clearly has the northern kingdom in view, and that is not a point that was lost on James’ hearers. James, in citing this prophecy, implies that it is through the New Covenant of Christ the “son of David” that the seemingly impossible ideal of reuniting Israel will be attained under the covering of the “tent of David”. For the distinguishing feature or essential character of the Davidic kingdom is that it did something the Mosaic covenant never did. The Mosaic covenant included the twelve tribes of Israel and no one else. The Davidic covenant, in contrast, unites the twelve tribes with the Gentiles throughout the world and, if it fails to do that, it fails to fulfill the Davidic covenant. So the defining feature of the Davidic covenant is that the son of David comes to establish a spiritual kingdom that somehow, mysteriously, links Israel with the Gentiles under the son of David. That is what Christ is doing in and through the church.

Given all this, James’ address to “the twelve tribes in the dispersion” makes a great deal of sense in light of overall biblical revelation: it appears that James sees his own role: his own unique duty: is to explain this mystery to those who are coming into the New Covenant from the remnant of Israel.





Introduction (cont.)

Form

Unlike most New Testament documents, James concerns itself almost exclusively with exhortation to ethical conduct and little with Christ or with the theological themes concerning his person and work that dominate the thought of, say, Paul or John. It consists of sequences of didactic proverbs discussing responsible Christian behavior.

Curiously, James is a very Jewish work written in very good Greek. Some have argued that this means James could not have written it since, if he was a cousin of Jesus, he most likely was a Galilean peasant and not an educated writer. This objection overlooks the fact that inhabitants of “Galilee of the Gentiles” had many opportunities to learn Greek (and that Jesus himself apparently spoke it since he carried on numerous conversations with Gentiles unlikely to know Aramaic such as the centurion and Pontius Pilate). Further, it overlooks the probability that James wrote using a secretary as Paul frequently did, who rendered James’ dictation in polished Greek.

Parallels Between James and the Sermon on the Mount

James show many parallels with the teaching of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Some of the parallels are:

1. Inheriting the kingdom: James 2:5 / Matt. 5:20
2. Perfect: James 1:4 / Matt. 5:48
3. The crown of life: James 1:12 / Matt. 7:13-14
4. Hearing and doing: James 1:22-26 / Matt. 7:24-27
5. How the Father gives: James 1:5, 17 / Matt. 7:9-11
6. How to pray: James 1:5-8 / Matt. 7:7-11
7. Lusts and pleasures: James 1:13-15; 4:1-5 / Matt. 5:27-32
8. Good gifts through prayer: James 1:17 / Matt. 7:11
9. Anger and wrath: James 1:20 / Matt. 5:22
10. The perfect law of freedom: James 1:25 / Matt. 5:17-19
11. Religious deception: James 1:16, 22, 26-27 / Matt. 7:21-23
12. Purity: James 1:27; 3:17; 4:8 / Matt. 5:8
13. The rich man: James 1:9-11; 5:1-6 / Matt. 6:19-34
14. Being led into temptation: James 1:13 / Matt. 6:13
15. The realm of the poor: James 2:5 / Matt. 5:3
16. Heirs of the kingdom: James 2:5 / Matt. 5:3-10
17. Loving our neighbor: James 2:8 / Matt. 5:43-48
18. The royal law: James 2:8 / Matt. 7:12
19. Keeping the whole law: James 2:10 / Matt. 5:17-19
20. Adultery: James 2:10-11 / Matt. 5:27
21. Being merciful: James 2:13 / Matt. 5:7
22. Reciprocal forgiveness: James 2:13 / Matt. 6:12, 14-15
23. Reciprocal judgment: James 2:13 / Matt. 7:2
24. Merciful: James 2:13; 3:17 / Matt. 5:7
25. Exceeding righteousness: James 2:14-26 / Matt. 5:17-22
26. Good works as a testimony: James 2:18; 3:13 / Matt. 5:14-16
27. Responsibility of teachers: James 3:1 / Matt. 5:19-20





Catholic Scripture Study



Introduction (cont.)

- 28. Speaking negatively: James 3:2-12 / Matt. 5:22
- 29. Knowing things by the fruit: James 3:10-12 / Matt. 7:16-20
- 30. Grapes and figs: James 3:12 / Matt. 7:16
- 31. A kingdom disposition: James 3:13-18 / Matt. 5:3-12
- 32. Meekness: James 3:13 / Matt. 5:5
- 33. Peacemakers: James 3:17-18 / Matt. 5:9
- 34. Asking and receiving: James 4:3 / Matt. 7:8
- 35. Conflict between God and the world: James 4:4 / Matt. 6:24
- 36. Mourning: James 4:9-10 / Matt. 5:4
- 37. Dealing with pride: James 4:6-10 / Matt. 6:1-6
- 38. Taking thought about tomorrow: James 4:13-17 / Matt. 6:25-34
- 39. Judging: James 4:11-12 / Matt. 7:1-2
- 40. Living one day at a time: James 4:13-16 / Matt. 6:25
- 41. The corruption of riches: James 5:2ff / Matt. 6:19
- 42. The Lord's coming to judge: James 5:7-9 / Matt. 7:22ff
- 43. Persecution: James 5:10-11 / Matt. 5:11-12
- 44. Swearing: James 5:12 / Matt. 5:34ff
- 45. Yes! Yes! and No! No!: James 5:12 / Matt. 5:37
- 46. Forgiveness: James 5:15-16 / Matt. 6:12-15
- 47. Restoring a brother: James 5:19-20 / Matt. 5:23-26
- 48. The judgment seat: James 1:12 / Matt. 5:21-22;
- 49. Judgement and mercy: James 2:12-13 / Matt. 5:25-26, 46
- 50. The dangers of public life: James 3:1 / Matt. 6:1, 4

□

A Message from the Authors

Are you enjoying our study? Would you like this important service to continue? If so, please be aware that Catholic Exchange is a non-profit charitable organization totally dependent on your financial support to maintain both our website and our groundbreaking Catholic Scripture Study. So please make an on-line donation with your credit card at www.catholicexchange.com, call 1-888-477-1982, or mail as generous a donation as possible to:

Catholic Exchange
P.O. Box 231820
Encinitas, CA 92023

Thank you for making the Word of God available to anyone who wants it anywhere in the world.
God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

