

INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

I. Canonicity of James.

A. James was slow to be accepted into the canon of Scripture since:

1. It was unknown to good many churches for some time (especially in the West).
2. There was a question as to the identity and authority of its author (doubts lingered longest in the Western or Roman Church, which placed much emphasis upon whether the writer was an apostle or not).

B. By the 4th century, doubts about its canonicity subsided and it was universally recognized following the Council of Carthage in 397AD.

C. The external evidence for its canonicity.

1. Origen was the first writer to quote the epistle as Scripture (185-253AD).
2. In the East, it was contained in the Old Syrian Version (circa 200AD).

D. The internal evidence for its canonicity.

1. The superiority of its contents to that of the sub-apostolic writings supports its authenticity (cp. epistles of Clement, Barnabas, or Ignatius),
2. The character of the epistle itself harmonizes with all that we know about the James to whom it is traditionally ascribed.
3. Martin Luther's criticism of the epistle was based on a supposed conflict between James and Paul (the Lutheran Church has not followed his evaluation of it when he described it as "a right strawy epistle").

E. Conclusion.

1. The external evidence for James is weak.

- a. It is chiefly Eastern.
- b. The decisive factor is the fact it was included in the Old Syrian Version (200AD).
- c. This is important, since the Syrian church was so near to the place of origin of the epistle.
- d. The fact it was addressed to Jewish Christians in Palestine may account for the fact it was so little known among the gentile churches.

2. The internal evidence is thoroughly consistent with the traditional view of the authorship of the epistle.

- a. Its strong Jewish cast, as well as its unmistakable reflections of the teachings of Jesus, confirm this view.
- b. If the epistle was a forgery in the name of James the Just, there is not adequate explanation for the lack of any emphasis on the writer's biography.
- c. The view that it was an anti-Pauline tract rests upon the mistaken assumption of a conflict between the epistle and Paul's epistles.
- d. Then there is the view that it was a purely Jewish document by origin and a Christian interpolator altered it. (God would not have allowed a spurious writing to be associated with canonical books.)

3. The fact there was serious questions in the early centuries concerning the canonicity of the epistle does not deter our view as to its integrity.

- a. Uncertainty arose out of uncertainty regarding its author.
- b. We hold that the Church was proper in its decision to accept it into the canon.

4. The canonicity of James proves God preserves His Word.

II. Authorship of James.

A. Internal evidence.

1. His name is given as simply James, or as the Greek has it, Jacob, Ἰάκωβος.
2. He further describes himself as "a servant of God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (which only indicates his spiritual understanding).

3. Unlike Jude, who identifies himself as the brother of James, our author did not feel compelled to mention any human relationships.
4. He was so well known to his audience that he needed no further identification.
5. The epistle marks him as an intense individual of Jewish extraction.

