

INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTERS TO ALL CHRISTIANS

There are seven New Testament letters which are not Pauline and which, in spite of having no other obvious connection, were very soon grouped together. Three of these letters are attributed to John, two to Peter and the other two to James and Jude. They were already given the title 'universal' or 'catholic' by the end of the 2nd century; it is not certain why, possibly because most are addressed to the whole Christian Church and not to particular communities or individuals.

The letter of *James* was generally accepted as canonical in the Church from the 2nd century onwards. Its author is usually identified with the James, 'brother of the Lord', Mt 13:55p; cf. 12:46+, who played an important part in the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem, Ac 12:17+; 15:13-21; 21:18-26; 1 Co 15:7; Ga 1:19; 2:9,12, and who was put to death by Jews about the year 62 (Josephus, Hegesippus). He is obviously not the apostle James, son of Zebedee, Mt 10:2p, martyred by Herod in 44, Ac 12:2, though he could theoretically be identified with the apostle James, son of Alphaeus, Mt 10:3p; even early writers, however, were doubtful and most critics nowadays reject it. Paul's turn of phrase in Ga 1:19 is ambiguous. But even without being one of the Twelve, James, as 'the brother of the Lord', was sufficiently prominent for the apostolic authority of his letter to be accepted from the beginning.

The traditional attribution of the letter to James, 'the brother of the Lord', leader of the Judaeo-Christian community in Jerusalem, is supported by internal evidence. The author was familiar with the Old Testament and with the teachings of Jesus, yet his letter, though it is full of Hebraisms and makes use of parallelism, and is in a didactic style that is characteristically semitic, was obviously written in Greek. It is written, moreover, with such elegance, such a rich vocabulary and with such a skilful use of the 'diatribe', that many critics have found it hard to believe the author was a Galilean. No accurate estimate, however, can be made as to how competent first-century Palestinians were in writing Greek, and James may have been helped by a disciple familiar with the hellenistic world and its culture.

The letter is addressed to the 'twelve tribes of the Dispersion', 1:1, i.e. to the Jewish Christians scattered all over the Graeco-Roman world but concentrated in countries near Palestine like Syria and Egypt. The whole tone of the letter shows that it was intended for Jewish converts and presumes that the readers are familiar with the Old Testament since, unlike Paul and the author of the Hebrews, James hardly ever makes use of direct quotations but argues from the imprecise and rather general allusions that underlie the whole text.

His two chief sources are the Old Testament wisdom literature, on which he bases his moral lessons, and the teaching found in the gospels. Some critics have thought of the letter as an exclusively Jewish product, but, on the contrary, ideas and even characteristic expressions of Jesus can be detected all through it, not so much by explicit quotations from written texts, as by reference to a living, oral tradition. James is a Judaeo-Christian sage who has rethought the maxims of the Jewish Wisdom tradition in the light of his Master's teachings, and is able to re-present them in an original way.

More a sermon than a letter, it probably reflects the regular teaching of Judaeo-Christian assemblies and consists of a series of moral exhortations linked either by a common theme or sometimes by nothing more than verbal assonances. The sort of subjects dealt with are: how to behave in time of trial, 1:1-12; 5:7-11; the origin of temptation, 1:13-18; how to control the tongue, 1:26; 3:1-18; good relations and sympathy with one's neighbour, 2:8,13; 3:13-4:2; 4:11f; the power of prayer, 1:5-8; 4:2f; 5:13-18 etc. In 5:14f is the *locus classicus* on the sacramental (cf. Council of Trent) anointing of the sick.

There are two main themes. The first praises the poor and threatens the rich, 1:9-11; 1:27-2:9; 4:13-5:6, showing a concern for the lowly, God's favoured ones, that follows one Old Testament tradition but particularly the Beatitudes, Mt 5:3+. The second insists that Christians must do good and not be content with a faith that produces nothing, 1:22-27; 2:10-26; this leads on to a section, 2:14-26, that ridicules the preaching of faith completely unrelated to good works, and some have seen this as aimed against Paul. James and Galatians-Romans have many significant points of contact, particularly noticeable in the different ways they interpret Old Testament texts on Abraham. James may be opposing Paul himself or, more probably, certain Christians who drew pernicious conclusions from Paul's teaching. Two points are worth remembering: first, that beneath the clash between their different positions, Paul and James agree on essentials, cf. 2:14+; secondly, that the problem of relating faith to works is inherent in the data of Jewish religion and may have been a traditional topic that James and Paul dealt with independently of each other.

