

INTRODUCTION TO THE GENERAL EPISTLE OF JAMES

by

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Note: Author's introduction in *Annotations on the General Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude* (New York, The Christian Literature Co., 1897). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

The Author of the Epistle. The writer of the Epistle describes himself as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). There are at least three persons by the name of James mentioned in the New Testament: (1) James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, one of the twelve, who suffered martyrdom 44 A.D. (Acts 12:1,2); (2) James, the son of Alphæus, also one of the twelve, who was also known by the name of James "the little" (Mark 15:40); and (3) James, the Lord's brother (Mark 6:3; Matt. 13:55; Gal. 1:19), not one of the twelve (John 8:5), to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7) and who occupied such a prominent position in the church at Jerusalem during the lifetime of Peter and Paul (Acts 12:17; 15:13,19; Gal. 2:9; Acts 21:18).

There are very few who ever have held that James, the son of Zebedee, was the author of this Epistle. There are many, however, who maintain that the last two, James the son of Alphæus and James the Lord's brother, are identical, holding that the latter was a *cousin* of our Lord instead of a brother. But such a view, though supported by great scholars, is altogether untenable. Even of those who think that they are different persons, there are some like Stier, Wieseler, and others who suppose that James the Apostle, the son of Alphæus, wrote this letter, identifying him with the James so prominently mentioned in Acts, maintaining that it was this James who was at the head of the church in Jerusalem.

But the reasons given are very insufficient. There can be but one answer to this problem. It was James the Lord's brother, who was not one of the twelve, who wrote this Epistle. He became a believer after Christ's resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7); and it is he who stands out so prominently in the Acts, who became, on account of his relationship to the Lord and his high personal character, one of the most eminent leaders of the primitive Church; who presided at the Council of Jerusalem; who was regarded by Paul as one of the pillars of the Church (Gal. 2:9); and who was known in the Early Church as "James the Just," "the Bishop of Jerusalem." This has been the almost universal opinion of all ages.

The Relationship of James, the Brother of our Lord, to Jesus. There are three theories held concerning the brethren of our Lord.

1. These brethren were really the first *cousins* of Jesus, the sons of Alphæus and of Mary, the sister of the Virgin Mary. The advocates of this theory thus identify James the Lord's brother with James the son of Alphæus, making him one of the twelve. This is known as the *cousin* theory, or, as Jerome first broached it, the Hieronymian theory. It is the least tenable of all and has neither any scriptural nor any traditional support.

2. The second theory is that the brethren and sisters of Jesus are the children of Joseph by a *former*

marriage, and had really no blood relationship with Christ. This view is known as the *half-brother theory*, or, since it was so zealously advocated by Epiphanius about 367 A.D., as the *Epiphanian theory*. But this theory can only be regarded as a compromise. It is destitute of all positive arguments in its favor. There is not the slightest indication in the Gospels that Joseph, previous to his marriage with the Virgin Mary, was a widower. Nor is this the only view known in the Early Church. And, as Schaff has shown, this theory is not free from suspicion of an ascetic bias as being the first step towards the dogma of the perpetual virginity of the mother of our Lord. This theory is also exposed to the fatal objection, that if Joseph had *elder* children, then *the Lord Jesus Himself would not be Joseph's heir*; the *eldest* son, unless deprived, would have been entitled to the throne of David. But Jesus is always regarded as the legal heir of the throne of David (Matt. 1:16; Luke 1:27; Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8; Rev. 22:16). This last objection admits of no satisfactory answer, and utterly and finally disproves the *half-brother theory*.

3. The last theory is that the Brethren of our Lord are the sons of Joseph and Mary and therefore the younger brethren of Jesus. This gives to the word *brother* its natural meaning, and this view is known as the *brother theory*, or, because it was strongly advocated by Helvidius, a Roman Christian about 380 A.D., has been styled the *Helvidian theory*. This interpretation is exegetically the most natural and is upheld by the obvious meaning of Matt. 1:18,25; Luke 2:7. All the objections that have been raised against this theory have no foundation either in Scripture or in early tradition, and we cannot arrive at any other conclusion but that James was a son of Mary and Joseph.

