

Introduction

The Epistle of James is the first of the “general Epistles,”¹ so called because these epistles lack a specific address to a community within a given location. Since the “general Epistles” are not identified as being sent to a specific region or community of believers, it is more difficult to reconstruct the historical background and/or situations to which these epistles belong. Yet, when studied carefully, they bear the stamp of authenticity and of being the work of divine inspiration.

That the general Epistles do not contain information as to their specific recipients, this gave rise to speculation of some of the early church fathers as to whether they should be received as Scripture or not. This was true of the Epistle of James, for besides having no designated destination to which the epistle was sent, there were questions about who the author actually was.

Though Origen (184–253 CE) is sometimes interpreted as having some doubt about the canonicity of James because of a comment he made in his Commentary on John,² such doubt seems ill-founded since on numerous occasions he cites the Epistle of James as Scripture and does so without hesitation.³ The fact that James is not listed in the Muratorian Canon should not be given too much weight, for neither are Hebrews or the Petrine Epistles, but this may well be simply because the text of the Muratorian Canon, as we now have it, is in a corrupt state itself.⁴

Eusebius (263–339 CE) does class James among the *Antilegomena* (“spoken against”), those writings which were considered by some as “disputed books,” but he also cites it as though it is genuine Scripture.⁵ Moreover, even though there were strong debates about the canonicity

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- 1 The “general Epistles” are also referred to as the “Catholic Epistles,” but this is not to be confused with the “Roman Catholic Church” but rather utilizing the word “catholic” in its primary sense, that is, “universal.” The General Epistles include: James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1 John, and Jude. (Some would also include 2 & 3 John.)
 - 2 *ως εν τη φερομενη Ιακωβου επιστολη ενεγνωμεν* “...as in the supposed epistle of James we inquire...” (Commentary on John 19:6)
 - 3 Cf. *Ad Rom.* 4.1 and *Hom. in Lev.* 2.4. See also *Hom. in Josh.* 7.1. (Taken from Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (IVP, 1970), p. 737, n. 2.)
 - 4 *Ibid.*
 - 5 *Ibid.*, note 3.

of some of the general epistles, including James, the reality is that those epistles which unmistakably bore the essence of inspiration were, by God's sovereign providence, widely accepted by the believing community as having the true marks of the inspired word of God. We most certainly must hold the Epistle of James as being divinely inspired scripture.

Authorship

One of the issues that caused the Epistle of James to be questioned was the sure identity of the author, for James (Ἰάκωβον, *iakōbon*) was a common name among the Jewish people of the 1st century. Most scholars take the author of our epistle to be "James the brother of Yeshua," on the basis of Paul's words in Galatians 1:18–19.

Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Gal 1:18–19)

One might wonder why he did not see the rest of the Twelve. The answer may be either that they were not in Jerusalem at the time, or that they avoided him, still fearing that he was intent upon persecuting The Way (cf. Acts 9:26). On the other hand, Paul may have been "sheepish" about meeting the rest, for his former actions against them were still too current in the memory of the sect, and he may have purposefully avoided them.

That James is referred to as "the Lord's brother" is a clear indication that this had become a well used adjective describing James. A recent ossuary was discovered on which is inscribed "Ya'acov, son of Yosef, brother of Yeshua" and may therefore offer additional credibility that "James the brother of Yeshua" had become a common way of identifying the author of our epistle.¹ When Paul identifies James as "the Lord's brother," he uses the word "Lord," (κύριος, *kurios*) as a well-known title referring specifically to Yeshua.

Further, in Mark 6:3, when referring to the brothers of Yeshua, James

1 See *Biblical Archaeological Review*, Nov/Dec 2002. Subsequent debate over the authenticity of this find has, for some, drawn a shadow over its usefulness. However, some scholars still maintain its authenticity, and have good reason to do so. See Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries* (Baylor Press, 2003), pp. 112–22.

is mentioned first in the list which might indicate that he was the next born after Yeshua. While some (particularly Roman Catholic scholars) would teach that James and the others mentioned were sons of Joseph from a previous marriage, there is no hint anywhere in the Apostolic Writings that James and the others in Mark 6:3 were anything other than legally full brothers of Yeshua, being the children of Joseph and Mary.

James apparently was unsympathetic to his brother's messianic claims in the years previous to Yeshua's crucifixion (Mark 3:21, 31-5; John 7:5), but the fact that he was among the first witnesses of the resurrection (1Cor 15:7) and named among the disciples following the resurrection (Acts 1:13) indicates that James had come to believe that Yeshua was, indeed, the Messiah promised by Israel's prophets. And by the time of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), James occupied the office of one of the primary leaders in the Jerusalem community of The Way.

