

NAME

The title of the epistle: "Iakobou" (Ἰακωβου), is taken from the name of the author, Iakobos (James, the Hellenized form of Jacob) as indicated in 1:1.

AUTHOR

There are four men in the New Testament who bear the name of James: 1) James the son of Zebedee (Matthew 4; Acts 12); 2) James the son of Alpheus (Matthew 10:3); James the brother of Judas - not Iscariot (Luke 3); and 4) James the half brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3; Galatians 1:19). James the son of Zebedee suffered martyrdom in 44 A.D. (Acts 12:2). This probably was too early for him to have written this letter (see date above). The tone of authority in this epistle fairly well rules out the lesser known individuals known by the name of James. This leaves James the half brother of Jesus as the most likely candidate.

Briefly (more follows below), James was among those in the upper room (Acts 1:14). Paul visited him in Jerusalem about 35 A.D. (Galatians 1:18, 19). By 44 A.D. James was a leader in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17). He evidently was Chairman of the first church council (Acts 15:13, 19). According to Josephus and Eusebius, James was martyred at Jerusalem in 62-63 A.D. He was a very pious man who bore the nickname, "righteous one" and "camel knees." The latter designation was due to his lengthy prayer sessions on his knees. Eusebius and many others after him identify the author as the half-brother of Jesus. If this James was indeed the author, he evidently practiced what he proclaimed in this letter.

Laney:

Accepting the traditional view that the epistle was authored by the half-brother of Jesus, one is able to determine certain facts about his life. He grew up in Nazareth as the son of a carpenter and a devout Jewish mother. James and his brothers remained unbelievers during the time of Christ's ministry on earth (John 7:5), but James had a significant role in the leadership of the Jerusalem church after Pentecost (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:8; Galatians 1:19; 2:9). Paul records that the risen Lord appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7) and shortly after that he appeared on the scene of the early church as a converted believer (cf. Acts 1:14).

In the summer of 37 A.D. James met with Paul in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18-20), just two years after Paul's conversion. By 44 A.D. James had become a leader in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17). He functioned as chairman at the Jerusalem Council in the autumn of 49 A.D. (Acts 15:13-21). James met again with Paul in the spring of 57 A.D. following the apostle's return from his third missionary journey (Acts 21:17-23).

Eusebius cites the testimony of Hegesippus, a second-century church historian, that James lived a life of a perpetual Nazarite, and spent so much time in prayer that his knees became as hard as a camel's. The Scribes and Pharisees of Jerusalem tried to persuade James to restrain the people who were following Jesus. He was placed on the wing of the Temple to speak and turn men from Christ, but instead he took the opportunity to give testimony to Jesus. The enraged priests and Pharisees had James thrown from the wing of the Temple so that others would fear to believe Jesus. As the fall did not kill him, James was then stoned to death. He lived long enough to pray Christ's prayer for his murderers, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" (Historia Ecclesiastica 2:23).

DATE

The definite date of this letter cannot be known with certainty. Most conservative scholars place the

date very early. By many it is considered the earliest New Testament writing and is dated about 45 A.D. An early date for the writing would be indicated by the use of the word "synagogue" (2:2) for the place of the assembly of the believers, and by the simplicity of the ecclesiastical organization which mentions elders alone (5:14). The mention of severed economic conditions (2:15,16) may be a reference to the famine predicted by Agabus in 44 A.D. (Acts 11:27,28). An earlier date is indicated as the letter reflects a Judaic Christianity which is basically concerned with moral principles rather than the problems and controversies that arose in connection with the Jerusalem Council (49 A.D.).

Others, however, place its writing near the end of James' life. Josephus places the martyrdom of James in 62 A.D. (Antiquities 20.9.1).

It is probable that the letter was the first canonical epistle and should be dated between 45 and 49 A.D.