A Brief Life of the Author of the Epistle. Of the early life of James, the oldest of the four younger brethren of our Lord (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3) nothing whatever is known, for we cannot accept any of the legends of the Apocryphal Gospels. His training must have been the same as that of Jesus, and he grew up to manhood in that humble home of Nazareth. Before Christ's resurrection James did not believe on Him (John 7:5), and we can only surmise that he took a somewhat prominent part as the oldest of the brothers in trying to restrain Jesus when they thought He was beside Himself (Mark 3:21), and he may have uttered the taunting words recorded by John (7:3,4).

We hear nothing definite concerning James until after the resurrection. St. Paul tells us that the risen Lord appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7), and this seems to have brought about his conversion as well as those of his brethren, for immediately afterwards we find them in the company of the Apostles and other believers (Acts 1:13,14). He seems to have been present at the election of Matthias (Acts 1:14-26), and evidently was a sharer in the supernatural gifts of the Holy Ghost poured out on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21). From this time onward, on account of his high moral character and probably also on account of his relationship to Jesus, James occupied the most distinguished position in the Christian Church, although we find no mention of him for about ten years.

Paul, on his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion (Acts 9:27), speaks of James in such a connection (Gal. 1:18,19) as to show his prominence, and he seems from this time on to have presided over the church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13,19; Gal. 2:9,12; Acts 21:18,19). Probably the last reference to James in the N.T. is found in Heb. 13:7. Entirely in accordance with these notices of Scripture is the universal testimony of the Early Church to the high official dignity held by James, the Lord's brother, in the church at Jerusalem. Both Hegesippus and Josephus (*Ant.* XX. 91) give an account of his martyrdom, and it may be regarded as an established fact that James was killed by the fanatical Jews at the temple shortly before the siege of Jerusalem, about 62 A.D.

The Genuineness of the Epistle. During the first three centuries considerable uncertainty prevailed regarding the identity of James, whether he was one of the twelve or not, and so some questioned the genuineness of this Epistle and consequently its authenticity and authority. This uncertainty about the

authorship was still further increased by the fact that it remained for a long time in the possession of exclusively Jewish-Christian circles, that its contents seemed to conflict with the views of Paul concerning Justification by faith, and that so little reference was made to the distinctive doctrines of Christianity. Eusebius classes it among the *Antilegomena*, or disputed writings of the N.T.; but he himself did not share in these doubts, for he expressly quotes the Epistle of James as Scripture.

We have two kinds of testimony at our command to prove that the Epistle is genuine, really written by James the Lord's brother, Bishop of Jerusalem.

1. Internal Evidence.

(a) The Epistle shows that the James who wrote it is no other than the James of Jerusalem, who is so prominent in Acts 12:17; 15:13,19; 21:18,19. He was so well known and so preeminent that the writer's simple designation of himself as James, "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," was sufficient for his readers.

(b) That the writer could reprove and warn the believing Jews of the Dispersion in such earnest words is also a proof that this James was held in the highest esteem (Gal. 2:9,12) and that he was no other than James the Just.

(c) The whole doctrinal peculiarity of the Epistle is entirely in keeping with the portrait of James as given in the Acts and in the Epistles of Paul; and of James the Just, or the Righteous, as depicted by Josephus and so fully described by Hegesippus in Eusebius.

(d) The writer was a Jew (2:21) writing to his Christian countrymen (1:2; 2:7; etc.), whom commercial enterprises (4:13) or persecution (1:1) had scattered over Syria and Asia Minor, and evidently one who, if he had not been a personal follower of our Lord, had often heard Him speak. This internal evidence is of the strongest kind. As we study this Epistle we are persuaded that the author is James, the Lord's brother. The simple designation of the writer in the first verse is a proof of the genuineness of the Epistle. A forger would have added some other description as "James, the Lord's brother," or "James, the Bishop of Jerusalem."

2. External evidence. Although Origen (*died* 254 A.D.) is apparently the first who cites the Epistle as Scripture and as written by James, the external evidence in its favor is very strong.