Even though the identity of the author of our epistle has been hotly debated down through the centuries and even continues to be debated by some, the majority of evangelical scholars agree that the author of our Epistle is James the brother of Yeshua. After exploring the issue in depth (nearly 20 pages), Guthrie gives this conclusion:

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.¹

And Tasker agrees:

The tradition that became established in the Church that the Epistle was not only apostolic but should be attributed to James, the head of the Early Church at Jerusalem, ought undoubtedly to be accepted as true. Not only is it incapable of being scientifically disproved, but it has much intrinsic probability.²

1 Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 758.

2 R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James in Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 21.

The English name “James” is not a direct transliteration of the Greek, *Ἰάκωβ*, *Iakōb*, which is itself a transliteration of Hebrew *יַעֲקֹב*, *ya'aqob*, “Jacob.” How, then, did the author of our Epistle come to be called “James” rather than “Jacob.” While there are many answers one can find to this question, the answer almost certainly lies in the various ways the Hebrew “Jacob” was vocalized by early languages which are the ancestry languages of English. These languages, overlaid upon Latin as well as other base languages, vocalized the Hebrew name Ya'acov in various ways. According to some, “Jacob” and “James” come out of the matrix of these earlier languages, with “Jacob” following the French/Norman tradition (e.g., Jacobin) and “James” following the Anglo-Saxon tradition. So when the KJV translators did their work, it may well have been that “James” was already embedded as a traditional way to pronounce the name “Jacob.” The story that is often heard, that “James” was chosen to honor “King James,” is devoid of historical evidence.

The important thing to note is that our author's name is originally derived from the Hebrew name Ya'akov, the name which became “Israel” and thus the “father” of the twelve tribes to which this epistle is addressed.

Outline of the Epistle

- I. **Salutation** (1:1)
- II. **The Character of Saving Faith** (1:2–11)
 - A. In testing; in training; in the fruit of perseverance (1:2–4)
 - B. In a life of prayer for wisdom and guidance (1:5–8)
 - C. In living out the unity within the body of Yeshua (1:9–11)
- III. **The Promise of God in the Gospel** (1:12–17)
 - A. For faithful enduring against temptations (1:12–21)
 - B. For Living out the truth of the Gospel (1:22–27)
 1. Living as who we are in Yeshua, i.e., as true believers, not just hearers of the truth but doers of the truth.
 2. As seen by our conversations, the control of the tongue.
- IV. **The Believer's Life** (2:1–26)
 - A. Showing true compassion to all, based upon the truth, not upon cultural norms. (2:1–13)
 - B. True faith is expressed in actions that please God (2:14–26)
- V. **Serving Each Other in the Believing Community** (3:1–18)
 - A. Teachers must be proven before teaching (3:1)
 - B. The power of the tongue for good or evil (3:2–12)
 - C. A believer is known by the fruitful peace of true wisdom, not by self-centered ambitions causing strife and division. (3:13–18)
- VI. **Love of the World and Love of God Contrasted** (4:1–10)
 - A. Love of the world is to be at enmity with God (4:1–5)
 - B. The believer shows his or her love for God by submitting to Him and seeking to love Him in word and deed (4:6–10)
- VII. **Warnings to be Heeded** (4:11–17)
 - A. Against engaging in *lashon hara*, gossip or slander (4:11–12)
 - B. Against living as though we control the future (4:13–17)
- VIII. **Final Exhortations** (5:1–20)
 - A. Judgment of the faithless rich (5:1–6)
 - B. Persevering patience: Yeshua may soon return (5:7–11)
 - C. Do not take false oaths: do that which you promise (5:12)
 - D. Community service: serving each other in truth (5:13–18)
 - E. Guarding each other in order to strengthen each one's faith in Yeshua (5:19–20)

Chapter One

commentary

1 – James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Yeshua Messiah, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.

As noted in the Introduction, the name “James” most likely came into the English language as a blending of pronunciations for the Hebrew name Ya’akov (Jacob). The Greek *Ἰάκωβ*, *Iakōb* in our text clearly links to the patriarch whose name became synonymous with “Israel,” for that was the name given to Jacob by God Himself (Gen 32:28).

