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### THE BACKGROUND

The Epistle of James is included in the grouping commonly designated “The General Epistles.” In this classification, James takes its place along with the two letters of Peter, the three letters of John and the short Epistle of Jude. Eusebius (ca. A.D. 265–340) reports that these letters were called “catholic” (general) by the Christians of his day.

What they appear to have in common to qualify for the title “general” is that they do not appear to have been written for any particular congregation or group of Christians.

The Interpreter’s Bible makes the observation: “Indeed, the teaching of the epistle is so free from concrete applications to any specific time or place that for the most part it is as fresh and as useful today as when it first was written; it is this very fact that gives James its enduring appeal.”

It would be difficult to find fault with this splendid tribute to the universal timelessness of the message in the Epistle of James. As we study this letter, I think that we will be impressed with its *timelessness*.

### THE INTENDED FIRST READERS

While we heartily agree with the observation regarding the universality of the message of this letter, we do find a specific clue from the author as to the people he had in mind when he was moved by the Spirit to pen these words. In chapter 1, verse 1, he identifies the original addressees as “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.”

At the same time, we can point to examples in the New Testament where titles and attributes of Old Testament Israel are applied to the New Testament “People of God.”

Taken in this way, this salutation or greeting might very well indicate that the author was addressing all Christians, wherever they might be, and in whatever age they might be living. Perhaps, it might help to make this letter more personal for us as we begin this study, to think of it as a message with our name included “at the top.”

Having made this point, we need to say that there are several present-day Bible scholars who have become convinced that the author of this letter did have in mind a specific group of people when he referred to them as “the twelve tribes of the Dispersion.”

Drawing from internal evidence in the letter, these scholars suggest the probability that when the author used the term “the twelve tribes” he had in mind, first of all, the Christians of Jewish heritage and religious practice who were members of the first Christian Church in Jerusalem.

Our study of the letter will give us a chance to make up our minds about the validity of these recent conclusions. It is our hope that considering the letter from this perspective will in no way detract from the sense of “personalness” we might otherwise feel about this message.

On the other hand, there is this to be said about accepting the newer interpretation: The more that we can put ourselves into the frame of mind or viewpoint of the person writing the letter, the more precise we can be of what the author is trying to communicate to them. The more we understand what he is trying to teach them, the easier it might be for us to appreciate his message for ourselves and apply it to our own life.

### THE SPECIFIC OCCASION FOR WRITING

Although it is quite apparent that the author of the Letter of James was very well acquainted with the circumstances of the people for whom the letter was originally intended, there do not seem to be any references which are specific enough to pinpoint any particular event or set of circumstances as the immediate reason for the letter.

### AUTHORSHIP

The man who penned the letter identifies himself as “James, the servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The name of James, in its original form “Jacobus,” was an extremely common name among the Jews and the early Christians. Come to think of it, the name James is still quite popular, isn’t it? Reflect for a moment or two on how many people you know who have that name or a derivation from that name — like Jim or Jamie? How many did you come up with?

As we might very well expect, there are differences of opinion among Bible students as to the identity of the particular “James” who wrote this letter. It gets to be a contest, not unlike that guessing game which was on television a few years ago. You find yourself frustrated, saying, “Will the real “James” please stand up?”

When we hear the name of “James” our tendency would be to think of the disciple of Jesus who was very prominent in the Gospels. With his brother John, this James was called into discipleship very early on. He and John were sons of Zebedee. Along with his brother, and their friend Simon Peter, this man was part of the so-called “inner circle” of the disciples of Jesus. On several occasions, we recall, this trio was singled out for special service and experience by our Lord. Most notably there was the event of our Lord’s transfiguration at which it was Peter, James, and John who were invited to accompany Him to that sacred spot. When Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane for His struggle in prayer on the night of His betrayal, Peter, James, and John were invited to go with Him.