(a) Direct Evidence. We have satisfactory evidence that the Syrian Church even before 150 A.D. accepted both the genuineness and the authenticity of this Epistle as well as its canonicity, for it is found in the Peshito, the Old Syrian Version, which was regarded as authoritative by all the Syrian churches and used in all their public services. They were best able to judge of the character of this Epistle, for they knew all the circumstances connected with its origin; for it is almost positively certain that James wrote this letter to the Christian Jews scattered in Syria. After the time of Origen (254 A.D.) and of Eusebius, writing about 314 A.D., the letter is universally acknowledged as belonging to the Scripture Canon. It is included in all the catalogues of the Bible which have come down to us from the churches of Egypt and Asia Minor; and the reason why its canonicity was for a time questioned by the Western Church, though the Epistle was well known, lay in the fact that it did not profess to be written by an Apostle, that it was not addressed to Gentile churches, and that it seemed to contradict the teaching of Paul.

(b) Indirect Evidence. The indirect evidence consists in the quotations and allusions found in the writings of the Early Church Fathers, and is of the greatest importance, showing that our Epistle was more widely known during the first three centuries than has been commonly supposed. Major calls

attention to the remarkable fact that our earliest witnesses in favor of the Epistle belong to the church which was one of the latest to recognize the Epistle as canonical, viz., the church at Rome. In proportion as the Gentile element in the church at Rome increased, the Judaistic Epistle fell into the background.

Clement of Rome, in his *Epistle to the Corinthians*, written about 95 A.D., shows that he was acquainted with the Epistle of James, not only in that there are several unmistakable references, but especially in this--that there are several attempts made by him to reconcile and combine the teaching of James and Paul concerning Justification.

We need not lay stress upon the close resemblance of expression or allusions found in the "Teaching of the Twelve," in the Epistle of Barnabas (written at least before 100 A.D.), and in the book known as the "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," because we know for certain that Hermas (110 A.D.), a contemporary of Clement of Rome, used this Epistle. The very topics dwelt on by James are those to which Hermas most frequently recurs.

We have also the testimony of Justin Martyr (*died* 165 A.D.), of the Epistle of Diognetus (written about 150 A.D.), of Irenæus (*d.* 202), of Clement of Alexandria (*d.* 220), of Origen (*d.* 254), of the Clementine Homilies (early in the third century), of the Apostolical Constitutions, of Lactantius (about 300 A.D.), of Athanasius (*d.* 373), of Chrysostom, and lastly of Didymus (*d.* 374), who was the teacher of Jerome and Rufinus, and who left a brief commentary on all the Catholic Epistles.

There can be no question, therefore, as to the genuineness, authenticity, or canonicity of the Epistle of James. This is now settled and fully established.

We cannot, however, close this discussion without referring to the unfavorable opinion which Luther always held with reference to this Epistle. His objections were not critical, for he even starts from the erroneous idea that the letter professed to be written by James, the son of Zebedee. His arguments are altogether subjective and rest on a theory which makes private feeling and personal experience the supreme authority as to the doctrine and source of doctrine. Although the same position was taken by the Magdeburg Centuriators, by Hunnius, and a few others, the great theologians of the Lutheran Church have not accepted this opinion of Luther, although in modern times Ströbel attempted to revive it.

The Relation of the Epistle of James to the Old Testament. Many commentators have called our attention to the frequency of the parallels between the language of this Epistle and that of the O.T., especially of the Wisdom literature, including Ecclesiasticus and the Book of Wisdom. This Epistle has even been described as the Christian Book of Proverbs. The proverbial character of the Epistle and its peculiar feature of O.T. piety are only additional proofs of the genuineness of the book.

The Relation of the Epistle of James to the other Books of the New Testament. A careful reading of the Epistle, with this special object in view, shows that the writer was unquestionably one who had known the Lord and was familiar with His oral teaching. The remarkable coincidences between the Epistle and the Sermon on the Mount and certain passages in the Synoptists arise from the fact that both James and the Synoptists were familiar with the Oral Gospel, for it is almost positively certain that James wrote his Epistle before ever the Gospels were composed.

It has been the general belief in the Church since the time of Augustine that there is a connection between the Epistle of James and the writings of Paul, and this has been usually explained on the supposition that James meant to controvert Paul's teaching on Justification. But, as has been pointed

out by the most careful students of this Epistle, the argument of James with reference to faith and works has no bearing on Paul's doctrine; and if one of these writers wrote with reference to the other, it is far more probable that Paul was acquainted with the Epistle of James than James with the Epistles of Paul.

