

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

Virgil Warren, PhD

I. External Citation and Authorship Evidence (see Salmon, pp. 473ff.)

A. Origen is the earliest writer to refer to its words by name and to cite it as scripture (*Commentary on John 7:1*).

B. Eusebius puts it among the disputed books but accepted it for himself (comm. in Psalm **56**—work of an apostle—and Psalm **100** as scripture), referring to it as the first of the catholic epistles. Eusebius notes that jew ancients quoted it, but (Salmon) Eusebius may have overlooked less direct allusions to it: Salmon notes *Shepherd of Hermas*; Clement of Rome.

C. In the Syrian church, the epistle did not get a foothold until it appeared in the Peshitta.

D. In the West it was not included in the Canon of Muratori.

E. It was generally ignored till Jerome and Augustine endorsed it.

F. Its canonicity seemed secure with its inclusion by the Third Council of Carthage (A.D. 397).

G. Erasmus questioned it.

H. Luther questioned it, at least at first.

I. The Old Syriac early included it.

J. It was long questioned at Carthage and Rome; Jerusalem and Syria early acknowledged it. It is included in the catalogue of books that have come down to us.

K. Salmon notes that no clear evidence of the use of this epistle can be found in the *pseudo-clementine* although the sect from which these writings emanated counted James, the head of the Jerusalem church, as the highest personage in the church.

L. Zahn says that there is no tradition of certain age or apparent originality that can be of use regarding the origin of the epistle. Internal evidence is also scanty. The letter mentions no living person and cites no historical event.

II. Reasons for Slow Acceptance and for Rejection

A. Eusebius states that it was denied by some of his contemporaries because few of the ancients quoted it.

B. Early on, Luther distrusted it because it did not seem in its doctrine works to agree with Paul's doctrine of faith.

C. If this epistle was addressed to Palestinian and Diaspora churches, there would be a possible reason for its neglect when the outbreak of Roman and Jewish hostilities caused the Christians to flee the land. (But did Christians not live in Palestine after A.D. 70?)

D. It was not of apostolic authorship. Its slow acceptance may show the hesitancy of the early church to canonize what was not directly apostolic.

E. The pseudo-Clementines—which emanated from a sect that accounted James the highest personage in the church—did not quote the epistle. That may illustrate the

insignificance of the fact that few ancients quoted the epistle. (Or does it signify that the Book of James is spurious?)

F. Perhaps a limited circulation of the epistle in less prominent territories of the empire caused it to be overlooked, a fact caused by its nature and the limited group to which it would be especially significant.

III. Readers

A. Harrison asks whether the letter could have been written to non-Christian Jews generally (but sets aside the possibility). Some have noted the absence of any statement that would identify the recipients as saints, believers, or even those who are called by God. It is unique in this respect among the New Testament letters.

1. But the assembly or the words “*sit here under my footstool*” may refer to a home situation where early Christians customarily met.
2. Why would James have been in any position to expect a hearing from non-Christian Jews?
3. The faith in Jesus is presupposed as a part of the readers’ makeup (2:1). *Faith* is a word especially associated with Christ and Christianity rather than Judaism.
4. Note the coming of the Lord to receive the fruit (5:7). (Cp. the future intervention of the Lord of Israel; see 2:1).
5. The term *brother* is appropriate (only) in Christianity (1:2, etc.).
6. “*Brought forth by the word of truth*” (1:18) is better referred to regeneration than to creation.
7. “*The good name by which you are called*” (2:7) refers most naturally to the Christian name.

B. Christians are the intended recipients of the letter.

1. Dispersion is used as in 1 Peter 1:1 to denote Christians among non-Christians.
 - a. But in James 1:1 it has the article.
 - b. There is no mention of the twelve tribes in 1 Peter.
 - (1) However, note that Matthew 19:28 includes the church, which the apostles will judge.
 - (2) Note also the usage of the twelve tribes figuratively in Revelation 7:5-8. (?) Note Revelation 7:9.
2. James would not want to encourage a natural division that could be caused in the Gentile-Jewish churches by addressing a letter to one segment of them. (Note, however, that the encyclical from Acts 15:23-29 went to the Gentiles of Antioch, etc., although this letter was a device for joining together a people who were in danger of being split over Gentile-Jewish relationships.)

