

James Background and Overview

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

In contrast to many of the epistles (or letters) we have in the New Testament, James does not include a specific audience to which it is addressed. This has led many scholars to consider it a “general” letter written the church as a whole, rather than one particular local church, group of people, or individual.¹ The closest parallel we have to this would be the letter of 1 John.

The book begins - “*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*” While there are a number of prominent men named James in the New Testament, for the majority of church history, authorship of this letter has been attributed to James, the half-brother of Jesus. The evidence is simple - with such a direct and concise introduction, it must be a well-known James who would have written the letter, and the half-brother of Christ is the only one who fits the profile. In addition, the style of writing is very similar to the speech given by James to the Apostolic Council in Acts 15.

Although he did not come to believe in Jesus until after the resurrection (1 Cor 15:7, John 7:5), James became a well-respected leader in the early church, especially among Jewish Christians. James was a zealous teacher of God’s Law and was eager to help bridge the gap of faith for those in Judaism. Many throughout church history, most notably the reformer Martin Luther, have written extensively about the letter, detailing that much of the theology James writes comes from his own wrestlings with the intersection of faith and law in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The original audience of the letter was almost certainly Jewish Christians, as a number of theological points within the book address common Jewish themes and subthemes. James refers to his audience as “the twelve tribes in the dispersion” (1:2), another reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, scattered about as a result of persecution. It is also a letter clearly directed at Christians, as James does not see the need to include the basic elements of the faith (the gospel, salvation, resurrection, etc), but rather almost immediately begins outlining various implications of the gospel for holy living.²

As the first prominent leader of the church in Jerusalem, it is only natural for James to address both his local church, and Jewish believers across the known world on particularly prominent issues he sees with their theology and practice. James has no problem using his pastoral authority to directly address sin and wrongdoing within the church. He calls Jewish Christians to not simply read and study the law of God, but rather to be changed by the Spirit as they receive conviction over what they read and hear.

The most likely dating for the book is between AD 60-62, as James was martyred for the faith in AD 62. However, recent scholarship has also suggested that the relatively unformed theology of the book could mean a date as early as the mid-40s.

¹ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James: The Pillar New Testament Commentary Series*, 7.

² James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 19-20.

KEY THEMES

Most scholars agree that James introduces most of his themes in the opening of the letter and then builds on these themes in the remainder of his writing.

A breakdown of those themes looks like this:

James 1	Topic	James 2-5
1:2-4, 12-15	Testing/Temptation	5:7-11
1:5	Wisdom	3:13-4:3
1:6-8	Prayer/Faith	5:13-18
1:9-11	Wealth	4:13-17, 5:1-6
1:16-18	God's giving	---
1:19-20, 26	Speech	3:1-12, 4:11-12, 5:12
1:21-25	Doing the Word	2:14-26
1:27	Concern for the lowly	2:1-8
1:27	Avoiding worldliness	4:4-10

James' primary concern for the book can be summed up in 2:17 - "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

James deeply wants the church to have a faith that actually means something. A faith that does not stay in their heads, but actually moves down into their hearts and out into their hands. A faith that impacts their daily lives - how they talk, how they relate to others, how they use their wealth, how they make plans for the future.

This letter, while deeply practical and convictional, all stems from the same root truth - Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.