

INTRODUCTION TO 59TH BIBLEBOOK

THE LETTER OF JAMES (A.D. 43-44)

A. The writer of the Letter of James	1
B. The characteristics of the Letter of James	2
C. The founding of Hebrew speaking and Greek speaking Jewish Christian churches	3
D. The founding of Gentile Christian churches	4
E. Date and Place of writing the letter of James	4
F. The purpose of writing the letter of James	4
G. The division of the Letter of James	4

A. THE WRITER OF THE LETTER OF JAMES.

1. James, the brother of Jesus, becomes a Christian.

Just as several people were called 'Mary' in the New Testament, likewise several people were called 'James'. The most famous two of them were James the brother of the apostle John and James the brother of Jesus.

James, the brother of John.

He was the son of Zebedee¹ the brother of John² and both of them were disciples of Jesus. He was put to death by king Herod in A.D. 44³. It is not very probable that he wrote the letter of James.

James, the brother of Jesus.

It seems that Joseph, the husband of Mary, had already passed away by the time Jesus began his public ministry⁴. He was called 'James the younger'⁵. In his hometown, Nazareth in Galilee, the people called Jesus *the carpenter* and *the carpenter's son*, whose mother and brothers and sisters lived among them in Nazareth. The names of the brothers of Jesus were James, Joseph, Judas and Simon. James was a married man, just as the apostles and the other brothers of Lord⁶.

John 7:1-9 says that the brothers of Jesus did not believe in him. 1 Corinthians 15:7 relates that Jesus, after his resurrection, appeared to James. It was probably at this occasion that James became a believer in Jesus Christ. Seeing Jesus being resurrected after his death turned his unbelief into faith. He was probably instrumental in leading also his other brothers to Christ. Acts 1:14 relates that after Jesus had ascended into heaven the disciples were gathered together waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the brothers of Jesus were also there. Thus, the family of Jesus was baptised with the Holy Spirit and filled with the Spirit at Pentecost⁷.

This James is mentioned throughout the New Testament without further qualification. He must therefore have been known to the whole Christian Church. The Christian tradition unanimously testifies that the writer of this letter is James, the brother of Jesus Christ.

2. James, the brother of Jesus, as one of the leaders in the Jerusalem church.

In May A.D. 30, due to the fact that James was present on the day of Pentecost, he must have become one the leaders of the Jerusalem church that emerged from the event of Pentecost.

In A.D. 34 Saul/Paul was converted and in A.D. 36 he visited Jerusalem for the first time after his conversion. He met with the apostle Peter and saw only James, the brother of Jesus⁸.

In A.D. 44, after James, the brother of John, was killed by king Herod, Peter was also miraculously rescued from prison and certain death. He went to the house of Mary the mother of Mark and said, "Tell James and the brothers about this." And then Peter left for another place, probably outside Jerusalem and possibly Rome⁹. This seems to be another indication that James was regarded as one of the most important leaders of the local church at Jerusalem.

In A.D. 50 during the Jerusalem Conference, Peter, John and James were regarded as the leaders of the Church¹⁰. This occasion refers to Peter, John and James as 'pillars' of the Church¹¹.

In A.D. 57 Paul went to see James in Jerusalem and James praised God for the wonderful work God had done among the Gentiles¹²! It is almost certain that James, the brother of Jesus, wrote the letter of James.

¹ Matthew 4:21

² Acts 1:13

³ Acts 12:2

⁴ Matthew 13:55-56; Mark 6:3

⁵ Mark 15:40

⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:5

⁷ Acts 2

⁸ Galatians 1:19

⁹ Acts 12:17

¹⁰ Acts 15:13-21

¹¹ Galatians 2:1-10

¹² Acts 21:18-20

3. James, the brother of Jesus, as the probable author of the letter of James.

No one in the whole New Testament could sign his letter with 'James' and expect everyone to know who he was, than James, the brother of Jesus.

The Christian tradition from the beginning up to the sixteenth century unanimously ascribed the letter of James to James, the brother of Jesus. The Christian tradition says that James was a devout man, known as *James the Just*, a description which was also given to his father Joseph in Matthew 1:19. Therefore we conclude that James, the brother of Jesus, was most probably the writer of the letter of James.

B. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LETTER OF JAMES.

