



The Epistle of James

The letter of James is the longest “Catholic” epistle. It comes out of a Jewish Christian community and has a strong focus on practical ethics. It begins simply, “James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes [of Israel] in the diaspora [i.e. outside Israel], greetings” (1:1), leaving us to guess which James is, or is supposed to be the author. We know of several Jameses in early churches, but the most famous are James the brother of John and James son of Alphaeus, who are remembered as disciples of Jesus (Matt 10:2–3, Mark 3:17–18, Luke 16:14–15), together with “James the brother of the Lord,” who is remembered by Paul and Acts as a leading figure in the early Christian community in Jerusalem (e.g. Gal 2:9): its spokesman (Acts 12:17, 15:13–21), and perhaps (with or after Simon Peter) its leader. It seems likely that the letter is attributed to one of these three, and, of these, probably the most obvious authority figure is James the brother of the Lord.

Most scholars, however, think that the letter is likely to be pseudonymous. All three of the best known Jameses were probably Aramaic speakers from modest backgrounds, and there is no indication that they spoke, let alone wrote Greek. This letter is written in excellent Greek, by someone who had a relatively high-level education. If it is pseudonymous, however, its date is very uncertain. Nothing within the letter indicates whether it was written before, after, or well after the fall of the temple in 70 CE. It does not show clear knowledge of the gospels but does seem to know the “double tradition” of teaching material used by Matthew and Luke, and also the letters of Paul and 1 Peter. Teachers and elders (presbyters) are referred to in the letter, but not deacons or bishops/overseers. All this suggests that it could have been written as early as the late first century, but some scholars put it as late as the mid-second century.

The Letter's Jewish Character

One of the most striking aspects of this letter is how little in it is specifically Christian. After 1:1, there is just one more reference to Jesus Christ, at 2:1, and the text here is insecure. The rest of the letter could come from a non-Christ-confessing Jewish community just as well as a Christian one. There is no real doubt that this is a Christian letter – the attribution to James points that way and the first mention of Jesus Christ is textually secure – but this reminds us that many early Jewish Christian communities must have been indistinguishable from other Jewish communities except in that they confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and awaited his coming. What is more, this continued to be true for some centuries (and, indeed, there are still communities that identify as Christ-confessing Jews today). It used to be assumed that Jews and Christians parted company decisively at an early point in the development of Christianity: perhaps very soon after the fall of the temple. Recent scholarship, however, has shown that this is far from the case, and many Christians continued to identify as Jewish throughout antiquity.

Wisdom

One of the central themes of the letter is wisdom, and in this the letter owes much to wisdom books of the Jewish scriptures such as Proverbs and Ben Sira. Wisdom comes from God (1:5) and involves seeking the righteousness of God (1:20), loving God and submitting to God (2:5, 4:4, 4:7), keeping the law of Moses in accordance with the scriptures (e.g., 2:8–12; 5:12), living a good life in humility (3:13), and maintaining good relationships with one's neighbors (e.g., 3:16–18).

Wealth

Maintaining good relationships with neighbors takes many forms, and one which preoccupies this letter is relations between rich and poor. The writer is anxious that the rich should not be given more attention or honor than the poor (2:1–4). The poor are to be treated with respect (2:6, 5:4) because – in an echo of the teaching of Jesus – God chose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of God's kingdom (2:5). The rich, indeed, should weep over their future, because their worldly wealth will rot and become “a testimony against you”

at the coming of the Lord (5:1–5). It has been suggested that this letter was written for a community in which relations between rich and poor were particularly difficult, or possibly in a community which saw rich Christians in other churches abusing their social status.

The tongue is a “restless evil” (3:8)

Several of the minor epistles are worried about true and false teachings and afraid that a community might be exposed to false teachers. For the writer of James, the issue is not so much specific teachings, as the dangerous power of speech itself. “Not many of you should become teachers,” he says (3:1), because the tongue is a small but powerful and potentially dangerous organ (3:5–6). The same mouth can both bless and curse (3:10), and do terrible damage when it speaks unjustly or irresponsibly (e.g., 4:11–12). One has to be able to control the tongue and use it well, as a good pilot controls a ship by its small and fragile rudder (3:4).

Faith and works

One of the most famous passages in this letter is 2:14–26, which insists that those who have faith must also perform good works. It is widely agreed that the writer is attacking Paul here. James’s assertion that “Faith without works is dead” (2:26) became one of the most popular slogans in the early Church, and the relationship between faith and works also became one of the battlegrounds of Reformation theology. The relationship between faith and works began, however, as a rather different issue.

