

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

Setting the Stage

A Personal Note

My own fascination with the Epistle of James began several years ago when, during a discussion of James 5:14, 15, a point of view was being put forward regarding healing that seemed to contradict both scriptural precedent and common sense. In coming to terms with the true meaning of that passage, I came to appreciate both the spiritual depth and the practicality of the epistle.

James is as relevant today as it was in Jerusalem when it was written not very long after the Lord's ascension. The apostle (I use that title deliberately) has written words of instruction, advice, exhortation and comfort that will assist us in our daily struggle to remain true to our Lord.

It is the aim of this study to let James' message and the challenge of his uncompromising stand for the truth coupled with his deep love for his brethren and sisters motivate us to greater efforts on our Lord's behalf. We may not be called upon, as was James, to die a martyr's death in the service of our Master but we are called upon to do the best we can with what talents and resources we have been given. An understanding of James' epistle will help us as we strive to be better "servants of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Beside the Lord himself, we could not choose a better role model than James. We will do well if we emulate his passion in the service of his Lord and of his brethren and sisters and his courage in the face of vicious persecution.

When was the epistle written?

I will not regurgitate here material that may be found in any reliable commentary. Suffice it to say that the epistle is considered to be the earliest of Christian writings. It may even have been written before the murder of Stephen but certainly not long thereafter. See James 5:6, "*You have condemned – you have murdered the **RIGHTEOUS** one; he does not oppose you.*"¹ [emphasis from the "Diaglott" by Benjamin Wilson].

From the overall context of the epistle, which is one of exhortation to persevere in the face of trial and persecution, I favour the view that puts the writing of the epistle after the death of Stephen and dealing with the adversity that attended the persecution that followed. It was about AD 40 or earlier when James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of the Apostle John, who together were, "Boanerges," "Sons of Thunder," wrote the epistle which was eventually to cost him his life.

¹ Wilson, Benjamin, The Emphatic Diaglott, Int'l Bible Students Assoc., 1942, page 771.

To whom was James' epistle written?

There was, until the persecution that followed the death of Stephen, no clear distinction between Jews and Christians. In fact, even after Stephen's death, it took a long time for the distinction to be fully realized. Even as late as Acts 24:5, followers of the Lord are labeled as the "sect of the Nazarenes." The same word, "sect," is used to describe the Sadducees in Acts 5:17 and the Pharisees in Acts 15:5.

The apostles continually referred to the Jews and their leaders as "brethren" (Greek = adelphos). Cp. Acts 2:29; 7:2; 13:26; 38; 15:7,13 – the same form of address used in relation to brethren in Christ, 23:1,6; 28:17.

At this early stage of its development, the Ecclesia was closely identified with Judaism. Consider the following:

- **Acts 2:47** – followers of the Lord were to be found in the Temple and were held in favour by the people. They were not persecuted at this point nor were they perceived as a threat by the authorities. This "honeymoon" period was not to last long.
- **Acts 3:1** – Peter and John were going up to the Temple "at the hour of prayer." "*...when Peter and John went up together into the Temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour, it must have been for the evening sacrifice, or rather half an hour later and, as the words indicate, for the prayer that accompanied the offering of incense.*"²
- **Acts 6:7** – "...a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." These continued in their priestly roles. Eventually, they would be forced to decide between Christ and the law but for the moment the line of separation had not been drawn.
- **Acts 15:5** – "But there rose up certain of the sect of the *Pharisees which believed*, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." There are two things to notice about this passage:
 - There were brethren who were believers and still Pharisees.
 - As late as Acts 15 there was still a debate about the duty of a follower of Christ regarding the law of Moses.

Brethren and sisters maintained their membership in their synagogues until they were forced out by persecution. Consider the words of Paul: **Acts 22:19** *And I said, Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee:* (Cf. **Acts 26:11!**)

- **Acts 21:17-24** – Even at this late date, James, the brother of the Lord, was urging Paul to demonstrate to the Jews in Jerusalem that, contrary to what they had heard about him, he "kept the law." Amazingly, Paul complied with an act of flexibility and spiritual maturity which should be much meditated upon today!
- **James 1:1** addresses the epistle to the "*twelve tribes which are scattered abroad*" or "*of the dispersion*" as the RV and RSV put it. In Greek, the word is "diaspora." This fact takes on new significance when one reads in Acts 6 that it was the synagogues of the "diaspora" in Jerusalem which were taking the lead in persecuting the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

² Edersheim, Alfred, "The Temple, Its Ministry and Services as they were at the time of Christ," W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994, page 144

Setting the Stage, Continued

To whom was the epistle written? (cont'd)

- In **Acts 6:9** we read: *"Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen."* These are the synagogues of the diaspora or more properly of the "diasporans," located not in the far-flung reaches of Asia-minor nor of North Africa, Persia, or Italy but in Jerusalem. This makes sense considering the early date of the epistle.

The great apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, had not yet begun to "turn the world upside down" with his preaching of the Gospel beyond the confines of Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Due to the persecution that followed the death of Stephen, the brethren and sisters had indeed been scattered but not much further than Damascus and Antioch. Indeed, many brethren and sisters still lived in Jerusalem, and, despite the persecutions unleashed upon them, either would not or could not flee.