The dating of the letter depends on how the problem just mentioned is solved. If James is thinking of what Paul taught in Galatians-Romans, it must be dated after 57/58; if not, it could be dated before the judaising crisis (about 49), which would account for its primitive Christology. In either case it must be dated before the First Letter of Peter which is indebted to James.

Jude who calls himself 'brother of James', v. 1, is also, it appears, one of the 'brothers of the Lord', Mt 13:55p. There is no reason to identify him with the apostle of the same name, Lk 6:16; Ac 1:13; cf. Jn 14:22, especially as he refers to himself as being outside the apostolic body, v. 17. Nor is it likely that an anonymous author would have adopted the name, since Jude was not sufficiently prominent to lend authority to a letter. Our hypothesis is that after his brother James had been executed in 62 A.D., Jude followed his example and warned the Jewish Christians against new threats to their faith. If this is so, his anonymous readers are those for whom James wrote, and his Greek, which is accurate, with semitic turns of phrase, may be accounted for as in the case of James. The letter was accepted as canonical by many of the churches as early as 200, though its use of two apocryphal sources, the Book of Enoch in vv. 6,14f,

and the Assumption of Moses in v. 9, had prompted certain hesitations; but to quote contemporary Jewish writings is hardly equivalent to recognising their inspiration.

Jude's purpose in writing this letter is to denounce the false teachers who are a danger to Christian faith. He threatens them with the divine punishments familiar from Jewish tradition, vv. 5-7, and also seems to base his description of their false teaching on the same traditions, v. 11. He nowhere states precisely what these doctrines were, so they cannot be identified with second-century Gnosticism. He accuses them of irreligion and immorality, in particular of blasphemies against the Lord Christ and the angels, vv. 4,8-10. These may have been part of the syncretistic tendencies denounced in Colossians, the Pastoral Letters and Revelation.

The letter must be dated fairly late in the 1st century: the apostles are quoted as belonging to the past, vv. 17f; the faith is now something fixed and 'handed on once for all', v. 3; and the author appears to be acquainted with Paul's letters. It is true that 2 Peter borrows from Jude and is therefore later, but the 'Second Letter of Peter' could have been written after Peter's death (cf. *infra*). The limits seem to be between 70 and 80.

Two of these 'universal' letters are attributed to *Peter*. 1 Peter introduces the name of the apostle in the opening verse, 1:1, and has never been doubted in any part of the Church. Clement of Rome seems to have used it; Polycarp certainly did, and since the time of Irenaeus it has been expressly attributed to Peter. The apostle writes from Rome (Babylon, 5:13), and calls Mark, who is with him, his 'son'. Very little is known about Peter's last years; according to tradition he went to Rome and was martyred there under Nero (in 64 or possibly 67). His letter is addressed to the Christians 'of the Dispersion', and names five provinces, 1:1, which represent practically the whole of Asia Minor. From what he says, 1:14,18; 2:9f; 4:3, it seems that most of them were converted pagans, though there may have been some Judaeo-Christians among them. He was obviously obliged to send them a letter in Greek—James had done the same with less reason—and though Peter's Greek is unsophisticated it is too accurate and unforced for a fisherman from Galilee. Unlike the letter from James, the name of a disciple and secretary is mentioned who may have helped: this is Silvanus, 5:12, usually identified with the Silvanus who had been a companion of Paul, Ac 15:22+.

The purpose of the letter is to help its readers' faith in a time of trial. Some critics think this may refer to a persecution under Domitian or Trajan, which would date the letter much later than Peter; but the allusions in the letter are not strong enough to make this conclusion inevitable, since it seems that this 'time of trial' could refer rather to the personal malice and spiteful calumnies caused by the strictly moral life led by converts among those whose sins they no longer shared, 2:12; 3:16; 4:4,12-16.

