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The Book of James, Introduction

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Author

Three men are named James in the New Testament. First, there is an apostle of Jesus named James, the son of Alphaeus. There is little mention of him in the Gospels, and little is known about his life. The second James is the apostle who was part of the trio of Peter, James, and John. This James was martyred early in the history of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:2). His death, at the bidding of Herod Agrippa I, was carried out in 42 A.D. The only candidate remaining to be the writer of this epistle is James, the half-brother of Jesus, and the post-resurrection leader of the Jerusalem church. There is no other James with sufficient credentials to be accepted as the writer of Scripture.

James is prominent at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. His speech at the Council employs several phrases that also appear in his epistle, and this gives additional credence to his authorship of his letter.

James, of course, grew up with Jesus, but we know from the New Testament that he did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah, and his conversion was after the resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15). John tells us in his gospel (7:3-5) the siblings of Jesus “did not believe in him.” In Mark 3:20-22 it is written, “They went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” His family shows up as Jesus is teaching and they act as if they are right to interrupt him (Matthew 12:46-50). When Jesus is crucified the only family member present is Mary, and his siblings are not mentioned.

We even know the names of his brothers, but not his sisters. *Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us?”* (Matthew 13:54-56). Judas, mentioned here, is the same person as Jude who authored the Epistle of Jude.

Purpose

James’ purpose is practical rather than doctrinal. Some skeptics have tried to argue that this book is an illegitimate forgery because it does not emphasize the great doctrines of justification and grace. But, the lack of doctrine does not point to some kind of forgery, as a forger would have tried to mimic doctrine and would not to have written from such a unique perspective. Often in the investigation of literary authenticity, it is the different and unexpected that receives the highest recognition of validity.

James’ basic style is reflective of the wisdom literature, particularly the book of Proverbs.¹

James	Proverbs
<i>Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. (1:19-20)</i>	<i>A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly. (14:29)</i>
<i>My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. (2:1)</i>	<i>It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the innocent of justice. (18:5)</i>
<i>The one who is rich...will pass away like a wild flower. (1:10)</i>	<i>Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf. (11:28)</i>

His ideas seem to be commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.²

James	Sermon on the Mount
<i>Consider it pure joy, my brothers whenever you face trials of many kinds. (1:2)</i>	<i>Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness... (5:10)</i>

BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: MONDAYS, 5:00 PM, ROOM 1425

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James

<p><i>Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (1:4)</i></p> <p><i>The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. (3:6)</i></p>	<p><i>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (5:48)</i></p> <p><i>But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother shall be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, "Raca," is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell. (5:22)</i></p>
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Other times James resembles a prophet like Amos.

James	Amos
<p><i>Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you... Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. (5:1,4)</i></p>	<p><i>You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. (5:11-12)</i></p>

None of this is unexpected as he was a Jew living in a Jewish culture leading a Jewish congregation.

The main issue for James is exhorting believers to examine their faith to see if it is genuine. He does this by stating the demands of the law upon those who claim to be Christ followers. Grace is not absent from the book, but it is not his main theme. But he declares "*mercy triumphs over judgment*" (2:13) and, regarding the sinfulness that besets us, "*But [God] gives us more grace*" (4:5). James is teaching the church about the law without denying our inability to fully keep it and our absolute need for grace to escape judgment.

Date

James was martyred in 62 A.D. and that would obviously mark the latest date the book could have been written.³ Commentators notice, however, that there is no mention or allusion to the decision of the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 which happened circa 49 A.D. Therefore, a common suggestion for the date of writing is from 44 A.D. to 49 A.D.

The Whole Counsel of God

For a New Testament book, James is different—his primary topic is keeping God's Law. That is not a reason to reject this book; rather it is a reason to embrace it. Believers in Jesus Christ celebrate the joy we have in our salvation. In Christ we are set free from the penalty of the Law which demands perfect obedience to be righteous before God. We are not able to keep the Law of God with perfect obedience, but Jesus Christ did accomplish this on our behalf. So, the perfect keeping of the Law is our merit before God, but it is not we who keep it. Christ gives His perfect obedience to sinners who place their trust in His good works.

James emphasizes law keeping, but it is a golden thread that runs throughout the New Testament. Paul, who rejoices in the doctrines of grace and our freedom from the penalty of the Law, nevertheless, upholds it.

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! (Romans 6:15)

Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:10)

Jesus proclaims in the Sermon on the Mount that He did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17)

Believers love Jesus and His Gospel. Believers are also called to Love Jesus and His Law. Luther reminds us that a drunken man may fall off either side of his horse.⁴

1. Daniel M. Doriani, *Reformed Expository Commentary, James*, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2007), p. 9

2. John MacArthur, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary, James*, (Moody Publishers, Chicago, IL, 2008), p. 2

3. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, vol. II, ch. 23 (A.D. 323).

4. Martin Luther, *Table Talk #630*, vol. 54, p. 111