

An Introduction to James

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – an introduction to the book of James and its view of living by faith in Christ
2. aim – to cause us to live by true faith in Christ, a life characterized by following his precepts
3. passage – James 1:22

b. outline

1. The Authorship of James
2. The Audience of James
3. The Applicability of James

c. opening

1. the **reasons** for choosing this book as a new series
 - a. back to the N.T., another book I've *never* preached before, and one very different from Paul
 - b. and, a book that is solidly *practical*, making it a great **challenge to preach** (see below)
2. the **purpose** of an introduction sermon
 - a. to establish *details* – to understand the simple details of the letter
 1. **i.e.** who wrote it, when it was written, to whom it was written, why it was accepted as Scripture, and other details related to its First Century appearance
 - b. to establish *context* – because “a *text* without a *context* is a *pretext* for a *prooftext*”
 1. **i.e.** without a proper context, the content may not be applied properly (**its thesis**)
 2. **i.e.** to make sure we understand *why* the book was written, and what the author *intended*
- c. to establish *interest* – to give us an initial desire to enter into it
 1. **i.e.** an opening designed to *transition* into the letter – to establish *excitement* about it
 - a. (**although**) this introduction may not produce “excitement” *per se* ...

I. The Authorship of James

Content

a. the author of the book

1. like most of the epistles of the N.T., this letter starts by identifying its author
 - a. the exceptions being **Hebrews** (unknown) and **1-3 John** (with strong manuscript evidence)
2. James (remote) = an unknown writer with that name or a pseudonymous writer *using* that name
 - a. certainly a possibility, given its late embrace (**see below**)
 - b. however, the (eventual) embrace of the book was influenced by its apostolic style, and church tradition dating to the 4th C. suggests that James was not anonymous, but a known person
3. James (likely) = one of the men named in the *narratives* of the N.T. as James
 - a. the six (6) men named as James in the N.T.: 1) the son of Zebedee (**Mark 1:19**); 2) the son of Alphaeus (**Mark 3:18**); 3) James “*the less*” (**Mark 15:40**); 4) one of Jesus’ brothers (**Mark 6:3**); 5) “*James the Lord’s brother*” (**Gal. 1:19**); 6) the brother of Jude (**Jude 1**)
 - b. this can be reduced to three (3) – #2 and #3 the same, #4, #5, and #6 the same
 1. James, the son of Zebedee is eliminated because he is martyred by Herod far too early in church history to have written to a “*dispersion*” (**1:1**) of Jewish Christians (**see Acts 12:2**)
 2. James, “*the less*” is a *remote* possibility (given that he was an apostle), but it is generally agreed that the James of the Jerusalem council (**Acts 15**) was not this man (**note Gal. 1:19**)
 3. James, the brother of Jesus is generally accepted to be the author of this book
 - a. his *authority* to write comes *both* from his connection to Jesus *and* from his position over the Jerusalem council (and the topic of the council fits this letter)
4. the Roman Catholic position is that Mary remained a perpetual virgin for the rest of her life, and that this “brother” of Jesus is *either* a child of Joseph from another marriage or a cousin
 - a. however, a straightforward reading of the Gospel accounts strongly suggests that Mary and Joseph had normal marital relations after Jesus (**see Matt. 1:25**) and had other children
5. James *did not* come to faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior until *after* the Resurrection
 - a. explicitly mentioned in **John 7:5**, with Jesus meeting with his half-brother after he rose (**1 Cor. 15:4, 7**), implying that this was for the purpose of “showing” himself fully to him (**i.e.** as Thomas)

- b. **IOW**: the childhood of Jesus was sufficiently “normal” (i.e. non-miraculous) for his family to fail to see him as the Messiah, requiring *in them also* the work of the Spirit to bring them to faith

b. the dating of the book

1. James is *possibly* one of the earliest works of the N.T., written c. 40-45AD
 - a. with the Synoptic Gospels written in the 50-60’s; the epistles in the 60’s; Fourth Gospel in the 90’s
 - b. **timeline**: Jesus raised, James converted (c. 30); Paul converted (c. 33); James sees Paul in Jerusalem (c. 34; **Gal. 1:19**); Paul in Tarsus (c. 34-47); James writes his letter (c. 43); Paul’s first mission (c. 47); Paul writes to the Galatians (c. 48); the Jerusalem Council (c. 49; **Acts 15**); Paul visits James in Jerusalem and is arrested (c. 57; **Acts 21:18**); James martyred (c. 62)

c. the embrace of the book

1. James (although written first) was one of the *last* books to be accepted into the N.T. canon
 - a. it was not listed in the Muratorian Canon for the W church (c. 200AD)
 - b. Eusebius (c. 311) reported that it was still one of the “disputed” books of the church
 1. although *he* thought it *should* be embraced because a) it was (in fact) recognized and embraced by many, b) had an “apostolic style” (i.e. substantive), and c) was orthodox
 - c. Athanasius (c. 367) included it in his definitive list of Scripture, and (with Augustine) convinced Jerome to include it in the Latin Vulgate (c. 384-410), which secured it into the W canon
 - d. Luther relegated it to an *appendix* in his 1522 German Bible, as not “true and certain”
2. James was slow to be embraced by the Church because:
 - a. uncertainty of authorship; not written by one of the Twelve; popular among groups deemed to be heretical; its practical and “generic” content, rather than as *theological*; it “appears” to conflict with Paul; a very Jewish “flavor,” which made it initially unpopular amongst Gentiles (**see below**)
 - b. over time, the church deemed this book worthy of being called Scripture because it met the apostolic standards (of Eusebius) *and* was written by someone in *direct* contact with Jesus