That the epistle is addressed to the “twelve tribes” is therefore perfectly fitting for an author whose name was *Iakōb*. But as we read the inspired words of this epistle, we recognize that when James addresses himself to the “twelve tribes,” he is not limiting his words specifically to only a Jewish audience. For by the time of the Apostles, it was already known that the Abrahamic covenant promised God’s blessing upon “all nations,” not just the chosen nation of Israel. It seems highly likely, then, that in this opening verse James is emphasizing God’s plan to graft into the believing remnant of Israel the elect from the nations whom God has chosen to save, just as Paul teaches in his epistle to the Romans (11:17–24). Here, once again, we see the plan of God, revealed at the very beginning of the Scriptures, is at the heart of the Apostolic Scriptures. For the faithfulness of God to His promise is shown when both Jew and Gentile are gathered together into one body, being blessed as equal participants in the eternal salvation secured for them by the saving work of Yeshua Himself.

The word order of the Greek in the first phrase of this opening verse is interesting because it is not what one might expect. It is *Ἰάκωβος θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δούλος*, which literally would be: “James, of God and the Lord Yeshua Messiah, a slave.” What this word order emphasizes is the One to whom James was a slave, i.e., that he was fully given to serve the Almighty. The point is this: while he clearly identifies himself as a slave, the primary emphasis is on the One he serves, not on himself. For he puts “slave” as last in the clause giving the first place to “God and the Lord Yeshua Messiah.” Thus, from the very beginning of the epistle, even in this nuanced method, James intends to show that if we are all to be servants of the Most High, He must receive first place in all aspects of our life. As Paul writes:

He [Yeshua] is also head of the body, the *ekklesia*; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. (Col 1:18)

But we must also emphasize that from the very beginning, James is identifying himself as a “bond servant of God and of the Lord Yeshua Messiah.” If, as we have suggested in the Introduction, this James is, in fact, the brother of Yeshua, we hear a remarkable confession from him. For according to John’s Gospel, early on Yeshua’s brothers were not convinced that He was, in fact, the promised Messiah.

After these things Yeshua was walking in Galilee, for He was unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him. Now the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, was near. Therefore His brothers said to Him, “Leave here and go into Judea, so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. for no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world.” For not even His brothers were believing in Him. (John 7:1–5)

What was it, then, that convinced James that Yeshua was, in fact, the promised Messiah? Surely it was the work of the Ruach opening His eyes and heart to the truth, but it seems very likely that the primary event that brought James to be a “bond-servant of the Lord Yeshua” was our Lord’s resurrection from the dead. For Paul gives us this historical record in 1Corinthians.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; (1Cor 15:3–7)

Though the wonder of Yeshua’s incarnation remained to one extent a mystery to all who lived at that time, the truth of His resurrection on the third day could not be dismissed. Did James, the brother of Yeshua, believe in the coming Messiah? It would seem that he did. But did he identify the promised Messiah as his brother, Yeshua? It seems very

likely that this occurred at the time of Yeshua's crucifixion and His triumphant resurrection. And so it is with all who believe. The resurrection of Yeshua forever seals the reality that He is the promised One, that He is the Son of God, and that He alone is the Savior of sinners.¹

Thus James, who being carried along by the Ruach HaKodesh (2Pet 1:21) wrote this epistle, identifies himself as one together with every true believer, for all who are truly in Yeshua have an ongoing commitment to serve the Lord Yeshua Messiah with all of one's life. As we study this epistle, then, we will see how strongly James calls each one of us to be a bond servant of Yeshua, and in doing so, he identifies with us as one who practices what he preaches.

...to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings – While there ultimately were 13 tribes when the tribe of Joseph was divided into Ephraim and Menasseh, the common usage of “twelve tribes” traditionally designated the fullness of the Israelite people descended from “Jacob and the twelve patriarchs.”² Here James uses this same broad label to identify the believing remnant of Israel that has been enlarged by the ingathering of believers in Yeshua from the nations. We also see that the remnant of Israel, i.e., the true believers from the twelve tribes, have not lost their identity as Israel, nor are their tribal identities lost. Moreover, the very fact that Yeshua chose twelve Apostles shows that His mission was to bring to Himself the believing remnant of the twelve tribes enlarged by those grafted in from the nations. Israel is never forgotten in God's saving work.

And Yeshua said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matt 19:28)

1 Cf. Acts 13:32-33; Rom 1:1-4; Phil 3:10;

2 Cf. Acts 7:8; compare Ex 24:4; 28:21; 36:21; Josh 4:5; Ezek 47:13.