1. The similarity between the teachings of Jesus and of James.

There is a striking similarity between the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus, recorded in Matthew 5-7, and the letter of James. Both speak of temptations and trials (1:2,12)¹³, of the Father in heaven (1:17,27; 3:9)¹⁴, of deeds of mercy (2:13)¹⁵, of the control of the tongue (1:26; 3:5-10)¹⁶ and of purity of life (1:27; 3:17)¹⁷. They both speak of the poor (2:5)¹⁸, the merciful (2:13)¹⁹, the peacemakers (3:18)²⁰, the prophets who were persecuted (5:10)²¹, not to swear by heaven or earth (5:12)²², the treasures on earth that are being destroyed by moth and rust (5:2)²³, judging other people (4:11)²⁴, asking things in prayer from God (1:5)²⁵, the Father in heaven who gives good gifts (1:17)²⁶, knowing a tree from its fruits (3:12)²⁷, and about being doers of the Word (1:22)²⁸.

Jesus must have had a tremendous influence on his brother, James! Although James was a physical brother of Jesus, he nevertheless calls himself not the brother of Jesus, but the servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1). *James like Paul no longer regarded Jesus from a worldly point of view, that is, how Jesus was before his death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. They both regarded Jesus as the exalted Lord*²⁹.

2. The resemblance between phrases in Acts 15 and in James.

There is also a resemblance between some phrases used in the letter of James and the words of James recorded in Acts 15, during the Jerusalem Conference A.D. 50. For example, the following phrases are all similar: the word: "greetings" in James 1:1 and Acts 15:23; the call to "listen to him" in James 2:5 and Acts 15:13; "God's Name that has been called over them" in James 2:7 and Acts 15:17; calling people his "dear brothers" in James 1:16 (1:19; 2:5) and Acts 15:25; and "the turning of people to God" in James 5:19-20 and Acts 15:19. James most probably had a hand in writing the final communiqué, which the Jerusalem Conference issued and the similarities therefore point to him as the writer of the letter of James. Neither the letter of the Jerusalem Conference nor the letter of James portrays James as a legalistic person who wanted to enforce the regulations of the Jewish Law on Gentiles.

3. The comparison between James and Paul.

The interpretation of Galatians 2:12.

There are people who say that James and Paul contradict one another in their doctrine of justification. They base their argument on the wrong interpretation of Galatians 2:12, which says, "Certain men came from James". These men, however, were Judaists, who tried to force Gentile Christians to keep the regulations of the Jewish Ceremonial Law. They taught that physical circumcision was an absolute requirement for salvation. And they taught that believers must avoid contact with Gentiles especially in the matter of the food rules. These Judaists in all probability belonged to the same group mentioned in Acts 15:1. However, this may not be interpreted as if these men were sent or authorised by James! The only thing these words mean is that these men came from the church at Jerusalem, where James occupied a position of special prominence. Nowhere in the New Testament, is James pictured as a Judaist or Paul's opponent. On

¹³ Matthew 6:13

¹⁴ Matthew 5:16

¹⁵ Matthew 5:7; 12:7

¹⁶ Matthew 12:36

¹⁷ Matthew 5:28,32

¹⁸ Matthew 5:3

¹⁹ Matthew 5:7

²⁰ Matthew 5:9

²¹ Matthew 5:12

²² Matthew 5:34-35

²³ Matthew 6:19

²⁴ Matthew 7:1

²⁵ Matthew 7:78

²⁶ Matthew 7:11

²⁷ Matthew 7:16

²⁸ Matthew 7:24

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:16

the contrary, in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Conference, James championed Paul's cause³⁰ and he remained Paul's friend and deeply appreciated Paul's ministry among the Gentiles to the very end³¹.

The relationship between faith and works in James and in Paul.

The people who say that James and Paul contradict one another in their doctrine of justification, also base their argument on what James and Paul teach about the relationship between faith and works. For example, James 2:19 says, "Abraham was considered righteous for what he did" and Romans 4:9 says, "Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness." Superficially seen, it looks as if James teaches that a person is justified by doing good works, while Paul teaches that a person is justified by faith alone.