Considering the closeness of this James to the Lord, he might be our first choice as the possible author of this book of the Bible. However, his name is quickly ruled out because the book of Acts (12:2) reports that he died a martyr’s death not too long after our Lord’s ascension. In fact it was his martyrdom and the accompanying circumstances of persecution that triggered the “dispersion” which the greeting at the top of this letter speaks.

### JAMES, APOSTLE AND SON OF ALPHEUS?

Attesting again to the popularity of the name “James,”

among the twelve disciples of Jesus, there were two with the same name. The other disciple is referred to as “James the son of Alphaeus” (Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Acts 1:13). Dr. Paul E. Kretzmann, editor of the Walther League’s *The Popular Commentary* published by Concordia Publishing House in 1922, makes a case for this James as the author of this epistle. This position does not have the support of other scholars who point out that this quiet, unassuming Apostle had very little to do with the Christians in and around Jerusalem in those early days. He would have needed to identify himself with more than just his first name.

### JAMES, THE BROTHER OF JESUS?

The Biblical record shows that this James, known as “Brother of our Lord,” centered his ministerial activity in Jerusalem. When controversy arose in the Early Church regarding the question of the need for Gentile Christians to observe the Ceremonial Laws of the Old Testament, a church council was called (A.D. 50). The chairman of that momentous meeting was this James.

The great Christian Scholar, Origen of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 185–ca. 254) is the first Church writer who explicitly quotes this epistle as Holy Scripture, ascribing it to James, “The Lord’s brother.”

Early reliable tradition supports this position that it was the brother of Jesus who authored the letter.

### DATE OF WRITING

James is very likely one of the first of the New Testament books to have been written. If, as is most commonly accepted, James the brother of Jesus was its author, it obviously had to have been composed prior to his martyrdom. He was murdered somewhere between A.D. 62 and 66. Another point of reference is the Jerusalem Council held A.D. 50. There is no mention of this in the Epistle, so scholars pretty much agree that something of such prominence in the life of the Early Church at Jerusalem would certainly have been referred to, if the letter had been written after this event.

An early date for writing this letter seems to be supported by the letter itself. Consider the simplicity of the greeting or salutation, the use of the word

synagogue for a Christian place of worship, and the reference to the “elders” only as officials in the Church. This would put its date of writing somewhere around A.D. 45. Think of it — only a decade and a half after Christ’s Ascension!

### THE LITERARY STYLE OF JAMES

Most Bible scholars are quick to observe and point out that there is a close similarity between the style of James and the so called “Wisdom Literature” of the Old Testament. For example, there is a great deal of poetic “parallelism.” We are familiar with this form in the Psalms. Some have even referred to the Epistle of James as “The Christian Psalm.” Others have tagged it “A homily in the Letter Form.” Its style is strongly “hortatory,” filled with one exhortation after another. In the 108 verses which make up the letter there are about sixty (60) imperatives!

Most commentators seem to take the position that it would be a fruitless search to try to find a traditional outline for the thoughts presented in the letter. At first glance, so it would seem, the letter appears to be more like the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, with a series of independent exhortations and directives strung together “like a string of pearls.”

Without a doubt, for those who regard it as such and study all of the injunctions in this way, there is bound to be spiritual blessing. Nevertheless, we humbly add that there are a few Bible students who have managed to come up with some fairly clear and logical divisions of thought and at least “sort of an outline.” That has been our experience, too, that for the sake of an organized Bible study, such as this one, such an outline might prove helpful.

### THE PLACE OF JAMES IN THE SCRIPTURAL CANON

Over the years, there have been some church leaders and students of Holy Scripture who have had second thoughts, yes even looked with suspicion upon this Epistle of James. Most notable of these, perhaps from our point of view, was Dr. Martin Luther, from whom the Lutheran Church gets its name.

In Luther’s “Preface to the New Testament” of 1522, James was stigmatized by the good Doctor Luther as an “Epistle of straw.” He probably picked up this analogy from

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Jeremiah 23:28, or 1 Corinthians 3:12. Luther even remarked that he “would give his doctor’s beret to anyone who could reconcile James and Paul.”

