

I. General Overview

A. The Writer - There are several men named James mentioned in the New Testament, but reliable tradition assigns this book to the one called *James the Just*, the half-brother of Jesus, the full brother of Jude. It is surprising to many that this James is neither of the two Jameses who were the disciples of Jesus. The disciples named James are as follows...

- James the Greater - One of the Twelve, Jesus called him James the "Great" meaning either "taller" or "older". He was the brother of John, the son of a man named Zebedee, and one of the first disciples of Jesus.
- James the Less - One of the Twelve, Jesus called him "Less" meaning "shorter" or "younger" not "less important" as some believe. He was the brother of the faithful Judas, both sons of a man named Alphaeus.

B. This James it seems was not a believer in the Messianic identity of Jesus until his resurrection. The Gospels are clear that Jesus's brothers by blood were unsupportive and even opposers of His ministry and claims. In his first letter to the Church in Corinth Paul tells us that this James was uniquely visited by Jesus after His resurrection. (Jhn. 7:5; 1 Cor. 15:7)

1. However his conversion came about, when he did follow Jesus, he followed with great devotion. An early history of the church says that James was known as a man of radical prayer, it is said that his knees had large and thick calluses, making them look like the knees of a camel. It also says that James was martyred in Jerusalem by being pushed from a high point of the temple. Yet the fall did not kill him, and on the ground, he was beaten to death, even as he prayed for his attackers.

C. To the Jew - In both traditional understanding and in all the historical writings James lived in; and ministered to; the church in the city of Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem was made up almost entirely of Jewish believers, living out a highly Hebraic expression of their faith. The book of Acts implies that James was a recognized and honored church leader in Jerusalem. This fact should bring a new level of weight to what James says at the Jerusalem council concerning the expression of faith that Gentiles are called to walk out. (Acts. 15:13)

D. The Intended Recipients - James tells us clearly that his intended audience is the Jewish believers who have been scattered abroad as a result of the severe persecution against Christianity from Jerusalem. "The Twelve Tribes" is a Jewish figure of speech that sometimes referred to the Jewish people as a whole. Paul referred to *our twelve tribes* in his speech before King Agrippa. The concept of the "twelve tribes" among the Jewish people was very strong, even though they had not lived in their tribal allotments for centuries. (Mat. 19:28; Acts 26:7)

1. James knew nothing of the theme of the ten so-called "lost tribes" which is incredibly popular today. He along with Paul regarded Israel, in its unity and completeness, as consisting of 12 tribes.

E. The Date - Almost all biblical historians and scholars place the date this letter was written as very early, around AD 40, many think it was possibly the first epistle to be circulated to the church. He tells us that he is writing to the Jews who are scattered abroad, and we know from the scriptures and historical writings that this is a reference to the members of the Jerusalem church who had fled Jerusalem by the thousands shortly after Stephen's martyrdom. (Acts 8:1-3, 11:19-20)

1. Additional Early Date - There is no mention of anything related to, or concerning Gentile believers, nor any other major churches, church leaders, or any other authoritative writings besides the Gospels.

F. The Literary Style - James wrote his letter in the Greek language in a style that strongly suggests he had formal training in Greek oratory and writing skills. It is of note to point out that this letter was written in a form intended for public reading and circulation as a sermon cast in written form.

G. The Purpose - James strongly desires to stir up or exhort believers to set their hearts toward spiritual maturity in the face of ongoing persecution. It's as if he feels like they are stuck in persecution and suffering awaiting relief and in light of this not being intentional in their spiritual growth and maturity in Christ. His message is to embrace suffering with thankfulness and joy understanding that God uses it to produce Christlikeness in us, and to set the true goal of walking in the fullness of faith, hope, and love as a lifestyle in every season.

"James exhorts believers to Christian maturity and holiness in the face of suffering. He deals with the practicals of theology rather than the precepts of theology. He addresses mature faith in the practicals every area of a Christian's life: what he is, what he does, what he says, what he feels, and what he has." - J. Ronald Blue

II. Unique Features

- A. Imperatives or Commands - James like no other letter or writing uses imperative nouns and verbs constantly. He is not just giving his readers practical commands to consider, He is demanding them of his readers with urgency. An urgent imperative or command is roughly every two or three verses throughout the letter. No other New Testament book of scripture contains such a concentration of critical and necessary commands.
- B. References - James references over 20 Old Testament books. He referred to and made examples of more Old Testament characters than any other writing of the New Testament. He references the book of Matthew 38 times in 5 chapters with a very heavy emphasis on to the Sermon on the Mount.
 1. Sermon on the Mount - There are more quotes and allusions to the Sermon on the Mount in the Book of James than in all the letters of the New Testament combined. I had a teacher in bible school who always spoke of the book of James as a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.
- C. Pauline Discussion - There have been many Christians who struggle to reconcile the command of James to “do works” to the command of Paul to “not do works” and feel as if either Paul or James is in error. This seeming contradiction actually caused Martin Luther to question whether this book was worthy of being in the New Testament in his preface to the New Testament James was stigmatized as “an epistle of straw” and that no one could reconcile Paul and James.
 1. As with all seemingly contradictory themes or verses in the bible, it is critical to understand the context and culture of the intended meaning. Luther's problem was that he thought James was writing about becoming a Christian (justification). However, James was writing to Christians about how to live the Christian life (sanctification).
 2. Living Condition (Sanctification) vs Legal Position (Justification) - James is writing to Jews in a Hebraic culture with a strong emphasis on personal growth in God's love of the living condition practically of the believer. Whereas Paul is focused on Gentile believers in a Hellenistic culture with a strong emphasis on the legal position theologically of the believer. If you look at what James says concerning “works” in context you will find that he is referring to works that demonstrate that one believes they are justified or saved by faith.