Another argument against Petrine authorship is based on the liberal use the letter makes of John, Romans and Ephesians, and on the surprisingly little direct use it makes of the gospel. There are, however, many reminiscences of the gospel but these are so implicit as to constitute an argument against the idea that the author merely wanted to pretend the apostle had written it. There is a tendency perhaps to exaggerate the number of points of contact with James

and Paul. Specifically Pauline themes, e.g. the abolition of the Jewish Law, the Body of Christ, etc., do not appear at all, and though some themes appear that are best known from Paul's letters, yet these are themes common to all early Christian theology, e.g. the redemptive nature of the death of Jesus; faith and baptism, etc. Certain formulae used in primitive preaching and certain items in anthologies of Old Testament quotations are being increasingly identified by critics, and any early writings could well have drawn on these independently. Even the remaining cases where 1 Peter is dependent on Romans or Ephesians need not militate against Petrine authorship, since Peter, feeling his lack of theological gifts, may well have had recourse to Paul's writings, especially as he was writing to people who had felt Paul's influence. It is also worth remembering that Silvanus was a disciple of both apostles and that some scholars detect affinities not only between 1 Peter and Paul but also between 1 Peter and two groups of writings whose climate is Petrine: i.e. Mark and the discourses of Peter in Acts.

If the substance of the letter were in existence before Peter's death in 64 or 67, Silvanus could still have given it its present form many years later. This hypothesis would be more likely if it could be proved that the letter was made up of fragments. It is suggested that, for example, a baptismal homily, 1:13-4:11, is one such fragment, but these identifications remain very tentative.

Though a very practical letter, it is also a valuable summary of apostolic theology. The dominating theme is fortitude in trial, for which Christ himself is the model, 2:21-25; 3:18; 4:1. Christians must suffer patiently like him when their trials are due to their faith and to their saintly lives, 2:19f; 3:14; 4:12-19; 5:9, i.e. if, in return for evil, they offer: charity, obedience to civil authority, 2:13-17, and gentleness to all, 3:8-17; 4:7-11, 19. There is one obscure passage, 3:19f, cf. 4:6; the 'preaching' of Christ can be taken as an announcement either of salvation or of punishment; the 'spirits in prison' can be taken either as the wicked who were drowned in the Flood or as the fallen angels of biblical and apocalyptic tradition. On either view, this passage refers the 'preaching' to the moment Jesus died and is the chief source for the doctrine of the Descent into Hell.

The Second Letter of Peter claims to have been written by the apostle himself. He is named in the opening address, 1:1, the prediction of Peter's death is made by Jesus to the author himself, 1:14, who also claims to have witnessed the transfiguration, 1:16-18, and who alludes to a former letter that is obviously meant to be 1 Peter.

The purpose of the letter is twofold: to warn against false teachers, ch. 2, and to allay anxiety due to the delay of the *parousia*, ch. 3. It is possible that both these difficulties existed before Peter's death, but other considerations make Petrine authorship doubtful and suggest a later date. The vocabulary is notably different from 1 Peter; the whole of ch. 2 is obviously a free repetition of Jude; an accepted Pauline corpus seems to be already in existence, 3:15f; the apostolic body is referred to, with the prophets, as a thing of the past and as if the author did not belong to it. These difficulties caused early writers to hesitate, and there is no sure evidence that the letter was accepted at all before the 3rd century, and some, according to Origen, Eusebius and Jerome, explicitly refused to accept it. Most critics nowadays also reject the Petrine authorship, though the writer may have had some claim to represent Peter: perhaps he belonged to

a group of Peter's disciples, perhaps he filled out one of Peter's writings with ideas from the letter of Jude. This is what we should call forgery but what in those days literary convention found admissible.

The letter has been definitely accepted by the Church as canonical, and Christians accept it as an authoritative document from the apostolic age. The doctrine it teaches supports this: note especially the vocation of all Christians to the 'share in the divine nature', 1:4; the way scriptural inspiration is defined, 1:20f; the assurance that eventually the *parousia* will come though no one can know when; the prediction of a new world free of all injustice after the old world has been destroyed by fire, 3:3-13.