Dr. Roland Bainton in his popular biography of Luther, “Here I Stand,” makes the observation that Luther “earned his own beret” by reconciling the theology of James and Paul himself. He sounded very much like James when he wrote: “Faith is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith.” James couldn’t have said it better.

A search of Biblical references in Luther’s Works shows that Dr. Luther quoted or referred to various passages of James over 150 times. Most of these were in a positive way, using James to support a particular idea or teaching. This seems to show that he had high regard for this little Epistle after all.

As we move into a detailed study of this wonderful letter, asking for the Holy Spirit’s blessing, we will surely be strengthened in our belief that the Holy Spirit was the real author of these 108 verses we refer to as the Epistle of James. We will also conclude that it was the same Holy Spirit who directed the New Testament Church to recognize His divine involvement in the writing and His influence in moving the Church to place it among what we refer to as the “Canonical books of the Bible.”

The Council of Carthage in the year 397 officially placed the church’s stamp of approval upon the Epistle of James and established its canonicity.



**PERSONAL APPLICATION – JAMES 1:1**


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*Thank you, Father in Heaven, for sending Your Holy Spirit into the hearts and minds of the writers of Holy Scripture. Send that same Spirit into my heart and mind as I seek to know and do Your will. Amen.*

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James 1:1

1. In the space below write a concise “bio” of “James, the Brother of Jesus.” Use one word “summaries” of qualities and traits. Think of it as a brief characterization of a pastor being considered for a divine call to your congregation. (Matthew 13:55; Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:17-19; John 7:2-5; Galatians 1:19, 2:9; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Jude 1:1).
2. Complete the following sentence: “I think that I would/would not consider it a blessing to have James as my pastor, because...”
3. Tradition and historical evidence point to the author of the Epistle of James as being a “brother” of Jesus. Why might some Christian people find this conclusion unacceptable?

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How do you feel about the idea that Mary and Joseph had a normal marriage after the Birth of Jesus?

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4. What does Jesus say about our relationship to Him in Matthew 12:46-50?
  5. In the first verse of his Epistle, James identifies himself as a “servant.” The Greek word for this is “doulos,” which is generally translated “slave.” What do you think James is intending to communicate about his relationship to God and Jesus by using this term?
  6. Can you pick out two words in verse one which show quite conclusively that James believed in both the Deity of Jesus and that He was the promised “Messiah”? (Acts 2:36, John 1:1).
  7. James addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes.” How are they described?
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8. In a few words describe the situation which members of the newly founded Christian movement had to deal with at the time that James, the brother of Jesus, was supervising pastor for the church in Jerusalem. (Acts 4:1-3, 5:17-18, 27, 33, 40, 7:54-58, and 8:2-3). What was happening? Who was responsible for the problems? What was the underlying reason for the hostility?
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9. Consider the harassment and persecution, which caused the "Dispersion" of Jewish Christians. What "redeeming" value was there to this movement? (Acts 8:4, Matthew 5:13).
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10. In the United States, especially on each coast, we are observing the influx of many different ethnic groups. They are being "dispersed" in many directions as a result of problems in their homelands. How might this phenomenon fit into God's plans?
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11. What lessons can we learn from this as we think about our own personal life and the contacts we might make?
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12. In many places James sounds a lot like Jesus, which would not be too surprising if, as we believe, this James was brought up in the same household with Jesus. In the following partial list, match the words of James to the words of Jesus.
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|------------------|-------|------------------|
| a. James 1:6     | _____ | Matthew 22:39    |
| b. James 2:8     | _____ | Luke 4:25        |
| c. James 3:6     | _____ | Mark 4:26-27     |
| d. James 5:7     | _____ | Matthew 7:7      |
| e. James 5:17-18 | _____ | Matthew 12:36-37 |