

General introduction and context of the Epistle of James

The Letter of James is the first of the catholic or general epistles of the New Testament, along with 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John and Jude. These letters are so called because they lack indication of a specific address and they, therefore, are understood to be addressed to the Church generally rather than to a concrete individual or community as it happens with the Pauline letters. This fact makes more difficult the historical reconstruction of the background to which they belong. Yet a careful reading and study of these letters offers us some indications of their circumstances and origin. It should be noted here, not without some regret, that these catholic or general epistles have played a small role in the development of the Church's thought and have been overshadowed, unjustly, by the other longer epistles that are part of the New Testament, notably by the epistles by Paul.

All this is especially true for the Letter of James. This letter has suffered much through misunderstanding, the most notable

example of which was Martin Luther's oft-quoted description of it as an epistle of straw. The course of nineteenth-century criticism [undoubtedly biased by Luther's and other reformers' views] dealt a further blow against the epistle and has left in its wake a general inclination to regard James as a product of an inferior Christian outlook in contrast to the strong Pauline theology. The Epistle of James can be rightly understood only within the context of the whole New Testament Scriptures. Its contribution is very different from that of Paul's letters and yet it was a true instinct that led the church to include it in its canon, for it represents an age of transition, without knowledge of which our appreciation of early Christian history would be the poorer and our grasp of ethical Christianity incomplete.

I. Author

This epistle does not provide us with much information as to who its possible author is, unfortunately, the only thing it expresses about the person who wrote it is his name, James. Because the name James was popular in the days of Jesus, one of the great historical and most discussed questions of this letter has been, which James was the author of this letter?

It is known in the listings of the Twelve Apostles that there were two Apostles of the Lord named James: James the son of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:2-3, Mark 3:17-18, Luke 6:14-15, Acts 1:13). There is James the "brother" of the Lord (Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3, Galatians 1:19), who according to Flavius Josephus was martyred in Jerusalem in 62 AD. Present at the Passion of Our Lord was Mary the mother of James and Joseph (Matthew 27:56. Luke 24:10 mentions Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James at the Empty Tomb. And then there is Jude the brother of James (Jude 1:1). Are these different expressions of the same person or actually different people? We cannot know for sure and different hypotheses have been presented, considering the meaning of the words brother and sister in Hebrew and in Aramaic.

Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-c. 254), who was the first to mention the Epistle of James, identified this James with the apostle, for he implies that this James is the Lord's brother.

St. Jerome, father of biblical exegesis, believed that there were two James: (1) the Apostle James, son of Alphaeus and "brother of the Lord" (Galatians 1:19), author of this Letter; he was also known as James the Lesser, Bishop of Jerusalem, and brother of Judas Thaddeus (Jude 1:1); and (2) James, son of Zebedee and brother of John, who was martyred under Herod Antipas (Acts 12:1-2).

Eusebius of Caesarea [c. 265-340], in his important work Ecclesiastical History, knew that the fatherhood of the Epistle of James was attributed to James the Lord's brother.

In summary, according to the evidence available to us, the candidate most likely to be the author of this epistle among all the James that are mentioned in the New Testament is James the Lord's brother. Donald Guthrie, professor of the New Testament at the London Bible College writes:

*There is now general agreement that the opening greeting is intended to point to James, the Lord's brother, who became leader of the church at Jerusalem. The simplicity of the description is in support of this, for it is evident that a well-known James must have been intended, and as far as the biblical record is concerned, the Lord's brother is the only James who appears to have played a sufficiently prominent part in early Christian history. (GUTHRIE, **New Testament Introduction**, p. 740).*

And in the conclusion to his analysis of the authorship of the letter he writes:

It would seem preferable to incline to the traditional view on the principle that the tradition has a right to stand until proved wrong. Although some of the arguments for alternative views are strong, yet none of these views has any better claim to credibility than the tradition. In these circumstances the authorship of James, the Lord's brother, must still be considered more probable than any rival.

II. Recipients

Just as the authorship of this epistle seems to demand an author with a Jewish background because of the ideas and themes it deals with and the arguments used, the epistle also seems to demand in the same way an audience with the same Jewish background. Although on this point we must exercise extreme caution since there is no unanimity among scholars. For some it would be addressed to Christians generally (Gentiles and of Jewish origin), others argue that the recipients are Christians with a Jewish background, and finally for others it would be addressed to non-Christian Jews. As you can see, there are views to suit all tastes.