For the three letters of *John* cf. the Introduction to the Gospel and Letters of Saint John.

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Address and greetings

Ac 12:17+
Ac 26:7
1 P 1:1
Jn 7:35 1 From James, servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Greetings^a to the 1
twelve tribes of the Dispersion.^b

Trials a privilege

Mt 5:11+
1 P 4:13-14
Heb 12:11
1 P 1:6-7
Rm 5:3-5 My brothers, you will always have your trials but, when they come, try to treat 2
them as a happy privilege; •you understand that your faith is only put to the 3
test to make you patient, •but patience too is to have its practical results^c so that 4
you will become fully-developed, complete, with nothing missing.

Mt 5:48
1 K 3:7f
Pr 2:6+
Ws 8:21f
Mt 7:7-
21:21p If there is any one of you who needs wisdom, he must ask God, who 5
gives to all freely^d and ungrudgingly; it will be given to him. •But he must ask 6
with faith, and no trace of doubt, because a person who has doubts is like the 7
waves thrown up in the sea when the wind drives. •That sort of person, in two 8
minds, wavering between going different ways, must not expect that the Lord
will give him anything.

Jr 9:22-23 It is right for the poor brother to be proud of his high rank,^e •and the rich 9
one to be thankful that he has been humbled, because riches last no longer than 10
Is 40:6-7 *the flowers in the grass; •the scorching sun comes up,^f and the grass withers, the 11
flower falls; what looked so beautiful now disappears. It is the same with the rich
man: his business goes on; he himself perishes.*

Dn 12:12
Rm 8:28 Happy the man who stands firm when trials come. He has proved himself, 12
and will win the prize of life, the crown that the Lord^g has promised to those who
love him.

Temptation

Pr 19:3
Si 15:11-20
1 Co 10:13 Never, when you have been tempted, say, 'God sent the temptation'; God 13
cannot be tempted to do anything wrong, and he does not tempt anybody.
Rm 7:8-10, 23 Everyone who is tempted is attracted and seduced by his own wrong desire. 14
Rm 5:12-6:23 Then the desire conceives and gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it too 15
Heb 6:1+ has a child, and the child is death.

Mt 7:11
Jn 3:3,27 Make no mistake about this, my dear brothers: •it is all that is good, 16
everything that is perfect, which is given us from above; it comes down^h from the 17
Father of all light;ⁱ with him there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow of a
change. •By his own choice he made us his children by the message of the truth^j 18
so that we should be a sort of first-fruits of all that he had created.

True religion

Pr 10:19:
14:17 Remember this, my dear brothers: be *quick to listen* but *slow* to speak and 19
Si 5:11 slow to rouse your temper; •God's righteousness is never served by man's anger; 20
Mt 5:22
1 P 2:1-2
Ga 5:19+ so do away with all the impurities and bad habits that are still left in you—accept 21

- and submit to the word which has been planted in you and can save your souls.
- 22 But you must do what the word tells you, and not just listen to it and deceive
 23 yourselves. •To listen to the word and not obey is like looking at your own features
 24 in a mirror and then, •after a quick look, going off and immediately forgetting
 25 what you looked like. •But the man who looks steadily at the perfect law of
 freedom^k and makes that his habit—not listening and then forgetting, but actively
 putting it into practice—will be happy in all that he does.
- 26 Nobody must imagine that he is religious while he still goes on deceiving
 himself and not keeping control over his tongue; anyone who does this has the
 27 wrong idea of religion. •Pure, unspoilt religion, in the eyes of God our Father^l
 is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it, and keeping
 oneself uncontaminated by the world.