THEME

Halley (page 44): "Good Works"

Mitchell: "Prove Your Faith By Your Practice"

Laney: "Christian Performance Must Accompany Christian Profession" Genuine faith is manifested by good works (2:17)

Key Word (Nelson's): Faith That Works - James develops the theme of the characteristics of true faith, using them as a series of tests to help his readers evaluate the quality of their relationship to Christ.

Key Verses (Nelson's):

"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." (James 1:19-22)

"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:14-17)

Key Chapter (Nelson's): 1 - One of the most difficult areas of the Christian life is that of testings and temptations. James reveals our correct response to both: 1) To testings, count them all joy; and 2) To temptations, realize God is not the source.

James is a practical and ethical epistle. This letter presents the ethics of Christianity, not doctrine. The purpose of the letter is to exhort the early Hebrew Christians to live out the ethical implications of their new found faith. James seeks to correct certain faults, instruct the wavering, rebuke sin, and exhort the believers to Godly conduct. This letter presents the ethics of Christianity, not doctrine. Faith is poured into various test tubes by which it demonstrates its reality.

Mitchell:

Many have tried to set James against Paul. They do not really contradict each other, but rather have a different emphasis. Paul emphasizes the root of salvation: Faith, while James emphasizes

the fruit of salvation: Works. Calvin has said, "*Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.*" Justification is not by works, but justification is demonstrated by works. James and Paul simply present two aspects of justification by faith. Actually a close study of Paul's writings will reveal that he is not silent concerning the works aspect of salvation. After telling us that we are saved by faith and not of works (Ephesians 2:8,9), he proceeds to state that we are saved "*for good works*" (Ephesians 2:10). While making it plain that we are not saved by works of righteousness which we have done (Titus 3:5), Paul none the less urges believers to "*be careful to engage in good deeds*" (Titus 3:8,14).

Outline:

The Epistle of James is difficult to outline because of the variety of topics discussed which do not seem to follow in specific logical order. Like Proverbs and other wisdom literature James sets forth a variety of practical exhortations on various topics. The outlines presented here is intended to highlight a major point or two found in each chapter.

- I. Faith Tested by Trial 1
Prove faith by suffering
- II. Faith Proved by Works 2
Prove faith by service
- III. Faith Evidenced by Conduct 3,4
Prove faith by speech
- IV. Faith Exercised by Patience and Prayer 5
Prove faith by spirituality

RECIPIENTS

James is the first of a group of letters addressed to Christians in general (James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1,2,3 John, and Jude). (see below: CONTRIBUTION TO CANON #1)

Laney:

This letter is addressed to "*the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad*" (1:1). This caption was used by James to refer to Jewish Christians living outside Palestine and throughout the Roman Empire. The fact that they are called "brethren" (1:2,16; 2:1; 5:7) would indicate that they are believing Jews - Hebrew Christians. The scattering of the Hebrew Christians was undoubtedly a result of the persecution of the church in Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen in the spring of 35 A.D. (Acts 8:1; 12:1-23). The addressees, then, are Jews scattered abroad, but bound together in a common faith in Christ.

James seems to have in mind genuine believers who were still clinging to Moses and Jewish Law. It should be kept in mind that the early Jewish believers were very slow to make a transition from law to grace. Many, if not most, were sort of homogenized Christians. They would cling to Jesus on one hand and Judaism on the other.

Mitchell:

Several items in the Epistle seem to indicate that this caption ("*the twelve tribes who are dispersed*") as used by James was intended to refer to Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine: 1) The specific reference to "*the twelve tribes*"; 2) The use in 2:2 of the word

“assembly” which is literally “synagogue”; 3) The numerous quotations and allusions to the Old Testament; 4) The use of Jewish idioms such as “*Lord of Sabaoth* (hosts)”; 5) The stress on the Jewish Law and monotheism; and 6) The lack of any reference to the common Gentile practices of slavery or idolatry.

Mitchell:

James was conscious of the weaknesses of his Jewish brethren. He knew their desire for wealth, their partiality and pride.