In this matter, and for reasons of comfort and convenience, I will follow the most widespread and traditional opinion. I will consider the letter to be addressed "*to the twelve tribes in the dispersion*". This is a most obvious and simple choice since the terms "twelve tribes" and "dispersion" had a technical use in Judaism. In Old Testament terminology the term "twelve tribes" designates the people of Israel; the "dispersion"

or “diaspora” refers to the Jews who had settled throughout the Greco-Roman world and who, therefore, lived outside Israel (see Jn 7:35). In Christian thought the church is the new Israel, so, it is only logical that the expression “to the twelve tribes in the dispersion” should refer to the Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Empire, in Palestine, Syria, and elsewhere. This interpretation would, of course, fit in well with authorship by James of Jerusalem, and is, as stated above, the traditional interpretation. Thus, it seems better to regard the letter as being addressed to Jewish Christians, but the alternative view that it may refer to Christians generally should not be totally disregarded.

III. Date

When it comes to dating the letter, the key is who we consider to be the author of the letter. For obvious reasons, if we accept the authorship of James, the Lord's brother, the letter must have as its *terminus post quem* the year 62, in which James suffered martyrdom in Jerusalem. Among the scholars who defend the traditional authorship there are two positions regarding the date of writing of this letter. One group thinks of an early composition around or before the year 50, while the other defends a later date closer to the date of his martyrdom. Nothing will be said here about the dates offered by those who do not accept traditional authorship. This data, as well as the discussions and evidence supporting each position, can be found in any study of the epistle. Suffice to say that some specialists delay their composition until the year 125.

All in all, and without going into further consideration, it can be said that the evidence points to an early rather than a late drafting date. Those who see no reason to reject James' authorship may pick a date for the letter between AD 50 and AD 62. With the earliest date being preferable.

IV. Purpose of the letter

The epistle of Santiago is, above all, a writing of eminently practical character, in the line of the traditional Jewish Wisdom literature, especially because of its demand to live according to a certain ethic marked by obedience and submission to God and his word. The apostle seems to be trying to correct certain tendencies that were not acceptable in the behavior of the believers and that apparently were not rare in the church. The apostle deals with issues such as attitude towards wealth and the wealthy, control of the tongue, oaths, Christian prayer and other practical matters. It stresses again and again the importance of faith being a lived faith and emphasizes the idea that works, and faith must always go hand in hand since without works there can be no authentic faith. Only the faith that is manifested in the daily life of the believer is genuine. Probably the topics dealt with in the letter arise from the author's own pastoral experience.

V. Literary Form and Structure

From the point of view of its literary form, if we only regard as letters those documents that faithfully follow the rules of classical epistolography, this document can hardly be considered as such. However, parallels can be found in the ancient world, suggesting

that despite not faithfully following the patterns that rhetoric set for letters, this document can be regarded as a letter from start to finish.

In any case, the Letter of James certainly falls within the scope of the genre of parenesis or exhortation and is concerned almost exclusively with ethical conduct. It therefore falls within the tradition of Jewish wisdom literature, such as can be found in the Old Testament (Proverbs, Sirach) and in the extracanonical Jewish literature (Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Books of Enoch, the Manual of Discipline found at Qumran).

And it is not that there is no ethical teaching in the rest of the New Testament writings. What marks James off from the rest is that its ethical teaching occupies the whole epistle and is not, as in other cases, linked with doctrinal passages. It may well be that some of the types of ethical material which formed an important aspect of catechesis have been more fully preserved. In other words, James is writing as he was in the habit of teaching. James represents a type of early Christianity that emphasized sound teaching and responsible moral behavior. Ethical norms are derived not primarily from Christology, as in Paul, but from a concept of salvation that involves conversion, baptism, forgiveness of sin, and expectation of judgment (Jas 1:17; 4:12).

It is interesting to notice that the Greek in this letter is excellent. This brings us to the question of whether this letter was originally written in Greek or in Aramaic or Hebrew. Here too there are different opinions. Some scholars are of the opinion that due to the quality of the Greek in the letter it must have been written in Greek by a writer who had an excellent command of this language. On the other hand, there are those who argue that the letter was originally written in Aramaic and then translated into Greek. The reality is that there are elements to support both theories. However, it seems possible to think that the letter was written by a secretary, as was usual at the time, and that it was dictated in Aramaic. Because, despite the opinion of some scholars, this letter has enough remains of Hebrew and Aramaic expressions to think of a writer whose primary origin was Aramaic or Hebrew.