Jn 3:11 +
 Mt 7:24-27p
 Lk 8:21
 Rm 2:13
 1 Jn 3:17r

Ps 19:7
 Mt 5:17
 Jn 13:17
 Rm 7:12; 6:
 15+; 8:2

3:2f

Ex 22:21 +

Respect for the poor

- 1 2 My brothers, do not try to combine faith in Jesus Christ, our glorified Lord,^a
 2 with the making of distinctions between classes of people. •Now suppose a man
 comes into your synagogue,^b beautifully dressed and with a gold ring on, and at
 3 the same time a poor man comes in, in shabby clothes, •and you take notice of the
 well-dressed man, and say, 'Come this way to the best seats'; then you tell the
 4 poor man, 'Stand over there' or 'You can sit on the floor by my foot-rest'. •Can't
 you see that you have used two different standards in your mind, and turned
 yourselves into judges, and corrupt judges at that?
- 5 Listen, my dear brothers: it was those who are poor according to the world
 that God chose, to be rich in faith^c and to be the heirs to the kingdom which he
 6 promised to those who love him. •In spite of this, you have no respect for anybody
 who is poor. Isn't it always the rich who are against you? Isn't it always their
 7 doing when you are dragged before the court? •Aren't they the ones who insult
 8 the honourable name to which you have been dedicated?^d •Well, the right thing
 to do is to keep the supreme law of scripture: *you must love your neighbour as*
 9 *yourself*; •but as soon as you make distinctions between classes of people, you are
 committing sin, and under condemnation for breaking the Law.
- 10 You see, if a man keeps the whole of the Law, except for one small point
 11 at which he fails, he is still guilty of breaking it all. •It was the same person who
 said, '*You must not commit adultery*' and '*You must not kill*'. Now if you commit
 murder, you do not have to commit adultery as well to become a breaker of the

1 Co 1:26-29
 Zp 2:3+
 Ry 2:9
 1:12
 Mt 4:17+
 Ga 3:29

Is 5:2

Rm 13:8-10

Lv 19:18
 Mt 22:39p
 Pr 24:23+

Dt 1:17

Dt 27:26
 Mt 5:19
 Ga 3:10;
 5:3
 Ex 20:13-14
 Dt 5:17-18

1 a. Lit. 'Be joyful' or 'Rejoice', a normal Greek greeting. 'Happy privilege' v. 2 (lit. 'all joy deem it') is in Greek a pun on the greeting formula.

b. In O.T. days the 'Dispersion' (*diaspora*) was used to describe the Jews who had emigrated from their country, cf. Ps 147:2; Jdt 5:19; cf. Jn 7:35. Here the reference is to the Jewish Christians living in the Graeco-Roman world, cf. Ac 2:5-11.

c. James, in the tradition of the Jews, believes the essence of religion is its practical value in actions, cf. 2:14+.

d. Lit. 'uncompoundedly' i.e. simply, or 'unreservedly'.

e. It is a theme of the O.T. that the poor, cf. Zp 2:3+, will be rewarded, 1 S 2:7-8; Ps 72:4,12, etc., and this theme is developed in the gospels, cf. Lk 1:52, Lk 6:20, etc., to show their reward in terms of the kingdom of heaven. This privilege of the poor is recognised in the early Church; it is barred to the rich unless they reduce themselves to the same humble state, cf. Mt 5:3+.

f. Or 'As soon as the sun, with a scorching wind'.

g. Om. 'the Lord', Vulg. reads 'God'.

h. Om. (Vet. Lat.) 'from above'.

i. Lit. 'the Father of the lights', i.e. the maker of the stars, Gn 1:14-18, and source of spiritual light, cf. 1 P 2:9; 1 Jn 1:5. The imagery following this phrase is suggested by astronomy. Var. 'no such thing as alteration due to the movement of a shadow'.

j. Lit. 'He deliberately teemed us forth by a word of truth'. This 'word of truth' is everything God has revealed to the human race, it is also called the law of freedom or the supreme Law, cf. 1:21-25; 2:8.

k. This reflects the Jewish concept of human freedom as flowing from obedience to the Law; Paul, however, had a different concept of Christian freedom as something flowing from the Christian's release from obedience to the Law, cf. Rm 6:15+; 7:1+.

l. Cf. Mt 6:9; 1 Co 15:24; Ep 5:20. The O.T. uses the phrase in Dt 32:6; cf. Is 63:16; Si 23:1,4; Ws 2:16.