3. The letter's strong Jewish flavor does not necessarily mean it was intended for Jews. As a result of its flavor, this type of letter might appeal especially to Jews, but it would be intelligible and helpful to Gentile Christians as well.

C. The view has generally prevailed in the church that the readers were Hebrew Christians.

1. The opening statements include "*twelve tribes of the dispersion.*"
2. The occurrence of both *synagogue* (2:2) and *church* (5:14)
3. The lack of warning against typical Gentile sins (idolatry and immorality)
4. See also X: G, H, I; XIII: A, B
5. Abraham as "our father" in 2:21 fits with a Jewish writer writing to Jewish readers.

IV. James, a Jewish Work with Christian Interpolations at 1:1 and 2:1 (Spitta)

- A. The substratum of Christian presuppositions (see III: A)
- B. *Χαράν* (1:2) is in obvious alliteration with *χαπεῖν* in 1:1.

V. Authorship Internal

A. "*James a servant of God,*" and so on, gives the name, but adds no information as to which James.

B. Since *James* was such a common name, only a person of prominence in the church would use it without further identification. A similar phenomenon appears in Luke 24:34, where the name *Simon* designates Peter although Simon Zelotes was in the same company.

C. James the brother of Jesus fits the description well.

1. Consistently scripture notes him by his personal name alone (Galatians 2:9, 12; Jude 1; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). Galatians 2:9 is definitely James the brother of Jesus, because 1:19 specifies "*brother of the Lord.*"

2. He was prominent in the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:12) Acts 21:18.
3. The Greek style is agreeable with one of Hebrew background.

- a. The syntax is paratactic with only occasional hypotactic constructions.
- b. Elijah "prayed with prayer" equals a Hebrew infinitive absolute plus cognate finite verb: "prayer fervently."

4. Old Testament outlook

- a. Figures: Abraham, Sarah, Rahab, Job, and Elijah
- b. Expressions: Lord of hosts (5:4); righteousness of God (1:20)
- c. Worldliness is spiritual adultery (4:4).

- d. Commandments: cleanse hearts and purify hands (4:8)
- e. Eschatology: “last days” (5:3)
- f. Name of the Lord (2:7)

5. He keeps referring to the Law, identifying it as Mosaic or as that of Christ but seemingly uniting them, informing the commandments with the touch of Christ, so they become a royal law of liberty.

6. A Palestinian viewpoint fits the author.

- a. Fig tree, grapevine, and olives (3:12)
- b. As far as we know, James continued to reside in Jerusalem from the earliest days of the church. That would give him considerable contact with Jews (especially) from many quarters. 1 Corinthians 9:5 might not include James, because there were other brothers to whom missionary activity and wives might refer and tradition ascribes no posterity to him, making it unlikely that he married.
- c. Familiarity with the sea (1:6) and its ships (3:4)
- d. The burning wind that withers vegetation 1:11; 4:13 (like Ezekiel 17:10—Septuagint [LXX]; Luke 12:54-57; John 4:8)
- e. Droughts (5:17)
- f. Salt and bitter springs (3:11)
- g. Early and latter rain (5:7)

7. Comparison of language with that attributed to James in the Book of Acts (see Mayer also)

- a. *Χάριεν* in Acts 15:23 is used by no other New Testament writer except James, who spoke last in the records of the meeting and whose idea is included in the circulatory. A Roman officer in Acts 23:26 also uses *χάριεν*.
- b. The word *visit* is used (1:27 and Acts 15:14).
- c. James’ word for sinners “turning” to God (5:19, 20) occurs also in the address of James, where he speaks of Gentiles turning to God (15:19).
- d. The use of the *name* of the Lord is similar in 2:7 and Acts 15:17.