B. Identity.

1. The view that we cannot know who he was (since James was a very common name) does not account for the authoritative tone and encyclic (circular) nature of the epistle (no one would listen to someone they did not recognize).
2. The view that it was James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John, one of the twelve, is rejected due to his early death in 44AD, Act.12:2; it is highly improbable that an apostle could have written an encyclic epistle at such an early date (this view has very few advocates).
3. The view that he is James, the son of Alphaeus, one of the twelve (Mt.10:3; Mk.3:18; Lk.6:15; Act.1:13) and is the same individual as James the Lord's brother is beset with serious difficulties as:
 - a. It assumes Clopas in Jn.19:25 is the same as Alphaeus, the father of James, Mt.10:3; Mk.3:18 et al.
 - b. It makes Jn.19:25 refer to only three women rather than four (it is unlikely Jesus' mother had a sister also named Mary. When we compare Mt.27:56 and Mk.15:40 it makes it more probable that John refers to four women, naming them in pairs, and that the sister of Mary is really Salome, the mother of the sons of Zebedee).
 - c. it makes James both Jesus' brother and one of the twelve, which is problematic since his brothers are always represented as a different set of men than the twelve, Jn.2:12; Mt.12:46; Mk.3:21; Lk. 8:19; Jn.7:3; Act.1:14; cp. Mt.13:55; Mk.6:3. Also, some six months before the crucifixion, they were not even believers, Jn.7:5. How can this statement be harmonized with the view that the author James was one of the twelve?
4. The reference in Gal.1:19 that speaks of James the Lord's brother as an apostle does not establish the above view that he was James the son of Alphaeus, since Paul was using the term in a wider sense to include other men of prominence in the church (we know the term was applied to Barnabas who was not one of the twelve, Act.14:4,14).
5. Three considerations have been advanced in confirmation of the position that James is the Lord's natural brother.
 - a. There are remarkable coincidences of language between the epistle and the speech of James at the Jerusalem Conference (49AD), as well as the letter drawn up by James (the form of the greeting in the epistle and the conference letter is unusual, Act.15:25). The expression "*your souls*" in the conference letter as well as in Jam.1:21 is a Hebrew expression; the peculiar use of the word "visit" found both in the speech and the epistle; these and other similarities point to the same person.
 - b. There are sayings and phrases that recall the words of Jesus (this epistle contains more verbal reminiscences of Jesus' teachings than all other apostolic writings taken together). But James does not consciously and deliberately quote Jesus).
 - c. The epistle reflects the kind of personality we know of James from the New Testament and Christian tradition.
6. Objections of the traditional view.
 - a. That it contains references to other N.T. books (especially 1Pet.) indicates it is too late in origin. (This is inconclusive since Peter could have borrowed from James.)
 - b. James, a Galilean peasant, could not have written such good Greek as we find in the epistle. This reflects a preconception of the schooling available to James (remember, Galilee was a bilingual area).

III. History of James.

- A. Apparently James was the oldest of the brothers of Jesus, as his name is always mentioned first, Mt.13:55.
- B. Following His resurrection, Jesus appeared to him, 1Cor.15:7.
- C. He was with the assembly in the upper room after Jesus' ascension, Act.1:14.
- D. When Paul returned to Jerusalem three years after his conversion, he saw Peter and James, Gal.1:18,19.
- E. Following Peter's deliverance from prison, Peter directed that the news be given to James, who was a leader in the Jerusalem church, Act.12:17.
- F. James was recognized at the time of the Jerusalem Conference as one of the prominent leaders in the church, Gal.2:9, and he took a leading part in the Conference.
- G. Paul delivered the Jerusalem offering to James at the end of Paul's third missionary journey, Act.21:18-25.
- H. James' relationship to Jesus.
 1. The Biblical view (called Helvidian view after a writer from the 4th century) holds that the brothers of Jesus were sons of Joseph and Mary.
 - a. A natural reading of the NT references, unprejudiced by dogmatic considerations, naturally leads to this conclusion.
 - b. Jesus is referred to as Mary's firstborn but never as her "only" child (μονογενής, monogenes).
 - c. After Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary lived together as husband and wife, Mt.1:25.
 - d. Tertullian (150-222AD) is the first known writer to expressly assert that the "brethren" were the physical brothers of Jesus. (There is no trace of a contrary tradition in his written comments.)
 - e. The majority of Christians in the second century held to this view, but "some" held the opposite view.
 2. The unscriptural view (that these were not Mary's sons) promoted by the ascetic desire to preserve the virginity of Mary cannot be defended by Biblical exegesis.
 - a. Those who advocate the perpetual virginity of Mary do so because they place a higher sanctity upon celibacy than marriage.
 - b. They could not accept the fact that the womb of Mary could also bear other children.
 - c. The reason Jesus committed his mother's care to John and not to one of his brothers is because there was a closer affinity between Mary and John (Jesus' cousin) than to her own sons due to the common spiritual interests (proponents of the false view try to use this as an argument against the true view).
 3. The false view has two theories.
 - a. The Epiphonian theory (taken from its most ardent supporter in the 4th century) holds that these brothers were Joseph's from a previous marriage (Eusebius, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa all supported it).
 1. This view had its origin in the 2nd century.
 2. It finds its earliest expression in apocryphal gospels.
 3. It does not do full justice to the statement that Jesus was the "firstborn son".
 4. If the brothers were older than Jesus, how can we explain their continued presence at home? (They would have established homes of their own.)
 - b. The Heironymian theory originated by Jerome (to refute Helvidius) holds that they were actually cousins which:
 1. Equates Alphaeus and Clopas as the same man, the husband of Mary's so called sister Mary.
 2. If they were cousins, why are they always associated with Jesus' mother and why not use the Greek word ἀνέψιος, anepsios (cousin) to express the relationship?