2 a. Lit. 'our Lord Jesus Christ of glory', cf. 1 Co 2:8+.

b. James is writing to Jewish Christians; it is possible they may even have still been attending Jewish synagogues, or it may be his word for the Christian 'assembly' for liturgical services.

c. I.e. poor in money, rich in faith, cf. 1:9+; this letter is not concerned to advocate social reform since it emphasises that the poor already have the truest wealth.

d. Lit. 'blaspheming the good name invoked over you (or: that you bear)'. In the O.T. the name of Yahweh pronounced over someone dedicated him to the divine protection, Am 9:12; Is 43:7; Jr 14:9. In the N.T. the only means of salvation is the name of Jesus invoked, e.g. at baptism, Ac 2:21+.

Mt 6:14-15; 18:35
Lk 6:36f
Rm 6:15-17
1 Jn 4:18
Law. •Talk and behave like people who are going to be judged by the law of freedom, •because there will be judgement without mercy for those who have not been merciful themselves;^c but the merciful need have no fear of judgement.

Faith and good works^f

2:24
Rm 4:1
Ga 5:6
Mt 23:41-43
1 Co 13:3
1 Jn 3:17
Mt 7:21
Take the case, my brothers, of someone who has never done a single good act but claims that he has faith. Will that faith save him? •If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, 'I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty', without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that? •Faith is like that: if good works do not go with it, it is quite dead.^g

This is the way to talk to people of that kind:^h 'You say you have faith and I have good deeds; I will prove to you that I have faith by showing you my good deeds—now you prove to me that you have faith without any good deeds to show. You believe in the one God—that is creditable enough, but the demons have the same belief, and they tremble with fear. •Do realise, you senseless man, that faith without good deeds is useless.ⁱ •You surely know that Abraham our father was justified by his deed, because he *offered his son Isaac on the altar*? •There you see it: faith and deeds were working together; his faith became perfect by what he did.^j This is what scripture really means when it says: *Abraham put his faith in God, and this was counted as making him justified*; and that is why he was called 'the friend of God'.

2:14+
Jos 2:4f
Heb 11:31
You see now that it is by doing something good, and not only by believing, that a man is justified. •There is another example of the same kind: Rahab the prostitute, justified by her deeds because she welcomed the messengers^k and showed them a different way to leave. •A body dies when it is separated from the spirit, and in the same way faith is dead if it is separated from good deeds.

Uncontrolled language

Mt 12:36;
23:8
1 Co 12:28+
3 Only a few of you, my brothers, should be teachers, bearing in mind that those of us^a who teach can expect a stricter judgement.

Pr 10:19;
13:3; 18:21
Sl 14:1
Sl 5:9-15;
28:13-26
After all, every one of us does something wrong, over and over again; the only man who could reach perfection would be someone who never said anything wrong—he would be able to control every part of himself. •Once^b we put a bit into the horse's mouth, to make it do what we want, we have the whole animal under our control. •Or think of ships: no matter how big they are, even if a gale is driving them, the man at the helm can steer them anywhere he likes by controlling a tiny rudder. •So is the tongue only a tiny part of the body, but it can proudly claim that it does great things. Think how small a flame can set fire to a huge forest; •the tongue is a flame like that. Among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a whole wicked world in itself:^c it infects the whole body; catching fire itself from hell, it sets fire to the whole wheel of creation.^d •Wild animals and birds, reptiles and fish can all be tamed by man, and often are; •but nobody can tame the tongue—it is a pest that will not keep still, full of deadly poison. •We use it to bless the Lord and Father,^e but we also use it to curse men who are made in God's image: •the blessing and the curse come out of the same mouth.^f My brothers, this must be wrong—does any water supply give a flow of fresh water and salt water out of the same pipe? •Can a fig tree give you olives, my brothers, or a vine give figs? No more can sea water give you fresh water.

Real wisdom and its opposite

Ep 4:1-2
If there are any wise or learned men among you, let them show it by their good lives, with humility and wisdom in their actions. •But if at heart you have the bitterness of jealousy, or a self-seeking ambition, never make any claims for yourself or cover up the truth with lies —•principles of this kind are not the wisdom that comes down from above: they are only earthly, animal and