

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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This resource has been adapted into multiple languages, including English, Tok Pisin, Arabic (عربي), French (Français), Hindi (हिन्दी), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Portuguese (Português), Russian (Русский), Spanish (Español), Swahili (Kiswahili), and Simplified Chinese (简体中文).

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James

Can we be loyal friends of God like Abraham? Can we resist the pressures of the world, our rebellious instincts, and the devil's influence? Can Christians live in peace while solving life's problems? James discusses these issues in his letter. He intends to motivate Christians to develop a mature and consistent faith. He also shows how Christians should live in their relationship with God and each other.

Setting

James, the brother of Jesus, became the leader of the Jerusalem church soon after the resurrection of Jesus. He wrote to Jewish Christians who had scattered because of abuse that began with Stephen's martyrdom (dying as a witness to Christ's resurrection) ([James 1:1](#); [Acts 8:1](#); [11:19](#)). They lived among Jews who had "dispersed" in the "Dispersion" (Diaspora) ([James 1:1](#); see [John 7:35](#)). The Dispersion started when the Assyrians displaced Israel (the northern kingdom) in 722-721 BC and the Babylonians exiled Judah (the southern kingdom) in 586 BC.

Later, it included many Jews who traveled widely throughout the Greek and Roman empires ([James 4:13](#); [Acts 13:14](#); [17:1](#)). By the middle of the first century AD, Jewish communities existed all over the Greek-Roman world. Jewish Diaspora Christians encountered pressure from a society that abused them in an economic way ([James 2:6](#)). The people treated them badly for their faith in Jesus Christ ([2:7](#)).

Summary

James wrote his letter from the perspective of a pastor. He emphasizes ethics more than any other New Testament book. It includes teachings based on the law interpreted through the life and teachings of Jesus ([James 1:25; 2:8](#)). James also reflects what Jesus taught, especially as recorded later in Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount" and Luke's "Sermon on the Plain" ([Matthew 5-7; Luke 6:20-49](#)).

Author

One of the step-brothers of Jesus wrote the letter of James. James, like the other sons of Joseph, had the name of an Israelite hero: Jacob (Hebrew *Ya'aqob*; Greek *Iakōb*) ([Matthew 13:55](#)).

During the public ministry of Jesus, neither James nor his siblings followed him. They even tried to stop his ministry and bring him home ([Mark 3:20-21](#); see also [John 7:3-5](#)).

After Jesus's resurrection, James became a believer, probably when the risen Jesus appeared to him and convinced him that Jesus was the Christ (see [1 Corinthians 15:7](#)). James was with the other disciples in the upper room when the Holy Spirit came at the feast of Pentecost ([Acts 1:14; 2:1-3](#)). He became a leader in the Jerusalem church (see [Acts 15:13-22](#)).

Date and Location of Writing

The letter of James is probably the earliest book in the New Testament. He wrote it after the abuse under Herod Agrippa in AD 44 but before the council in Jerusalem in AD 49 to 50 ([Acts 12:1–5](#)). It reflects an early period before the debate over circumcising non-Jewish converts and before false teachings developed in other Christian communities. During this time, *synagogue* (meaning “meeting,” [James 2:2](#)) and *church* could refer to the same thing, as could *law* and *word* ([5:14](#); [1:23, 25](#)).

We infer that James wrote this letter from Jerusalem based on information in Acts and Galatians about James’s location ([Acts 15:13–22](#); [21:18](#); [Galatians 1:18–19; 2:9, 12](#)).

The book includes references suitable for Palestine, including:

- the scorching heat ([James 1:11](#));
- salty water springs ([3:11–12](#));
- the growing of figs, olives, and grape vines ([3:12](#));
- the sea ([1:6; 3:4](#)); and
- the fall and spring rains ([5:7](#)).

Literary Character

The letter of James is written in *Koiné* Greek, the common language of the Greek-Roman world. It shows the Greek influences on Galilee and Palestine. It also shows the cultural adaptation of Jewish readers living outside Israel. James writes with correct grammar, uses a wide vocabulary, and has a good sense of word rhythms and sounds. There are plain references to the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint), along with some imagery from the Greek-influenced (Hellenistic) world (for example, [4:6](#)).

James uses many speaking techniques, including:

- brotherly appeals ([1:2](#); [2:1](#); [3:1](#); [4:11](#)),
- questions with the answers assumed ([2:5](#); [3:11-12](#); [4:1](#)),
- strong encouragements ([1:16](#); [3:1](#); [5:16](#)),
- metaphors and examples ([2:26](#); [3:3-5](#); [4:14](#)), and
- sayings that summarize paragraphs ([2:13](#), [17](#); [3:18](#); [4:17](#)).

Meaning and Message

James wants his readers to have strong faith and loyalty to God ([James 1:6](#)). James recommends:

- patient endurance ([1:3](#)),
- submission to God ([4:7](#)), and
- sharing in the ministries of the church ([5:13-20](#)).

These will result in:

- perfection ([1:4](#)),
- honor ([4:10](#)), and
- a glorious life when Jesus Christ returns ([1:12](#); [5:8](#)).

The Law

James showed respect for the law of Moses and Jewish traditions, like the ceremonies that make a person pure after a vow ([Acts 21:18-25](#)). He also understood the mission to the non-Jews (gentiles). He concludes that gentiles could become Christians without first converting to Judaism. He referred to God's covenant with Noah ([Acts 15:19-22](#); see [Genesis 9:1-17](#)). In his letter, James upholds the law while also suggesting a new interpretation of it through the life and teaching of Jesus the Messiah ([James 1:25](#); [2:8-11](#)).

Jewishness

James uses Jewish symbols with little criticism and keeps the main identity markers of Judaism without change (contrast [Romans 2:29](#)). He addresses the readers as the "twelve tribes" and calls their church gathering a *synagogue* with elders and teachers ([1:1](#); [2:2](#); [5:14](#); [3:1](#)). He often refers to the law of Moses ([1:25](#); [2:8-12](#); [4:11](#)). He cites Israel's belief statement (the *Shema*, [2:19](#)). He names God as "the Lord of Hosts," a common Old Testament title ([5:4](#)).

James also uses elements from Old Testament wisdom literature and warnings of prophets ([1:5](#); [3:13](#), [17](#); [4:13](#); [5:1](#)). He appeals to Israelite heroes like: Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah ([2:21](#), [23](#); [2:25](#); [5:11](#); [5:17](#)). However, he does not explicitly mention ceremonial elements of Judaism, such as the Sabbath day, circumcision, or food laws.

Works

The differences between James and Paul about "works" relies on their contexts of history and doctrine. Both believed that only God, through his grace, could solve the problem of human sin. They agreed that a person must respond to God's offer of salvation by faith. However, they emphasized different aspects.

Paul, who often dealt with Jewish Christians imposing requirements on gentiles, stressed that "works of the law" do not lead to salvation ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)). People cannot become right with God by following the law ([Romans 3:20](#), [28](#); [Galatians 2:16](#); [Romans 4:3-5](#)).

James, on the other hand, emphasizes that good deeds are necessary to make a person right with God. True biblical faith will always result in good deeds that please God. James shows that faith is not just agreeing with the truth. True faith does not allow for divided loyalty between God and the world ([2:19](#); [1:8](#); [4:4](#), [7](#)).

Oppression

The letter of James guides Christians on how to live as a minority in a non-Christian society. James encourages readers to confront challenges in a brave way and show consistent Christian character. The letter offers valuable advice and wisdom for today, especially when confronting challenges in society related to faith.