Eerdmans:

Christian freedom can be a heady thing to people previously bound by a strict legal code of conduct. If salvation is God’s free gift, what does it matter how we live? There is no question in James’ mind that it matters a great deal. There should be no discrepancy between belief and action. James reminds us of the need for genuinely Christian standards and values in every area of our life. It is so easy to let things slip - so easy for the world around us to squeeze us into its own mold, to convince us that there are no absolutes, no black and white areas - only gray. To this kind of Christian mentality James addresses himself. The early Jewish believers needed this letter and so do we.

Historical Setting:

Laney:

James, the author of the epistle, was a resident of Jerusalem and recognized as a pillar of the early church (Galatians 2:9). In writing to the scattered groups of Jewish believers James apparently draws upon the situation in Judea as the basis for his exhortations and examples. The epistle indicates that the readers were suffering persecution and trials (1:2-4,12; 2:6; 5:4). The Hebrew Christians were also lacking in fervor for good works and the practical application of truth to Christian living (1:26,27; 2:14-26).

Most of James’ readers were from lower and poorer classes (2:5), and the believers showed signs of partiality to the rich (2:1-9). The lack of organization in the church fellowship led to abuses with an overemphasis on speaking (3:1-12) and little emphasis on doing (1:22; 3:13-18). The young believers were engaged in petty quarrels and conflicts (4:1) and failing to lead disciplined Christian lives. James addressed his epistle to Hebrew Christians who, having been freed from the shackles of the law, needed to be reminded that Christian performance accompanies Christian profession!

CONTRIBUTION TO CANON

Adapted from Mitchell:

1. It is the first book in the group known as the Catholic (in this case meaning “universal”) Epistles: James, 1,2 Peter, 1,2,3, John, and Jude, because these epistles (with the exceptions of 2 and 3 John) lack indications of limited address to a single locality. It should be noted that they are titled according to their traditional authors, like the gospels, but unlike the Pauline epistles and Hebrews, which take their titles after the traditional addresses. (note: Hebrews can be considered a General Epistle as it is not addressed to anyone or any particular location.)
2. The book is primarily ethical and practical rather than doctrinal.
3. There are more striking similarities to the Sermon on the Mount. Some times there is almost

word for word identity. Some examples: James 1:2 and Matthew 5:10-12 (Luke 6:22,23) - Joy in the midst of trials; James 1:4 and Matthew 5:48 - God's desire and work in us: perfection; James 1:5 and Matthew 7:7 - asking God for good gifts; James 1:17 and Matthew 7:11 - God is the giver of good gifts; James 1:19,20 and Matthew 5:22 - command against anger; James 1:22,23 and Matthew 7:24-27 - contrast between hearers and doers (illustrated); James 1:26,27 and Matthew 7:21-23 - religious person whose religion is worthless.

4. There is a strong resemblance to Old Testament literature. There is no more Jewish book in the New Testament. If the passages referring to Christ were eliminated, the whole epistle could well fit into the Old Testament. Much like the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (especially Proverbs), James handles many different subjects. However, his precepts are delivered in the fashion of a fiery prophetic sermon. His short, abrupt paragraphs have been likened to a string of pearls - each is a separate entity in itself. There are a few logical transitions from one paragraph to another, but for the most part transitions are abrupt or missing entirely.
5. It abound in illustrations from nature (sea, wind, sun, grass, flowers). In this respect it reminds us for Jesus' teachings. Paul, on the other hand, favored athletic, legal, and military analogies.

Mitchell:

James differs from most other New Testament books by reason of the fact that it has no particular analysis. It is an extremely practical letter about the Christian life, and has been labeled the least doctrinal and most practical book in the New Testament.

Eerdmans:

There should be no discrepancy between belief and action. James reminds us of the need for genuinely Christian standards and values in every are of life. It is so easy to let things slip - so easy for the world around us to squeeze us into its own mold, to convince us that there are no absolutes, no black and white areas - only gray. The early Jewish believers needed this letter and so do we.

RESOURCES

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As general resources I've relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (WCBS - [especially those of Dr. J. Carl Laney]), and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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