8. It fits well for the author to have been converted from the ranks of Judaism, because he felt the need of others like himself to be rid of the tendency among believing Jews to rest on faith in a creedal sense and fail in working it out. This may seem contradictory to the Jewish idea of meritorious works. The point may not be so much that idea as against the idea that salvation is the natural benefit of descent from Abraham, thus de-emphasizing obedience into salvation by intellectual belief. The problem of meritorious works was to the other extreme from James’ readers’ problem.

9. Uses Abraham as “*our father*” (2:21)

10. The writer may have been in personal association with Jesus Christ.

- a. Those passages that echo the Lord's words are few outside James’ epistle.

- (1) There are none in Paul's epistles except 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 4: "a thief in the night"
- (2) The discourse of (1) is impressed also in 2 Peter 3:10 and Revelation 3:3; 16:15.

b. Particulars

ISBE : " <i>James says less about the Master than any other writer in the N. T., but his speech is more like the Master's than any one of them.</i> "	(1)	James 5:12—Matthew 5:37	do not swear
	(2)	1:22—Matthew 6:26	hearers and doers; foolish builders
	(3)	1:25—John 13:17	happiness in doing
	(4)	2:5—Luke 6:20	the poor are heirs of the kingdom
	(5)	4:10—Matthew 23:12	exaltation as a result of humility
	(6)	4:12—Matthew 7:1	judging others
	(7)	1:5—Matthew 7:7	ask God and receive
	(8)	1:6—Mark 11:23	not doubting when asking God
	(9)	1:4—Matthew 5:48	patience and perfection
	(10)	1:1-6—Luke 6:24	denunciation of the rich
	(11)	4:9—Luke 6:25	laughter to mourning

c. The above in "b" are not quotations from the synoptics; they are an independent testimony to our Lord's teaching. Perhaps 1:12 is witness to an unrecorded saying of Jesus.

11. James fits well if there is an indistinctness between the Jewish Christians and Jews. James himself was noted for great sanctity (Eusebius 2:23 on Hegesippus). The Jewishness of the book is due more to the authorship/origin than it is to the readership/destination.

VI. Arguments Against Jacobean Authorship

A. Strange that there should have been such doubts and slowness about accepting this book if it was by James

1. James is a common name.
2. Continual problem of pseudonymity
3. But Paul's letters, which were so dissimilar to James', enjoyed ready reception. In other words, perhaps the slowness to receive the letter was not in its doubtful genuineness, but in some aspect such as the following:
 4. Its lack of doctrinal emphasis
 5. The possible oblivion into which the Jewish church sank took with it, for a time, this epistle that was naturally identified with that phase of Christianity (perhaps, i.e., people tend to cherish what is most like themselves).

B. The high quality of Greek is strange if not impossible for a man whose native language must have been Aramaic

1. Palestine was trilingual (superscription of the cross)
2. James, being associated with the Jerusalem church, would have had extensive contact with Hellenistic Jews, who would not only come to Jerusalem for regular feasts but who had rather permanent dwelling there, from whom converts would come; cp. Acts 6:9). His position in this strategic location might spur him on to a greater proficiency in the language.

3. Perhaps he used an amanuensis. Note, however, the Hebrew characteristics (see V: C3). Salmon:

“Though we should not beforehand have expected James to write such good Greek, we see plainly that the letter was written by a Jew; and we can give no reason why James might not know as much Greek as any other Jew”

(p. 489; cp. Josephus, a Jew, writing in Greek).

C. The form of the letter is Hellenistic Greek, but the substance is Hebraistic Hebrew (paraenesis—diatribe, *e.g.*). The point is hardly conclusive since Paul, a Hebrew, used Hellenistic literary devices.

D. The writer does not claim relationship to Jesus.

1. Argument from silence
2. James’ modesty
3. James’ prominence made such identification unnecessary.

VII. That James Is Not Pseudonymous

- A. No lavish identity of James
- B. Why would such a person use James’ authority? The matter in this letter could presumably make its own way.
- C. It does not contain novel or heretical positions to be palmed off on the church.
- D. Zahn comments, *“The epistle does not bring out a single one of those characteristics by which James is distinguished in history and legend.”*

VIII. James the Son of Alphaeus Not Writer of Book

No tradition in its favor.