James and Paul, however, faced completely different situations and tackled different issues. James values *faith* very highly, as can be seen from his letter (1:3,6; 2:1,5,22-24; 5:15), but the kind of faith he condemns, is *the faith of dead orthodoxy* (2:14-18) and *the faith of demons* (2:19). Paul would certainly condemn that too. Paul is a firm believer in the necessity of doing good works as *the fruit of faith*³². As a matter of fact, James and Paul teach exactly the same truth! In James 2:22-24, James writes that Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Abraham's faith and his actions worked together and his faith was made complete by what he did. He says that Christians must show that their faith is genuine by working out their faith in actions. In Romans 4:3, Paul also writes that Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. But in Philippians 2:12, Paul also writes that Christians must work out their salvation with fear and trembling. And in Ephesians 2:8-10, he writes that although Christians are saved by grace through faith and not on the basis of their good works, Christians are nevertheless created to do good works!

4. The quality of the Greek language of James.

The quality of the Greek language in which James writes shows that he was a person of linguistic skill. Although James, the brother of Jesus, was from a humble background, he certainly was baptised and filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and this probably gave him this linguistic ability. The essential Pentecostal gift on the Day of Pentecost was *a gift of languages*, which according to Acts 2:6-11 consisted of the ability and desire to communicate God's message in intelligible words in different existing languages in the world! And we cannot overlook the fact that together with the other disciples of Jesus, James shared in this original Pentecostal outpouring. Therefore, no one can say that James could not have written the good Greek of this letter.

5. The imperatives in the letter of James.

There are 108 verses and 54 imperatives in the letter of James. This shows that James is deeply conscious of the authority, which God gave him to write these instructions.

6. The illustrations in the letter of James.

James uses all kinds of pictures to teach the truth. He uses illustrations from the Old Testament about Abraham, Rahab, Job and Elijah. He uses illustrations from nature: like, the waves of the sea, which are blown and tossed by the wind (1:6), the flower, which passes away quickly (1:10) and the shadow, which shifts on the ground (1:17)(3:5; 3:11; 4:14). He uses illustrations from agriculture (3:7; 5:5), business and industry: like, a fig tree, which cannot bear olives (3:12), a farmer, who waits for his land to yield a valuable crop (5:7), a businessman making money (4:13) and a large ship, which is steered by a small rudder (3:4). He uses illustrations from human life: like, looking at your face in a mirror (1:23), seeing poor people with shabby clothes on (2:2), a dead body without a spirit (2:26)(2:15) and clothes destroyed by moths and precious metals destroyed by corrosion (5:2-3).

C. THE FOUNDING OF HEBREW SPEAKING AND GREEK SPEAKING JEWISH CHRISTIAN CHURCHES.

The events described in Acts chapters 1-8 occurred between A.D. 30-33/34, during which the church in Jerusalem grew.

The Hebraic Jews³³. According to Acts 5:16, crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem. This must have been the beginning of the founding of other Jewish Christian churches in Judea. Several different kinds of Jews lived in Jerusalem. The majority were ordinary Aramaic/Hebrew speaking Jews.

The Grecian Jews³⁴. There also lived many so-called 'Hellenistic Jews' in Jerusalem, that is, Jews who spoke Greek and had adopted the Greek culture.

'The God-fearers' or 'worshippers of God'³⁵. Greek speaking Gentiles/non-Jews who became *Jews that were known as 'God-fearers or worshippers of God'*. They were pagans who became Jews, that is, they accepted the ethical monotheism of Judaism and attended the synagogue meetings, but did not feel obligated to keep the whole Jewish (ceremonial) Law, particularly circumcision.

³⁰ Act 15:13-29

³¹ Act 21:18-25

³² Romans 2:6-10; 6:13,19; 2 Corinthians 9:8; Ephesians 2:8-10; Colossians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:17

³³ Ἑβραίους. Hebrew speaking Jews (Acts 6:1)

³⁴ Ἑλληνιστῶν.

³⁵ Greek speaking Gentiles who became God-fearers (ἄνδρες εὐλαβεῖς) or worshippers of God (σεβομένων) (Acts 16:14; 17:4,17; 18:7).

The ‘Proselytes’³⁶, Greek speaking Gentiles/non-Jews who became *Jews that were known as ‘converts (those who came over) from paganism to Judaism’*.

They were won by Jewish missionary efforts³⁷, underwent circumcision and committed to keep the Jewish ceremonial law. They had adopted much of the Jewish culture (Acts 2:11). They originally came from places where many Jews lived: Cilicia and Asia (in Asia Minor) and Cyprus in the North and from Cyrene and Alexandria in the South. They had their own synagogues in these places³⁸.