IV. The readers of James.

- A. James declares the circle of his readers to be "*the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad*", Jam.1:1.
 - 1. The traditional and correct view is that it was addressed to Jewish believers outside Palestine, cp. Hebrews.
 - 2. That they were Christian is evident from Jam.1:19.
 - 3. The fact they met in the synagogue (as well as the Jewish features of the epistle) demonstrates that they were Jewish, Jam.2:2.
- B. From Act.11:19, 9:2, and 13:1 it is clear that Christianity spread beyond Palestine into Greek speaking areas at a very early date.
- C. As Jews who had been scattered due to the Jewish persecutions of the early Church, they naturally looked to Jerusalem for spiritual leadership (James was the recognized leader of the Jewish Christian community at Jerusalem).

V. The occasion and date of James.

- A. It was his discovery of the unacceptable conditions among them that prompted him to write (failure to apply, old sin nature activity, etc.).
- B. Since Jerusalem was the place of James' residence, we conclude it was written from there.
- C. The evidence points to a date between 45 and 49AD, making James the earliest book of the New Testament.
 - 1. It was written before the Jerusalem Conference, since there is no mention in the epistle of the issues of the Conference (total absence of any reference to gentiles or their relationship to Christianity suggests an early date).
 - 2. The church organization reflected in the epistle is most elementary (no mention of "bishops" or "deacons", only "elders", which indicates a synagogue pattern of leadership).

VI. The purpose of James.

- A. It was not theological (like Romans).
- B. It is intended to induce believers to apply doctrine, as Jam.1:21, 22 suggests.
- C. Therefore, it places a great emphasis on works (divine good production).
- D. One of the dominant if not central themes of the epistle is the blessings associated with passing various tests, Jam.1:12.
- E. He stresses the sins, which dominated Jewish life (arrogance, sins of the tongue, materialism, and favoritism).

VII. The style of James.

- A. His language is clear, uninvolved and straight to the point.
- B. His sentences are brief and free from long, involved grammatical constructions.
- C. He is one who is sure of himself and exercises his authority.
- D. In the 108 verses of James, there are 54 imperatives.
- E. He repeats a leading word or cognate as seen in Jam.1:26.
- F. He uses an abundance of illustrations, especially from nature, Jam.1:6,10,11; 4:14.
- G. He refers to various Old Testament personalities to make his point (Abraham, Job, Rahab, and Elijah).
- H. He alone, among the New Testament writers, refers to God as the "Lord of Hosts", Jam.5:4.
 - I. The similarities between James and the Sermon on the Mount are striking.

James cp. to Matthew James cp. to Matthew

1:2 5:10-12 3:17,18 5:9

1:4 5:48 4:4 6:24

1:5; 5:15 7:7,12 4:10 5:3,4

1:9 5:3 4:11 7:1,2

1:20 5:22 5:2 6:19

2:13 5:7; 6:14,15 5:10 5:12

2:14-16 7:21-23 5:12 5:33-37

J. Omissions.

1. Although Christ is mentioned as the object of faith, no further development of His person and work is found.
2. There is no mention of Jewish ritual.
3. There is no benediction.

VIII. James offers a glimpse of the Christian faith as held by Jewish believers during the early chapters of Acts. It presents a picture of Judaic Christianity before Act.13.

IX. While addressed to Jewish Christians, who did not have the doctrine of the Pauline epistles, there is an indispensable message to the whole body of Christ. His stern insistence upon faith plus application is always needed. It is easy to slip into a condition of being a hearer of Bible Doctrine only.