IX. Not James of Zebedee

- A. The simple name would not be taken as a reference to him. He requires further identification in the Scripture.
- B. The writer does not indicate his apostolic position.
- C. His death in *ca.* A.D. 44 may be too early to have permitted him to write the book.

- D. No tradition speaks for him in this connection except for a medieval period localized in Spain.

X. Date of Writing (Matters Involved) (Thiessen, A.D. 45-48; Tenney, A.D. 45-50)

A. On the assumption of James' authorship, it must have been produced prior to A.D. 62, the date of his death according to Josephus, or 66 according to Hegesippus' account contained in Eusebius.

B. James devotes considerable attention to economic conditions, stressing the chasm between the rich and the poor and deploring the harsh, unjust treatment meted out to laborers by land barons. These conditions ceased to exist with the outbreak of the war against Rome in A.D. 66. Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 20:8:8; 9:2) illustrates the rich pride that the Sadducean rulers had developed for themselves.

Paul's collection for the poor Jerusalem saints illustrates their extreme poverty, especially in light of the fact that Gentile Christians were not generally rich. (cp. 1 Corinthians 1:26.) Salmon also notes that *Ebionite*, a term later used for Christian Jews, is a name derived from poverty.

C. The strong anticipation of Christ's second coming points away from a late date (?).

D. The relation between James and the Sermon on the Mount, while not in verbal agreement, points to a time before written accounts of Christ's words existed (?).

E. In the way of an *a quo*, perhaps the Epistle of James came as an answer to a misunderstanding of Paul's early preaching on faith. On the other hand, Thiessen feels that James came before Paul's writings, because James would have avoided apparent contradiction with him. However, this "apparent" contradiction would also have existed with Paul writing after James was written.

F. Interpreters frequently make the point that the church organization was simple. Only elders and teachers are mentioned.

G. The question of admission of the Gentiles seems not to have come to the fore, indicating perhaps that the conference on circumcision had not occurred as yet (A.D. 49 or 50). Salmon says,

"One of the surest criteria of the date of a document is the controversial interests of the writer." He says elsewhere, however, *"As I hold the controversy concerning the obligation of circumcision on Gentiles was one of short duration, I could admit that the epistle is later than that controversy, and yet to have been written by James"* (489).

But what of Galatians?

H. The believers met in the synagogue, one, of course, in which Christians predominated. (The matter of a synagogue becoming a church might be questionable in that membership could become a problem. To whom did these synagogues belong, especially in Palestine?)

I. A total silence in the epistle regarding the non-Jewish world and people in the church of Gentile birth. Tenney says, *"... seems to refer to a time when the church was still to a great degree within the bounds of Judaism"* (yet note Acts 11:19ff). Some authors say these bonds were broken with the death of James.

J. As a whole, the Christians were not recent converts. They were established in a certain type of worship and service.

K. The indistinctness drawn between the converted and the unconverted Jew (?). We know from Acts that the Christian Jews frequented the temple worship and observed the national rites.

L. The rich bringing them before the judgment seats (2:6) cannot refer to Gentile tribunals because down to a date later than any suggested for this letter a charge against Christians solely because of their religion would be received by a heathen magistrate the way Gallio received the accusation against Paul. Roman policy allowed Jewish authorities considerable power over their countrymen even outside Palestine, as Paul in Damascus shows (see James 5:6, 7), especially since for a long time Rome considered Christianity a sect of Judaism.

M. An early date agrees with the affinity with Old Testament writings and the words of the Lord rather than a more systematic writing like Paul's, John's, and Peter's.

XI. Destination Geographical

A. Jews of the Eastern Dispersion

1. Peter addressed his epistles to Asia Minor because the Jews in that section would be less likely to know the Epistle of James.
2. Syria was particularly full of dispersed Jews.
3. It is found in the ancient Peshitta Syriac.