According to Acts 6:1, there arose tension between the Greek speaking Christians and Aramaic/Hebrew speaking Christians concerning the daily distribution of food to the poor. The Jerusalem church and the apostles appointed seven deacons to take care of this matter. One of these deacons was Stephen, who was a Greek speaking Jew who had become a Christian. In about A.D. 32-34, the Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem argued with Stephen, but they could not stand up against the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit by which he spoke. Finally these Greek speaking Jews stoned Stephen to death and this was the beginning of a great persecution against especially the Greek speaking Jews who had become Christians in Jerusalem!

According to Acts 8:4 and Acts 11:19-21, these Greek speaking Jewish Christians scattered throughout Judea, Samaria and up the coast to Phoenicia, Cyprus and eventually to Antioch. Everywhere they went, they proclaimed the gospel to Greek speaking Jews and planted churches. This all happened between A.D. 34-44. *These churches consisted of Greek speaking Jewish converts*. Thus there were two kinds of Jewish Christian churches. In Jerusalem and probably Judea, there were Aramaic/Hebrew speaking Jewish Christian churches. But in Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Phoenicia, Cyprus and even Syria, there were Greek speaking Jewish Christian churches.

D. THE FOUNDING OF GENTILE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES.

From A.D. 41 onwards the attitude of the Jews in Jerusalem changed for the worse against Christians in Jerusalem and especially against their leaders, the apostles and people like James, the brother of Jesus. Thus, they themselves experienced trials and persecution.

Just before king Herod died in A.D. 44, James, the brother of John, was killed and Peter was arrested and imprisoned³⁹.

Although James was already one of the leaders in the now predominantly Aramaic/Hebrew speaking Jewish Christian church at Jerusalem, he wrote his letter to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations”, that is, to the Greek speaking Jewish Christians “scattered among the nations” (1:1). He addressed his letter to all Christians in the world who had scattered from Jerusalem after the persecution that arose around Stephen, but *it seems that at that time James did not know of the existence of any Gentile Christians yet*, that is, Gentiles that had become Christians without first becoming Jews, like the worshippers of God or the proselytes.

E. DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING THE LETTER OF JAMES

This means that James must have written his letter before A.D. 44, the time when the Jerusalem church heard of the many Gentiles who were converted to Christianity in Antioch in Syria⁴⁰.

Therefore, we conclude that James was written about A.D. 43-44 from Jerusalem to the Greek speaking Jewish Christian churches scattered among the nations.

F. THE PURPOSE OF WRITING THE LETTER OF JAMES.

The purpose of James was very much the same as that of Jesus in ‘the Sermon on the Mount’, to set forth ‘**the true standards of Christian living**’.

G. THE DIVISION OF THE LETTER OF JAMES.

The letter of James may be given **the title: “Genuine faith is demonstrated in deeds, words and life”**.

The letter of James may be divided into five parts as follows:

1. James 1:1-11. Perseverance and prayer in all circumstances.

Christians are admonished to exercise endurance in the midst of trials and temptations (1:2-4).

If they lack this grace, then they should confidently ask God to supply it (1:5-8).

Instead of losing courage, they should consider their high position in Christ (1:9-11).

2. James 1:12-18. Birth.

The sinful nature gives birth to spiritual death (1:13-16), but the word of truth gives birth to the new life (1:17-18).

³⁶ προσηλυτοι (ερχομαι, ελευσομαι, ηλθον εληλυθα). Greek speaking Gentiles who became converts (those who came over) from paganism to Judaism.

³⁷ Matthew 23:15

³⁸ Acts 6:9

³⁹ Acts 12

⁴⁰ Acts 11:19-22

3. James 1:19-25. Growth.

Christians grow by hearing (1:19-20), by accepting the Word of God (1:21) and by doing it (1:22-25).

4. James 1:26 to 5:6. Development.

James 1:26-27 says that the three notable characteristics of true Christian life are deeds of mercy, self-control of the tongue and holiness of life.

- James 2:1-26. Deeds of impartiality, mercy and kindness.
- James 3:1-12. Words of restraint.
- James 3:13 to 5:6. Life of wisdom, submission, dependence and simplicity.

5. James 5:7-20. Patience and prayer in all circumstances.