As an example of that Guthrie [op. cit. p. 543] points out that it is worth observing the poetic element in this epistle, as this may provide a counterbalance to the theory of excessive Greek influence. Certain typical features of the Hebrew poetic style (such as parallelism) are found in the epistle, and it can be assumed that such poetic forms had made a deep impression on the author long before he wrote his epistle. It is significant that this same feature is evident in the teaching of our Lord, and it is an interesting conjecture that a love for Hebrew poetic forms may have been particularly fostered in that household in Nazareth.

The principal divisions of the Letter of James are the following:

- Address (1:1)
- The Value of Trials and Temptation (1:2–18)
- Exhortations and Warnings (1:19–5:12)
- The Power of Prayer (5:13–20)

Certainly, those four big sections can be divided into smaller sections.

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In the following, I'm drawing on Guthrie's analysis [op. cit., chapter 20]. The following scheme merely describes the sections in the order in which they occur.

a. Greeting (1:1)

James introduces himself and very generally defines his readers.

b. Trials and how to meet them (1:2–4)

Trials are to be faced joyfully, for they will then have a stabilizing effect on character.

c. Wisdom and how to obtain it (1:5–8)

James assumes that all true wisdom comes from God and can be received in response to faith. Doubt can lead only to instability.

d. Wealth and how to regard it (1:9–11)

Its transitory character is insisted upon and therefore it becomes irrelevant for the Christian. Rich and poor arrive at a common level.

e. Temptation and trial distinguished (1:12–15)

Trials are used of God to develop endurance and lead to reward. But temptation springs not from God but from a man's own evil desires.

f. Good gifts (1:16–18)

Not only does God send trials, but all perfect gifts. The basic gift of life is provided by his unchangeable will.

g. Hearing and doing (1:19–27)

When the word is heard and received all that is opposed to God's righteousness must be put away. Hearers of the word are warned of the dangers of not doing and a special explanation is given of the difference between vain and pure religion.

h. Against partiality (2:1–13)

The theme of rich and poor recurs, although now it is the Christian attitude towards them that is emphasized. God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith, whereas so often it is the rich who are the oppressors. The royal law of love is in any case opposed to partiality, and those who do not fulfil this law fail in respect of the whole law.

i. Against a barren faith (2:14–26)

In this well-known passage James exposes the fallacy of an inoperative orthodoxy. He illustrates from both Abraham and Rahab that the faith which is commended is that which is linked with works. On the other hand, James is not decrying the need for faith, for he assumes this as a basis. He will show his faith in fact by his works.

j. Qualities required in teachers (3:1–18)

(i) Control of speech (3:1–12). A teacher has a great responsibility and should not rush into the task without contemplating the dangers of uncontrolled speech. The tongue is

liable to become the most undisciplined member of the body, with the result that the whole is affected.

By means of various illustrations James shows the deadly danger of untamed speech and the extraordinary inconsistency with which the same lips can utter blessings and cursings.

(ii) True wisdom (3:13–18). There is a distinct contrast between a wisdom which results in jealousy and bitterness and that which produces good fruits and which is from above. Those who have the latter are truly the wise and understanding.

k. Dangers (4:1–17)

(i) Human passions (4:1–10). One of the worst manifestations of false wisdom is the unloosing of passion, seen in the outbreak of strife and the tendency to compromise with the world. The antidote is humiliation and submission to God who will exalt those who are truly repentant.

(ii) Evil speaking (4:11–12). James attacks the general human failing of being critical of others and points out that those who do this are being critical of the law.

(iii) Rash confidence (4:13–17). The folly of planning apart from the will of God is vividly described and its tendency to arrogance noted.

l. Warnings to wealthy oppressors (5:1–6)

James thinks next of those who put all their confidence in riches and who use their wealth as an opportunity to oppress those less fortunate. Such men are denounced in language which recalls the Old Testament prophets.

m. Encouragements to the oppressed (5:7–11)

The quality most needed is patience, and this is enjoined by reference to the Lord's coming. The farmer awaiting the harvest illustrates the quality, while the prophets and the patriarch Job show how to be patient in the midst of suffering. But its real basis is the compassion of the Lord.

n. Against oaths (5:12)

The Christian's word should be so unequivocal that oaths become redundant.

o. The power of prayer (5:13–18)

If a Christian is sick, prayer is enjoined upon the elders of the church, and the power of such a method is illustrated by appeal to the fervent prayer of Elijah when he prayed for rain.

p. Help for the backslider (5:19–20)

A special commendation and reward is promised to those who help others to turn back from the errors of their ways.