

Historical Background

I. The Epistle of James

Readers of the Epistle of James will notice that the letter consists of large sections of teaching on specific topics along with other shorter sections on topics largely unrelated to each other.¹ As a result, many scholars and interpreters have struggled to understand the overall structure and theme of the epistle. Many, like Luther, have concluded that the Epistle of James is merely a collection of random teachings with no relation to each other. However, although the form may not present a strict and clear structure, there appear to be a number of larger themes that guide the overall purpose of the letter.

Testing appears to be the larger context for the letter, including the presence of persecution and suffering in the churches. Within this context, Moo considers the central concern (not “theme”) to be spiritual adultery, as evidenced by James’ climax (4:4-10).² James’ readers are guilty of trying to be friends with the world (4:4). As a result, they compromise their divine charge to be doers of the word and not merely hearers (1:22). The other issues in the epistle, such as obedience to the word (1:21-25; 2:14-26), the need for godly wisdom (3:16), and pure religion (1:27) should be seen as opportunities for James’ readers to be friends either with the world or with God, possessing “spiritual ‘wholeness.’”³

The Greek of the Epistle of James is high quality *koine* similar to the Epistle to the Hebrews. Richardson notes that James’ Greek “may be judged of a more literary quality than that of the Gospel of John and does not indulge in the personalized expressiveness found in Paul’s letters.”⁴ The use of subordination, control of word order, the lack of barbarisms and anacolutha, the use of the gnomic aorist, and choice of vocabulary evidence James’ literary skill. Concerning vocabulary, some sixty-three *hapax legomena* are found in the Epistle of James.⁵ Furthermore, James uses the LXX when quoting or alluding to the Old Testament, further indicating a great dependence upon and use of Greek.

Before Origen’s reference to it in the third century, the letter was relatively obscure. Eusebius (c. 325) refers to the epistle as one of the challenged (*antilegomena*)

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 30.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴ Kurt A. Richardson, vol. 36, *James*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 2.

⁵ Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* in The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 58.

books while Tertullian, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Hippolytus make no reference to it. The epistle is also absent from the Canon Muratori, usually dated around AD 180.⁶ Based on the scarcity of references to the Epistle of James one can only deduce that the letter was not widely used in the early church before its inclusion in the canon.

Due to the relative obscurity of James before the third century, the epistle did not enter into the canon quickly or with ease. It was highly doubted in the East but gained acceptance in the West under the influence of Hilary (315-68), Jerome (354-419), and Augustine (354-430).⁷ Origen was the first church father to claim that the epistle was genuine, quote it as scripture, and name its author as James (though unspecified and sometimes called “apostle”).⁸

The Epistle of James had to overcome three hurdles to be included in the canon of scripture: “people’s addiction to their old heritage,” “their passion to have what other churches, especially the big churches, had” and “the determination of the authorities to give the flock only apostolic Scriptures.”⁹ The first hurdle would have kept the epistle out of the canon had it been the only factor. The Epistle of James was not well known like many of the traditional apostolic letters. The second hurdle actually benefited the epistle because of the letter’s use in Alexandria and many other important Greek cities. Finally, because many of the church fathers were uncertain of the epistle’s authorship, it almost was not included in the canon because of doubted apostolic authority. In fact, although much theological debating occurred over the epistle, none of these issues—such as the relationship between faith and works—hindered the canonical inclusion of the Epistle of James. Rather, the only dominant issue was that the epistle “could not, so to speak, produce its passport.”¹⁰

After its inclusion in Athanasius’ Easter Festal Letter (AD 367) and the strong insistence of Athanasius, the Epistle of James was included in the authoritative canon by the third and fourth Councils of Carthage (397 and 419).¹¹ It remained unchallenged until the Reformation in the early 16th century. William Tyndale, writing in 1526, says of the Epistle of James “methinketh it ought of right to be taken for holy Scripture.”¹² John Calvin also accepted the epistle but Erasmus and Martin Luther were hostile toward it. As a result, on April 8, 1546, the Epistle of James was declared “Holy Scripture” at the Council of Trent.¹³

⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 51, gen. eds. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988), lxxii.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 39-40.

⁹ James B. Adamson, *James: The Man and His Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 165.

¹⁰ Ibid., 166.

¹¹ Ibid., 152.

¹² Ibid., 147.

¹³ Ibid., 40.

II. Background Information

The author of the Epistle of James has traditionally been recognized as James, the brother of Jesus, who led the Christian community in Jerusalem shortly after the death of Jesus and was later called “James the Just.”¹⁴ Evidence for this conclusion comes from references to James in the Gospels of John and Mark, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Pauline letters of Galatians and 1 Corinthians. Outside of the New Testament, church fathers such as Josephus, Eusebius, Hegesippus, and Epiphanius bear witness to James’ authorship.