- The epistle was written and circulated primarily to the brethren and sisters who were members of the Synagogues of the "diaspora" and secondarily as a kind of "open letter" to the other members and especially to the leaders of these Synagogues as well. Hence the backlash that was to cost James his life as the leaders of the Jewish community reacted to his forthright condemnation of their persecution of the followers of the Lord.
- The contention that because James was the first epistle, he used the word Synagogue instead of Ecclesia to describe an assembly of Christians is an unnecessary assumption. James knew the word Ecclesia and used it appropriately in chapter 5 verse 14. When James talks about Synagogues, he means Jewish Synagogues and not a Christian community or meeting place.

This interpretation helps to make sense of the "difficult" passages in James such as chapter 2:1-13; 3:9-15; 4:1 – 5:6 which, if addressed to brethren only would give a very different picture from that of the harmony and Godly fellowship portrayed in the early chapters of Acts. Never mind the language which would be totally contradictory if applied to brethren in James' day:

- **2:13** Judgement without mercy – in the context of persecution; are brethren sitting in judgement of brethren? This verse makes sense in terms of the judicial persecution, imprisonment, and condemnation of the followers of Jesus by their fellow Jews.
- **3:14-15** Brethren behaving in an earthly, sensual, demonic manner; creating tumult, faction, strife, and engaging in every vile (RV) deed? Read the accounts of Ecclesial harmony and love in the early chapters of Acts. This description does not fit the facts when applied to that wonderful Ecclesia.
- **4:1-4** The Jewish community was famous for its political infighting – the only thing that united them at this time was the growing hatred by the rich and powerful among them of the "sect of the Nazarenes." How could the followers of the Lord be characterized by words such as, "Ye lust and have not; ye kill and desire to have and cannot obtain: ye fight and war..." The phrase, "desire to have" is, in the Greek, "*Zelos*". In their *zeal* they kill to get their way. Who does that phrase best characterize? Do we imagine for a moment that James was writing this of brethren and sisters?

Setting the Stage, Continued

To whom was the epistle written? (*cont'd*)

Here are some passages that characterize the Ecclesia in James' day:

- **Acts 2:41-46** – they sold their possessions and had all things in common. Where are the grasping, greedy, rich in this scenario? Any such would have been scared straight into a Godly generosity by the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (**Acts 5:11**). They were of one accord – united and not distressed by division and factional strife.
- **Acts 4:32** – those who believed were of one heart and one soul. There was no disunity and no strife, at least not at the time period when it is generally accepted that this epistle was written.
- **Acts 6:1-6** – The one incidence of disunity was solved in a way that has shone forth as a beacon to brethren and sisters ever since. The members of the offended minority were put in charge of rectifying their own grievance! What faith and love was shown by these wonderful brethren and sisters! The wisdom of the apostles in letting the meeting decide how to handle the situation should be instructive to Arranging Brethren in our own day.

Who wrote the epistle?

Who wrote the epistle? It is generally accepted that James the Lord's brother was the author. However, the evidence for his authorship is very slim indeed. Usually, a comparison is made between the speech of James the Lord's brother recorded in Acts 15 and the epistle. In more than one set of published notes the following observations (set in *italics* below) are made:

- **James 1:1** *Greeting = wishes joy; occurs elsewhere only in Acts 15:23 (James the Lord's brother writing) and in Acts 23:26 (Lysias, the Roman commander writing). James' Greek is very formal as of one who was very talented in his use of the language but not a fluent native speaker such as the apostle Paul.* Firstly, it must be noted that this formal beginning to the epistle was not unique to James. It was a common form such as our "Dear Sir" and could have been used by anyone in any formal written communication (as in the letter of the Roman commander to his superior). So, this bit of evidence in favour of the authorship of James the Lord's brother is weak.
- **James 1:16, 19; 2:5** *"Beloved brethren" – the word "beloved" occurs only here and in Acts 15:25.* I am not sure how this conclusion was reached. My count brings the number of occurrences to **62**! The word, *agapeetos*, is often used exactly as James used it (cp 1 Corinthians 15:58).
- **James 2: 5** *"Hearken... brethren...." This expression is found only here and in Acts 15.* Not so. See Acts 7:2.
- **James 5:19, 20** *"converteth" is used twice and the same Greek word is used in Acts 15:19.* The force of this argument is greatly diminished when it is realized that Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, and Paul also used the same word in the same sort of context.
- **James 1:27** *"visit the fatherless and widow and keep yourselves un-spotted from the world is similar to Acts 15:14, 29.* This comparison is weak because others use the same words to convey the same idea: Paul in Acts 15:36; Stephen in Acts 7:23.

Setting the Stage, Continued

Who wrote the epistle? (cont'd)

- **James 2:7; 5:10,14** stress is laid upon “the name” as in Acts 15:14, 17, 26. It is true that the one phrase in James 2:7 “that worthy name by which you were called” is similar to the one in Acts 15:17, “upon whom my name is called.” However, it must be noted that the phrase “the name” occurs more than 40 times in the New Testament between Acts and Revelation and almost always refers to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is instructive to meditate upon Philippians 2:10 where our Lord has been given by the Father, “The name which is above every name....” Not “a name” as the AV has it but “THE name.” But that is another subject! In any case stress is laid upon the name of the Lord throughout the New Testament.

