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Introduction to "James"

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James

James is the first of the General Epistles, also called Catholic Epistles. They were written by those whom Paul labeled the "pillars" of the early Christian church: James, Peter, and John (Gal. 2:9). This section of the New Testament also includes the letter written by Jude, another brother of Jesus, along with James. It is interesting to note that during the Council of Jerusalem in AD 49, when the apostles gathered to discuss the issue of circumcision for the Gentiles (Acts 15), they decided that Paul and Barnabas would focus their efforts among the Gentiles while the other apostles would concentrate on the Jews (Gal. 2:9). Although the division of effort was reasonably flexible, many of the General Epistles do display a noticeable emphasis on a Jewish audience. Also, the concern to remember the poor voiced by James to Paul on that occasion (Gal. 2:10) is a significant theme in the epistle to James. One should read the Pauline letters and the General Epistles as complementing each other.

AUTHOR

Since the author identifies himself simply as "James" (1:1), he must have been a prominent individual in the early church who needed no further identification. (1:1). The author could not have been the disciple of Jesus named James since he died very early in the history of the formative church (around AD 44; cf. Acts 12:2). James, son of Alphaeus, is also unlikely the author because he does not play any significant role in the Bible (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Acts 1:13). That leaves James the brother of Jesus as the most likely candidate (Mark 6:3). Although James did not believe Jesus was the Christ until after the resurrection, he quickly rose to prominence in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). He was such a pious man that he was known as James the Just. He was martyred for his faith in AD 62 when the high priest Ananus, brother-in-law of Caiaphas and also the son of the former high priest Annas, had him stoned to death. Some scholars believe that similarities in language between James' speech in Acts 15:13-21 and the epistle is evidence that James the Just was the letter's author. They also note that the letter has several allusions to Jesus' teachings that suggest the author had to have been an individual who was very familiar with Jesus, as James the brother of Jesus would have been. Based on this sort of reasoning, early church fathers such as Origen and Eusebius also believed the author of James was the brother of Jesus.

DATE

The presence of distinctly Jewish elements and the absence of major Christian theological themes strongly suggest the epistle was written at an early stage in the history of the church, perhaps in the mid-to-late '40s and before the Jerusalem Council



Date of writing probably before AD 49

in AD 49. While some believe the letter may have been written later than that, if James the Just is the author, it would have to have been written before AD 62, when James died.

AUDIENCE

The Jewishness of the epistle of James points to an audience of primarily Jewish Christian readers. The author mentions a “synagogue” as their place of meeting (2:2), and he frequently refers to the Old Testament and uses Jewish phraseology (2:19; 4:4; 5:4). The letter is explicitly addressed to the “twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1). It is possible that it might be a metaphor for Christians, who are away from their heavenly home (1 Pet. 1:1), but it is more likely that it is a literal reference to Jewish Christians living in the Diaspora, scattered in the Roman Empire. Jewish religious authorities in Jerusalem would regularly write to Jewish communities in the Diaspora for administrative and spiritual purposes. As the leader of the city’s Christian community, James would have followed the same practice. It is also probable that he was writing to Jewish Christians originally from Jerusalem who had been forced to leave the city as a result of the persecution mentioned in Acts 11:19 and who were now living in the Diaspora.

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

The nature of James’ letter is pastoral and it is filled with exhortations. He writes to instruct, correct, rebuke, and remind believers of several issues. Interestingly, James has more imperative verbs than any other New Testament book. The epistle resembles ancient wisdom literature in that the author instructs its readers how to live wisely under the new covenant (1:5; 3:13-18). They are to obey the teachings of Jesus in light of love for God and one’s neighbor (1:19-25; 2:8-13). A significant point that James emphasizes is that faith transforms one’s character and behavior, and genuine faith would always express itself in outward behavior, primarily acts of kindness (1:6-8; 2:14-26; 5:14).

STRUCTURE

The opening section of the epistle focuses on the trials and temptations of the Christian life (1:2-18). James reminds his hearers that faith is always being tested. Such testing should not be seen as negative but positive. It enables believers to develop the character that, once approved, would result in the crown of life. The letter then describes how faith in God should affect the way in which Christians conduct themselves (vv. 19-27), and in particular, how they treat others, especially the disadvantaged in society (v. 27).

In the second half of the letter, James elaborates on some of the main themes introduced earlier (2:1–5:18). He reminds his readers of the blessings of being humble and of treating those financially disadvantaged with love and dignity (2:1-13; 5:1-6). That includes speaking in a godly manner, for our speech shapes our relationship to others (3:1-12; 4:11; 5:12). Additionally, while believers are not to show favoritism toward the wealthy (2:1-13), they should also seek to alleviate the needs of the poor (2:14-26). The letter then concludes with a final exhortation encouraging believers to seek to restore those individuals who have wandered away from the truth (5:19-20).

As you read the letter of James, consider how God calls His followers to live out the teachings of Jesus in their lives, and in particular, to the poor and needy.

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction (1:1)
- II. Trials and Temptation (1:2-18)
 - A. The Need for Patience and Wisdom (1:2-8)
 - B. Enduring Both Affliction and Exaltation (1:9-12)
 - C. The Source of Temptation (1:13-18)
- III. Evidence of True Religion (1:19-27)
- IV. Warnings against Frequent Dangers in the Early Church (2:1-5:18)
 - A. Wealth and Poverty (2:1-26)
 - B. Wisdom and Speech (3:1-4:12)
 - C. Trials and Temptations (4:13-5:18)
- V. Conclusion (5:19-20)

ARCHAEOLOGY

The ancient world equated wealth with social prestige, perhaps even more than the modern world does. To follow a career in politics, for example, required money for campaigns and the construction of public buildings, and gifts to the general populace. However, it was not enough just to have money: wealth used merely for personal consumption without benefiting the community elicited heavy criticism. Society also frowned upon making money in dishonorable ways. The great disparity of wealth between the different classes of society created constant discontent and resentment. Wealth and land possession was concentrated among less than 10 percent of society, while the rest of the population was impoverished and forced to earn their livelihood by hard labor.

Philosophers and politicians such as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero discussed these issues, and sometimes the authorities passed agrarian laws and created debt redemption opportunities in an attempt to remedy such social injustices. However, as a rule, public welfare for the poor or other ways to fight poverty did not exist in the Roman Empire. In this sense, the recurring theme in the New Testament of helping the poor and disadvantaged (sick, widows, orphans, etc.) shows an ethical and social concern that would have set Christians apart from the otherwise indifferent, but suffering, society. It builds upon the active concern for helping the poor that already existed in Judaism. James' condemnation of luxury and self-indulgence of the wealthy members of the Christian community reflects the broader problem of social injustice and indifference in Roman society as a whole (cf. James 5:1-6). Christians are called to be aware of such social issues, to act with kindness and love, and to treat the disadvantaged as brothers and sisters in Christ.