Two internal issues have most often been cited against James being the author of the Epistle. First, although James was the brother of Jesus and a witness of his death and resurrection, it is strange that the epistle does not contain more explicit references to Jesus. Second, the Greek used in the epistle is “among the best in the NT.”¹⁵ Consequently, interpreters find it difficult to believe that James, a lower-class Jew from Galilee could have possessed the necessary education to use high-quality literary Greek. However, as Laws notes, due to the prominent presence of Greek in Palestine, “it is certainly no longer possible to assert with complete confidence that James of Jerusalem could not have written the good Greek of the epistle.”¹⁶

Despite the absence of explicit references to Jesus and the high literary Greek present in the Epistle of James, the traditional belief that James, the brother of Jesus, is the author still stands for a number of reasons. The first verse of the epistle identifies James as the brother. No other James mentioned in the New Testament lived long enough or was prominent enough to be the author of the epistle.¹⁷ Some of the wording in the letter resembles James’ speech in Acts 15:13-1. The circumstances of the letter fit the setting of James of Jerusalem. Finally, the primitive Christian theology of the letter fits the early Jewish-Christian environment in which James of Jerusalem lived.¹⁸

James addresses his letter to the “twelve tribes of the Dispersion” (1:1). There has been much debate over whether James writes to Jewish Christians or non-Jewish Christians. Adamson believes that the epistle is addressed both to “Christian and (hopefully) to non-Christian Jews, outside and within Palestine itself.”¹⁹ Martin, referencing F.F. Bruce, notes “it is possible to...view (tentatively) James’ address as directed to the worldwide community of believing Jews of the messianic faith.”²⁰ Finally, Richardson notes that a proper identification of James’ audience can only be conjecture

¹⁴ Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), Laws, 38-9.

¹⁵ Davids, 10.

¹⁶ Laws, 40.

¹⁷ Moo, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 51.

²⁰ Martin, 8.

because arguments can be made both for a Jewish-Christian audience and a non-Jewish audience.²¹

James writes his epistle to a group of (presumably) Christians living in the midst of a pagan Roman Empire. As a result, these Christians were oppressed and persecuted by non-Christians. James writes to instruct believers on how to live in the midst of a world that is opposed to Christianity. Though James addresses many practical matters such as prejudice, language, charity, and trials, all of these issues are under the umbrella of a spiritual issue. As Moo notes, “The situation of the church in the world provides one important context for the letter. But the letter ultimately has much more to say about the problem of the world getting into the church.”²² James writes to exhort his readers to live properly as Christians, not being influenced by the pagan world around them.

The date for the Epistle of James is tied to the identity of its author. If the author is James, the Lord’s brother, it must have been written prior to AD 62 when he was martyred.²³ Furthermore, there are two strong indications that the letter was written prior to AD 48-49. The Jerusalem Council occurred in AD 48-49 to settle the issue of Gentile inclusion (Acts 15). During that conference James interacted with Paul, so it unlikely that James would have written on justification and faith (2:14-26) in the same manner if he had not met Paul. Also, after the Gentile inclusion, there was much debate of the use of Torah, a topic unaddressed in James’ epistle. Thus, the epistle was most likely written before AD 48-49, possible in the mid-40s.²⁴

The place of writing (setting) and connection to the readers for the Epistle of James are also both tied to its author. Assuming that the epistle was written by James, the Lord’s brother, then it must be set in Jerusalem. James became head of the Jerusalem church around AD 44, during the imprisonment of Peter.²⁵ James stood as one of the prominent leaders in the early church, in particular a bridge between Judaism and Christianity. Adamson notes that James emerged “as a devout lifelong Nazirite and powerful Jewish-Christian apostle, a unique mixture of saint and OT prophet.”²⁶ As such, James wrote to (presumably) Jewish-background Christians struggling to live as Christians in the Roman Empire. He was uniquely able to provide guidance from a central point of the growing faith to the many believers dispersed throughout the empire.

III. Critical Issues

One of the most critical issues in James’ epistle is the relationship between faith and deeds. Many readers find James’ emphasis on the Christian life and the necessity

²¹ Richardson, 10.

²² Moo, 16.

²³ Ibid., 17.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Adamson, *James: The Man and His Message*, 20.

²⁶ Ibid.

for evidential works to be alarming. While it is certainly important for the Christian to evidence his faith by an outward life change, James almost appears to elevate works or deed to a place of salvific importance, which would place the letter outside of orthodoxy.

The passage in question is James 2:14-26, where James makes the statement, “faith without works is dead.” At first glance, James appears to teach a works-based salvation, which is contrary to the entirety of Scripture, especially the Pauline epistles. However, as Peter Davids notes, “the argument is that verbal, intellectual assent to doctrine is meaningless unless an altered lifestyle reveals a truly salvific commitment.”²⁷ Claiming to possess life-changing faith without exhibiting a changed life was the epitome of inconsistency for James. Thus, it is consistent with James’ theology to claim that faith without accompanying works is not a living faith.

Included in the discussion of James’ theology is his usage of Greek vocabulary. The respective Greek words for “works” and “justify,” *erga* and *dicaiovw*, take on different inflected meanings when used by James compared to their usage by Paul. Paul speaks of works of the law, “ceremonial rites added to the work of Christ.”²⁸ James’ “works” are ethical deeds that flow from true faith, to which even Paul encouraged his readers. Furthermore, when Paul uses “justification” as what Davids calls a “forensic term,” referring to the declaration of a person as being just or not guilty.²⁹ James uses *dicaiovw* in the more common way to mean the act by which one proves himself to be righteous. Thus, although Paul and James use the same vocabulary, context indicates that the two writers differ in their meanings and are not in contradiction regarding faith, works, and salvation.