The only other credible alternative to James the brother of the Lord as the author of the epistle is James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, one of the “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17). We can hear his thunderous condemnation in chapters 4 and 5 as he denounces the rich and worldly persecutors of his brethren. These words of righteous denunciation were so unlike those of James the brother of the Lord who was ever the conciliator between the Christian and Jewish communities (cp. Acts 21:18-25).

In **Acts 12:1-3** Herod slew James, the son of Zebedee and he saw that it pleased the Jews. Why did he choose James? He went after James first and only then arrested Peter. Why not Peter first? If the leaders of the Jewish community were particularly angry with James, it would have made sense for Herod to mark him as his first target. James’ fearless denunciation of the leaders of the Jerusalem synagogues for their murderous designs on his brethren cost him his life. Like Stephen before him, he would almost certainly have known that in writing his epistle he was signing his own death warrant. Compare Stephen’s ringing condemnation in Acts 7 with that of James in chapter 5 of his epistle.

*Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the **Just One** (RV = **Righteous One**); of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels and have not kept it. – Acts 7:51-53*

*Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are motheaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days.... Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter. Ye have condemned and killed the just (RV = **Righteous One**); and he doth not resist you. – James 5:1-6*

Who wrote the epistle? (cont'd) *The reaction of the Jewish authorities* to James' letter was one of outrage and indignation – just as they had reacted to Stephen's brilliant indictment. Stephen they killed by their own hand but they were pleased beyond measure when Herod seized the opportunity to ingratiate himself with them and shed the blood of James the son of Zebedee who had so fearlessly shone the searching light of truth upon their corruption, violence, and greed.

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God. – John 3:19-21

James knew the risks when he penned his epistle, yet he stood up courageously on behalf of his brethren and sisters. The example of Stephen and James must stir us to stand with them in outspoken defiance of a corrupt and evil world to bear witness to our Lord's coming and his Kingdom.

The apostle Paul portrays the spirit of James and indeed of all who are willing to take a stand for the Truth and bear the reproach of Christ when he wrote:

"...We will have none of the reticence of those who are ashamed, no deceitfulness or watering-down the word of God; but the way we commend ourselves to every human being with a conscience is by stating the Truth openly in the sight of God."

– **2 Corinthians 4:2**, (Jerusalem Bible)

Summary

The apostle James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John wrote this epistle. He wrote it to encourage his brethren and sisters who were enduring persecution at the hands of their relatives and former friends who were members of the same synagogues, primarily in Jerusalem, but perhaps as far afield as Damascus and Antioch. He also addressed the persecutors knowing that an epistle circulating among the Christian members of the synagogue would be read by the other members too. His forthrightness cost him his life.

Although the authorship is generally ascribed to James, the Lord's brother, there is no convincing evidence to make this linkage. There is more convincing circumstantial evidence to link James, the son of Zebedee, as its author. The authorship of the epistle and its context, is crucial to our understanding of the epistle and to discerning the exhortation in James' forthright stand for the Truth. It is an exhortation we must all take to heart!

Setting the Stage, Continued

Structure of the epistle **Purpose:** To encourage his brethren and sisters in their time of trial by offering them advice and spiritual counsel and by standing up to their persecutors.

The Salutation:	1:1
Wisdom, Maturity, Patience: <i>to brethren and sisters</i>	1:2 – 18
• The purpose of trial	1:2 – 4
• Acquiring the divine perspective	1:4 – 11
• Trial and temptation	1:12 – 18
Pure Religion: <i>to the persecutors</i>	1:19 – 27
• Be doers of the word	1:19 – 25
• Pure religion and undefiled	1:26 – 27
Respect of Persons: <i>to bre. and sis. and persecutors</i>	2:1 – 13
Faith and Works: <i>primarily to the persecutors</i>	2:14 – 26
The Wisdom that is from above: <i>to the persecutors</i>	3:1 – 4:10
• Be not many teachers	3:1
• The untamed tongue	3:2 – 12
• The wisdom of the true teacher	3:13 – 18
Friendship of the world is enmity with God: <i>to the persecutors</i>	4:1 – 5:6
• Friendship with the world	4:1 – 7
• Draw near to God	4:8 – 10
• Who are you that judgeth another	4:11 – 12
• What is your life	4:13 – 17
• Condemning the Conspirators	5:1 -6
Be patient; establish your hearts: <i>to brethren and sisters</i>	5:7 – 18
• The Divine perspective	5:7 – 11
• Swear not at all	5:12
• Healing for the weak	5:11 – 15
• Preventative medicine	5:16 – 18
Converting the sinner: <i>to brethren and sisters</i>	5:19 – 20

Note: The labeling in the above outline, “*to the persecutors*” and “*to the brethren and sisters*” is meant as a guide to the primary targets of James’ remarks. However, the principles he brings forth are as universal in their application as they are timeless no matter to whom they are primarily addressed.