According to Acts (whose picture is certainly over-schematized, but probably has an element of truth), the mission of the apostles to preach the gospel after Pentecost began as a mission to fellow Jews, but quickly began to reach out to gentiles too. This was less surprising given that there were already gentile “God-fearers,” who honored the God of Israel, attended synagogues, and kept some Jewish laws without identifying as Jewish. The gentile mission raised the question, how much of Jewish law should gentile converts keep? Some communities may have expected converts to keep the whole law. Acts 15 describes an early council held in Jerusalem to discuss the issue, which concluded that gentiles should keep some of the key provisions of the law but not all of them, much as resident aliens in Israel had done for centuries. Paul went much further: in his view, confessing Jesus Christ as Lord was now

sufficient for righteousness and the hope of salvation, and he did not think that gentiles needed to keep the law at all (though he assumed that Jews would continue to do so). It is probably not a coincidence that this letter comes down to us under the name of James, who clashed with Paul in Jerusalem on this very topic. To support his case, in his letters to the Galatians and Romans, Paul invokes Abraham, who, long before the law of Moses was given to Israel, “believed/trusted in God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness” (Rom 4:3, Gal 3:6). In places Paul sharpens his argument rhetorically by drawing a contrast not just between faith and law-keeping, but between faith and works in general.

It is abundantly clear that Paul did not think that if a person has faith, it does not matter how they behave. Long passages of his letters concern how community members should behave, and his views are every bit as stringent as those of the writer of James. But James may have been worried that Paul’s argument was, at least, open to misreading, and perhaps he knew of communities which did misread it. He insists that it is not believing or having faith by itself that saves, but the combination of faith in God and Christ and how one then behaves.

Praying for the sick

James has a compassionate concern for the sick, and gives us an early Christian description, outside the gospels and Acts, of people attending to the sick. If a person is suffering, he or she should pray on his or her own behalf (5:13), but also summon the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord (5:14). This procedure continues the long tradition of anointing the sick with oil (e.g., Isa 1:6, Luke 10:34), and reminds us of healings performed by the apostles in the name of Jesus Christ in Acts. In general, the writer concludes, it is a good thing to pray for each other regularly (5:16) because the prayers of the righteous are powerful. As in other epistles (notably 1 Peter), the writer encourages readers to recognize themselves, as followers of Christ, as, in many ways, privileged and powerful people with great hopes for the future, even if their lives are difficult at present.

Waiting for the day of the Lord and persevering

Like all early Christian communities, James’s is waiting for the “coming of the Lord” (e.g., 5:7). While they wait, they can expect their faith to be tested (1:2). They must persevere,

resisting temptation and following the example of the Israelite prophets (5:10–11). The writer uses the image of the farmer, who plants his seeds and then must wait for them to grow (5:7–8). Some of the minor epistles seem to emerge from communities which feel actively threatened by persecution, but there is no indication of that in this letter. Themes of patience and perseverance might be relevant in any second- or third- generation community which may have expected the Lord to have come before now.

Unlike some New Testament writings, this writer has no clear vision of what will happen before the Lord comes, or when he comes. In an echo of Jesus' teaching, however (e.g., Matt 6:25–34), he does advise community members not to plan their lives in too much detail: "you have no idea what your life will be like tomorrow" (4:14). Where Jesus uses images from the natural world to make this point, this writer appeals to an urban audience, telling them not to plan to travel to another town to do business and make a profit.

"Resist the devil"

While they are waiting for the coming of the Lord, community members must be careful to remain faithful and not to sin or fall away. James envisages several ways in which this can happen. People may fall into doubt – which could mean either disbelief or mistrust of God – which James describes as a painful state, like being a wave driven helplessly by the wind (1:6). The faithful can also be tempted away from God by their own desires or passions (1:13–14, 1:19–20, 4:1). Both of these are traditional ways of understanding sin, which affirm that human beings sin by their own volition, by turning away from God. But James also refers to the devil (4:7) and demons (2:19). The idea of the devil, in the sense of a metaphysical being who works against God, is first attested in Judaism in the Dead Sea Scrolls, perhaps only a century or two before this letter was written. It was taken up by many early Christian communities, but not by all, and to this day Christian theologies vary in their understanding of their origin and nature of evil.