IV. Theological Issues

Within the Epistle of James there are a number of key theological issues. While commentators differ on the exact number of issues, there are at least seven: God, Christ, eschatology, ethical teaching, the Law, wisdom, and human nature. First, prominent throughout James’ letter is the doctrine of God. However, the doctrine of God is prominent only in its presupposition rather than its extensive development.³⁰ While James does not dictate a complete doctrine, his entire letter is built upon the nature of God and God’s three characteristics of oneness, jealousy, and grace.³¹

The second theological issue addressed in James’ letter is Christology. Like his doctrine of God, James’ doctrine of Christ is largely undeveloped yet equally largely implied. James applies the title “Lord” to both God the Father and Jesus. Also, Jesus is cast as the eschatological judge in James 5:7, 9. As Moo notes, “[one finds] in the

²⁷ Davids, 50.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 51.

³⁰ Richardson, 15.

³¹ Moo, 19.

juxtaposition of these points an incipient trinitarianism.”³² By attributing to Jesus titles and functions that belong solely to God, James teaches his readers the divinity of Jesus.

Eschatology is the third theological issue that James addresses in his letter. Beginning with the presence of trials (1:2-4), James exhorts his readers to consider the end times as encouragement over temporal suffering. In 2:12-13 and 4:11-12, James warns his readers not to judge each other because only God *can* judge and *will* judge in the last days. Finally, in 5:1-6 James warns the rich against placing their hope and faith in riches that will not survive the judgment that will come when Christ returns. James’ entire ethical teaching is based upon the imminent return of Christ and the final judgment. Readers are exhorted to ethical living by the insistence not that “the Lord *would* come at any moment” but by the reminder “that he *could*.”³³

The fourth theological issue James addresses is ethics, the connection between the Christian life and speech, trials, wealth, and mercy. Christians have a duty to use speech in a way that honors God, not in a way that tears down other believers (3:1-12). Trials come in many different forms and from many different sources, but all of them have the same purpose. Trials are used by God to perfect the believer, “not in the sense that a person becomes sinless but that it drives him or her to mature, complete faith.”³⁴ Those believers who are blessed with material wealth have a divine mandate to use that wealth to care for the widows and orphans (1:27), not to oppress the poor through injustice and prejudice (2:17). God chooses the poor as objects of mercy (2:5), so believers must not exalt wealth to a place of prominence that it does not deserve. Finally, believers are exhorted to show mercy toward others. James notes that judgment is coming for all but “mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:13). God will only show mercy to those who show mercy to others.

While the Law is not explicitly discussed in James’ letter, it is nonetheless the fifth theological issue that must be examined. James’ primary Old Testament source for his theology of the Law is Leviticus 19, specifically verse 18 which summed up the entire Law in the command to love God and neighbor. Because of the focus on the ethical aspect of the Law, James does not consider the ceremonial and political laws in his letter. Instead, James is concerned with how his readers treat their brothers. Based on Leviticus 19, James exhorts against false swearing (5:12), withholding of wages (5:5), partiality (2:1-7) and slander (4:11-12).³⁵

One of the most difficult aspects of understanding James’ use of the Law is the connection between Old Testament Law and the Christian life. Much controversy has existed for centuries because of the apparent contradiction between Paul and James. For the most part, Paul spoke negatively about the Law (Rom. 7:4, for example). However, James speaks highly of the Law, even calling it the “law of liberty” (1:25). James’ treatment of the Old Testament Law is uniquely tied to the life and work of Jesus. The Law is still a guide for Christians because Jesus has fulfilled it. As Moo

³² Ibid., 20.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Richardson, 13.

³⁵ Moo, 21.

notes, “this standard of conduct is still law because it continues into the new age of salvation the will of God expressed in torah, but it is now a law ‘of liberty’ because it comes...from the one whose ‘yoke is easy’ and ‘burden is light’ (Matt. 11:30).”³⁶

The sixth theological issue in James’ letter is wisdom and its relationship to earthly living. James mentions wisdom explicitly only twice (1:5; 3:13-18). For believers enduring trials, James encourages them to ask God for wisdom in order to understand his ways. Wisdom that comes from God is also contrasted with earthly wisdom that is demonic and unspiritual (3:15). For James, wisdom is tied to ethical behavior. Proper wisdom leads people to be “humble and anxious to perform good deeds” while improper wisdom leads people to be “selfish and contentious.”³⁷

Finally, the seventh key theological issue in James’ letter is human nature and the connection between being made in the image of God while simultaneously being a fallen being. Both faith and the temptation to sin are found within fallen human nature. Richardson notes, “Human beings are created in and possess the qualities of the image of God (3:9), but they are also their own sources of evil desire and contentiousness.”³⁸ No believer can blame God for tempting him (1:13), for God does not tempt anyone. Believers must look to God for the strength required to resist temptation and prove faithful to God’s good purposes.

³⁶ Ibid., 23.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Richardson, 15.