So, likewise, the treatment of the subject of faith in *The Epistle to the Hebrews* is such as to suggest that the writer was acquainted with both the Epistle of James and that to the Romans. In Heb. 11 faith is exhibited not as in rivalry with works but as the cause and ground of all the noble deeds of the Old Testament saints. In Hebrews, too, the evils of the Jewish Church are more developed and the threatened judgments more imminent than when James wrote, and no doubt Heb. 13:17 contains an allusion to the martyrdom of James himself.

There are also many resemblances between this Epistle of James and 1 Peter. Everything goes to prove the priority of our Epistle to that of Peter. In almost every case the common thought finds fuller expression in Peter, and we find that in the quotations from the O.T., which are common to James and Peter, the inexact references of the former are corrected and supplemented by the latter. Peter, evidently, was familiar with the Epistle of James and made use of it.

The Language and Style of the Epistle. A few scholars have sought to establish an Aramaic original because they think that James could not have written such good Greek. The purity of the Greek idiom has also been made a ground for doubting the genuineness of the Epistle, for there can scarcely be any question that the Greek of this Epistle approaches more nearly to the standard of classical Greek than any other book of the N.T., with the exception perhaps of the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Hebrews. A careful study of the Greek text shows, however, that it is written in Greek by a Greek-speaking Jew. There is no reason why James should not be able to write such idiomatic Greek. The Greek language was certainly known and spoken in Palestine and Syria, and Galilee was studded with Greek towns, and the neighboring town of Gadara was celebrated as an important seat of learning and literature. James evidently continually read the Greek Bible, for he quotes the O.T. according to the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew.

The style of the Epistle is remarkable for its rhetoric and rhythm. The sentences are short, simple, direct, conveying weighty thoughts in weighty words, and giving the impression of a strong and serious individuality as well as of a poetic imagination.

The Persons Addressed. James writes this letter "to the twelve tribes which are of the Dispersion." But this inscription, plain and simple as it is, has been variously interpreted.

1. Some suppose that the Epistle was addressed to Christians in general, to all believers whether Jews or Gentiles. They take the expression "twelve tribes" in a figurative sense to denote the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) in contrast to "Israel after the flesh" (1 Cor. 10:18). But such an opinion is inadmissible and without any support in the Epistle. A literal interpretation of the expression is by far the best. There is no allusion whatever to Gentile converts, and it is highly probable that when this letter was written no Gentile Christian Churches had been regularly formed and fully organized.

2. Others maintain that the Epistle was addressed to the Jews in general, whether believers or not. But the contents of the Epistle refute this opinion, for the readers, whoever they were, were at least regarded as Christians.

3. There can be only one true conclusion--the Epistle was addressed to Jewish Christians. It is very clearly evident that the Epistle throughout is addressed to Jews, and that these Jews were Christians who had acknowledged Jesus as their Lord and Christ. They are mixed up, however, with rich Jewish

unbelievers who persecute and oppress them, keeping back the hire of their laborers, slaves of lust and luxury (2:6,7; 5:1-6). The believers themselves are mostly poor (2:5) and the faith of many is still weak (1:6-8,13; 4:11; 5:9); they are haughty to the poor, obsequious to the rich (2:1-9,15,16), and the few rich belonging to the Church (1:10) are in danger of falling away through covetousness, worldliness, and pride (4:3-6, 13-16).

As all the congregations established by Paul, especially after the council of Jerusalem (50 A.D.), were mixed congregations in which Gentiles, as a rule, largely predominated, we must seek these Jewish Christian churches among those founded before Paul began his missionary labors. That there were many such congregations we learn from Acts 2:9-11; 4:36; 9:2,10,14,19,25; 11:19,20; and this is confirmed by the statement made by James in 58 A.D. as recorded in Acts 21:20. Among the three chief divisions of the *Diaspora* then recognized (the Babylonian, the Syrian, and the Egyptian) we must look for these churches where the Greek language was most commonly used: among the Greek Jews or Hellenists scattered in the Syrian Dispersion in the countries lying nearest to Judea--in Phœnicia, Syria, and Proconsular Asia. For all the evidence seems to point to the Syrian Diaspora as the location of these Jewish-Christian congregations.