II. The Audience of James

Content

a. the audience of the book

1. written to “*the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*” (**1:1**)
 - a. *diaspora* = the scattering of the Jews away from Jerusalem under Roman oppression; in this case, the scattering of the *believing* Jews into the “outer” regions of the Roman empire
 - b. similar language is used in **1 Peter 1:1**: the Christian churches established in the “interior” of Asia Minor (i.e. Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia [the province], and Bithynia)
 - c. e.g. the Jews that came to Jerusalem for Passover/Pentecost in **Acts 2** went *back* to their “native” lands after their conversion; Paul encountered Jews in synagogues everywhere he went
 - d. **IOW**: to the Jewish believers all over the world; in their “*assemblies*” (*synagogue*; **2:2**)
2. written to Jewish believers *prior* to the advent of the Gentile mission
 - a. some Gentile believers had started to trickle in, but the bulk of the church was yet Jewish
 - b. the Gentile church would not *really* begin until Paul/Barnabas c. 47, a few years after this letter
3. written as an **encyclical** from the head of the Jerusalem church to all Christians everywhere
 - a. the Jerusalem church (at this time) was the *epicenter* of Christianity (i.e. the center of the church eventually moved up to Antioch [with Paul], then over to Ephesus and eventually to Rome)

b. the style of the book

1. James is often called “the Proverbs of the New Testament”
2. James is best described as *wisdom literature* (rather than didactic or epistolary)
 - a. it does not have the indicative/imperative structure of the Pauline corpus – it is strictly imperative
 - b. there are over 50 imperatives in its 108 verses – i.e. it is highly “practical” in nature
 - c. not difficult to *understand* (i.e. the letter has a very easy rhetorical style) ...
3. James assumes a Christian life of *action* rather than “mere” belief
 - a. it is *not* an epistle (to teach) – it is a *sermon* – **which is why it is so difficult to preach ...**
 - b. **end of teaching ... now on to preaching ...**

III. The Applicability of James

Content

a. the controversy of the book

1. the statement in **2:24** vs. **Romans 3:28** – justification by faith alone vs. justification by works of faith
 - a. **i.e.** Paul insists that justification is entirely by faith alone (his trust), whereas James *seems* to be saying that one is justified by what he does (his works)
2. this was why Luther called James “an epistle of straw” – he contended that James *contradicted* the “material principle” of the Reformation (**i.e. sola fide**) and relegated it to an appendix
3. however, they are *not* contradictory, but **complementary** – two different sides of the same coin
 - a. like faith (which always has an *object*), justification always has a **vantage point** – **i.e.** from **whose point of view** are we talking when we say we are justified?
 - b. Paul contends that *in the sight of God* a man is justified only by faith – God “sees” us as justified only on the basis of our trust in his promises as manifested through the person and work of Christ
 1. because God can look upon the *heart* – a heart which he himself regenerated
 - c. James contends that *in the sight of men* a man is justified by a faith that *demonstrates itself in everyday life* – other men can “know” that we are justified (trusting in God) *only by what we do*
 1. because men *cannot* look upon the heart – they can only see the “fruit” of that heart in life
4. **IOW:** James is answering the question: **what is saving faith** – what does *true faith in Christ really look like* in the *life* of the individual – is it simple *heart-knowledge*, or does it have a *living component*?

b. the difficulty of the book

1. James writes in the most *primitive* time of the church, and addresses a “tendency” that is common to the church *from its inception* – a “tendency” that has always been a part of the follower of Jesus
 - a. tendency = to “disconnect” what one *believes* from what one *does*; the “natural” condition of the flesh whereby we think one way and act another (**e.g.** like Paul in **Romans 7**)
 1. it is the very **thesis** of the book, as found in **James 1:22**:
“*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*”
 - b. **e.g.** preaching that is popular today is preaching that is “practical” = tell me how to live
 1. since James is highly “practical” in nature, it should be easy to preach and be well-received
 2. however, “practical” is defined *more* as “tell me how to live amongst the pagans and enjoy all the benefits of a pagan world *while at the same time* claiming to have faith in Jesus”
 3. the “disconnect” is the *tendency* to claim to be justified by faith, yet show *little evidence* of that faith in everyday life – **true justification is visible before both God and men**
 4. **i.e.** if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you – the trial portrayed in **Revelation 20** before the Great White Throne of Jesus?
 5. **note:** even Jesus addressed this tendency among his own disciples (**e.g.** fruit in **John 15**)
2. James is difficult to preach because it requires me to confront this most basic of tendencies
 - a. **i.e.** the imperatives are easy to understand, but extraordinarily difficult to convince you to put into action – your tendency will be to “assume” that you *are* living by faith (**i.e.** deceiving yourself)
 - b. **preaching through James requires a tremendous amount of introspection (self-analysis), which many simply don’t have the “time” or willingness to actually do – thus the difficulty: convincing you to examine your tendencies, one of which is to “ignore” your tendencies!**
 - c. **James is a gold-mine of useful helps for living out a true faith in Jesus Christ, by those willing to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only, [not] deceiving [themselves]”**