If we had James only, we might be more inclined to think that "dispersion" as a designation for the readership referred only to Jewish Christians. But when we get to 1 Peter, it becomes clear that Peter uses that terminology for Christians undifferentiated. That is the case because he includes Galatia and Asia among the named provinces. Unless we were to put 1 Peter ahead of the Pauline Gentile mission (before A.D. 45), we have this apostle sending a letter to congregations comprised of the whole range of constituents.

Furthermore, in 1 Peter 2:9 the apostle picks up on several Jewish terms (*priesthood, nation, people*) and labels his readers thereby. In other words, there is a general pattern of Christian writers "baptizing" previously Jewish terminology with Christian content: *dispersion, the twelve tribes of Israel, Israel*. A different way to put this is the way Paul does in the Olive Tree Parable of Romans 11. Israel was always intended to be spiritual Israel. The national components that were distinctive to the Old Testament nation were not ideally meant to obliterate this more fundamental intention for the nation. Unproductive branches were in God's mind pruned out—even if it were a majority of the branches; and, so to speak, wild branches were grafted in. The result is that Israel and spiritual Israel were always the same ideally: "Israel," "the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28), and here "*the dispersion*."

B. Palestine

1. We conclude that Hebrews was written to Jerusalem, because of its Jewish flavor and because it is based so largely on the readers' Jewish background of strong Old Testament knowledge. May we not do the same with James (even Jude, for that matter)?

2. Is there anywhere besides Palestine where all-Jewish congregations would be found? We must be impressed with the intention of the writer here in that we read into his motives that he intended to write to Jews, because he veneers his letter with such strong Jewish colors, which might have had a disruptive force in mixed congregations.

3. Contrary to this idea is the use of ἡ διάσπορα with Jews only as readers; it would be more naturally literal. (But Zahn says that the twelve tribes of the dispersion can mean all of Israel (p. 79, vol. I). Perhaps that usage could even include Palestine.

4. James 4:13 fits better the migratory commercial enterprises of the Hellenistic Jews than with home Jews of Palestine. (Salmon uses Aquila and Prisca as examples: from Pontus, to Rome, to Corinth, to Ephesus, to Rome, to Ephesus—Acts 18:1, 19; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19).

C. See X: G, H, I

XII. Nature and Structure of the Book

A. It is the most Jewish of all New Testament books (Feine-Behm B).

B. It parallels The Sermon on the Mount and serves as an interpretation of the Old Testament law in light of the Christian gospel.

C. It has random arrangement of sayings and groups of sayings, separate admonitions of greater or lesser extent (Feine-Behm).

1. Note that in this respect it partakes of the character of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.
2. Three longer expositions (2:1ff; 14ff; 3:1ff); other smaller aphorisms are joined by catch words but often by nothing.
3. It thus partakes of the nature of paraenesis.

D. Against epistolary nature

1. Vagueness of destination
2. Impersonal attitude of the contents
3. Lack of epistolary conclusion

XIII. Against James' Authoring the Book of James

A. Dogmatic grounds: not apostolic or canonical

B. Doctrinal grounds: irreconcilable with Pauline gospel

C. Historical-critical grounds: language is too good to have been written by a Jew

XIV. Material of James on Works and Romans on Faith Not Contradictory

- A. This is antecedently unlikely since James was in accord with Paul's gospel (Acts **15**; Galatians **2:1-10**).
- B. The presentation in James does not read like an attempt at refuting Paul.
- C. Both *faith* and *works* are used differently in the two writers, and they address different concerns.

XV. Place of Writing: Palestine

- A. Fig tree, grapevine, and lives (**3:12**)
- B. James was always a resident in Jerusalem as far as we know.
- C. Familiarity with the sea and its ships (**3:4**)
- D. The burning wind that withers vegetation (**4:13**)

Concluding generalization: The New Testament antilegomena are largely in the general epistles (James, 2 Peter, Jude; cp. Hebrews and Revelation).