The Date of the Epistle. With reference to the date of the Epistle we need refer but to two views. There are some who maintain that this Epistle shows an intimate acquaintance with the writings of Paul, especially of his controversial Epistles (Gal., 1 and 2 Cor., Romans), and that therefore this Epistle must have been written after the year A.D. 58. On the other hand, we have the strongest evidence to prove that this Epistle was written before A.D. 50 and that it is the oldest of all the N.T. writings. We may give the following reasons for an early date:

1. It was written to churches composed exclusively of Jewish Christians. It was not until A.D. 44 that any number of Gentiles were admitted into the Church (Acts 11:20,21).
2. There is no allusion whatever to the great controversy concerning circumcision and the observance of the Mosaic law. This proves that this question had not yet arisen.
3. The Judaic tone of the Epistle (so strongly emphasized by Luther) is in favor of an early date. So far as this consideration goes, we should be led to assign the Epistle to the earliest possible date after the day of Pentecost.
4. The description given of church organization and church discipline implies an early date of the Epistle. No mention is made of bishops but only of teachers and elders (3:1; 5:14), which were also recognized in the Synagogue. The congregation or church (5:14) probably still worshipped in the synagogue (2:2), for we know from the Acts that the Christian Jew frequented the Temple and Synagogue worship and for a long time observed the Jewish ritual.

We conclude then with Gloag that we have in this Epistle of James "an inspired document of primitive Christianity, allied to the simple teaching of the Master,--before the religion of Christ was developed by the doctrinal statements of Paul and the profound intuitions of John."

All are agreed that the place where James, the Lord's brother, wrote this Epistle was Jerusalem. Commentators love to trace the local coloring of the Epistle, for all the physical notices and illustrations correspond to the environment of the author.

The Aim of the Epistle. The whole character of the Epistle is purely practical. James is writing in the interest of morality, and his warnings are directed not so much against errors of doctrine as against errors of life. There is no polemical design in it, for there is no direct or indirect reference to the

teaching of Paul. The Epistle is preeminently ethical and practical.

The Contents of the Epistle. The contents of an Epistle can best be ascertained by a careful analysis. On account of the proverbial character of this Epistle it is not easy, however, to trace a connected train of thought.

I. James 1:1-18. ***Of Trial.***

1. Address and Greeting (1:1)
2. Endure Trials with Patience (1:2-4)
3. Believing Prayer gains Wisdom (1:5-8)
4. The Perishableness of Riches (1:9-11)
5. The Reward of the Endurance of Trial (1:12)
6. The Development of Sin (1:13-15)
7. The Perfect Gift of God (1:16-18)

II. James 1:19-27. ***Of True Religion.***

8. The Evil Results of Wrath (1:19-21)
9. Be ye Doers of the Word (1:22-25)
10. The Essence of True Religion (1:26-27)

III. James 2:1-13. ***Of Respect of Persons.***

11. Warning against Respect of Persons (2:1-4)
12. Fulfil the Royal Law (2:5-9)
13. Live by the Law of Liberty (2:10-13)

IV. James 2:14-26. ***Judgment shall be According to Works.***

14. God will Render to every Man According to his Works (2:14-26)

V. James 3:1-18. ***The Marks of True Wisdom.***

15. Warnings against the Sins of the Tongue (3:1-12)
16. True and False Wisdom Contrasted (3:13-18)

VI. James 4:1-17. ***Of Worldliness.***

17. Worldliness the Cause of Strife (4:1-3)
18. The Unfaithful Reproved (4:4-10)
19. Evil Speaking (4:11,12)
20. The Uncertainty of Life (4:13-17)

VII. James 5:1-20. ***Denunciations and Exhortations.***

21. Warnings to the Rich Jews (5:1-6)
22. Encouragements to Patience in Suffering (5:7-11)
23. Warning against Swearing (5:12)
24. General Exhortations (5:13-18)
25. Be Active in Saving Souls (5:19,20)