

Commentaries on the Letter of James

The review of our study of James: Chapter 5, begins with a summary of the Letter's final chapter. I will quote from several writers who wrote books on James including the following excerpts. The purpose is to emphasize their observations about the Letter.

1. The first writer we will consult is **Zane C. Hodges**. The following are excerpts from his book, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing*:

“Introduction to the Epistle”:

I. Authorship: The author calls himself James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1). But which James is this?

Of the four or five men in the New Testament named James (*lákōbos*) [Ἰάκωβος], same name as Jacob in the Old Testament), we may exclude James the father of Judas (not Iscariot; see Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:33), who is too obscure a person to be a candidate for authorship. For the same reason, we can probably eliminate James the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3; Acts 1:13), who may be the same person as James the Less (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; Luke 24:10). James the apostle (and brother of John, the son of Zebedee) was martyred at such an early date (c. AD 44; see Acts 12:2) that most scholars think it is very unlikely that he wrote the epistle.

The “James” most frequently connected with this letter is a half-brother of our Lord. If the epistle was written after the death of the apostle James, then James, the Lord's brother, was the only well-known James left in the Christian church of Palestine. It is also likely that the bearer of the epistle knew its author and would also inform the recipients wherever it was read. In addition, the tone of authority in the epistle presupposes a fairly commanding and respected figure, rather than an unknown James.

Nevertheless, many modern scholars think of the Epistle of James as pseudonymous (i.e., ascribed to James by the real unknown author. This is an improbable point of view.

Would not the unknown author have made his claim to authority clearer and more pointed by the name “James” either as “the apostle” or as “the Lord’s brother”? That such a claim is not made in the letter implies that the original readers were contemporaries who knew which authoritative James this was.

The internal contents of the epistle agree well with the conclusion that it was written by James the Lord’s brother. These may be noted as follows:

(1) The authoritative manner of the author fits the portrait of him that we get from Acts (Acts 15:13–21; 21:18ff.).

(2) The high moral standards of the author, and especially his emphasis on prayer, are reflected in a famous reference to James the Lord’s brother by a patristic writer, Hegesippus (2d century). Eusébius quotes Hegesippus as saying that this James was distinguished from others named James by the title “the just,” and that “He drank neither wine nor fermented liquors, and abstained from animal food. A razor never came upon his head, he never anointed with oil, and never used a [public] bath. He was in the habit of entering the temple alone, and was often found upon his bended knees, and interceding for the forgiveness of the people: so that his knees became as hard as a camel’s in consequence of his habitual supplication and kneeling before God.”

The James so described must have been a man of exceptional moral rectitude, reflecting the character of the author which the epistle’s contents portray.

(3) Authorship by James, the Lord’s brother, who rose to prominence in the Jerusalem church, is supported also by the physical notices in the epistle which point to a Palestinian situation for both readers and writers.

Note: (a) the writer is not far from the sea (1:6; 3:4); (b) his land is blessed with figs, oil, and wine (3:12); ... (c) salt and bitter springs are known there (3:11, 12); (d) there is reference to the hot wind so common in Palestine (1:11), as well as to the former and latter rain (5:7)

II. Audience, Date, and Destination: James designates his intended audience as “the twelve tribes” (1:1). The phrase seems naturally to identify the recipients as Jewish.

James makes no reference to the Gentiles, nor does he show any awareness of the kind of evangelism typical of the Pauline mission. This suggests the possibility that James was written at a date prior to the Gentile outreach recorded in Acts.

If the traditional date of James’s death (AD 62) is correct, the epistle cannot have been written later than that. Instead, the absence of any concern with the issues raised by the conversion of Gentiles, suggests the possibility that the letter might be dated as early as the middle or late 30s. James could possibly be dated as early as AD 34. As [A. T.] Robinson has noted (*Redating*, p. 121), “there is nothing in James that goes outside what is described in the first half of Acts.” We may add that nothing in the epistle goes beyond Acts Chapters 1–9.

If James is regarded as quite early, before the spread of the Gospel to the Gentile world, we can understand the phrase, “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad accordingly.” The words “scattered abroad” translate the Greek words, ἐν τῇ διασπορά (en téi diasporá): “in the dispersion.”

Note: Διασπορά is a feminine noun defined as “to scatter abroad ... a dispersion which many of the Jews lived after the captivity, in Chaldea, Persia, and chiefly in Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor.

The structure of James's Letter helps us define his purpose even more closely. The threefold admonition of 1:19, "let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath," in fact, is the key to the letter's development.

James adopts for his Letter a structure known and approved for speeches by ancient writers of rhetoric. Of course, as contemporary rhetorical criticism has pointed out, the New Testament documents were almost certainly intended for public reading in the churches. Thus, James's Letter is basically a speech or sermon, cast in written form. Its basic elements are as follows: a preface, or prologue (1:2–18), followed by a thematic statement (1:19–20); a body, called by the Greek rhetoricians the κεφάλαια (*kephálaia*), or "headings" (1:21–5:6); and an epilogue (5:7–20).

Septuagint, abbreviation LXX, the earliest extant translation of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew, presumably made for the use of the Jewish community in Egypt when Greek was the lingua franca throughout the region. Analysis of the language has established that the Torah, or Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), was translated near the middle of the 3rd century BC and that the rest of the Old Testament was translated in the 2nd century BC.¹

III. Early history of the Epistle. Although the Epistle of James may have been written long before any other New Testament book, it probably came into general circulation much later. Indeed if, as we suggest, it was a pastoral communication from James to the scattered congregations of Palestine, it had no single destination. Rather, the bearer of the letter may have moved from congregation to congregation allowing it to be read in each assembly of believers. Whether the epistle was copied in any of these places is unknown. But it is possible that the original could have been left with the last congregation for whom it was intended.

¹ "Septuagint," in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2010), 643.



When Palestinian believers fled from Palestine during the Jewish War with Rome (AD 66–70), the original—if it still existed—*probably went with them*. Alternatively, a copy or copies of the original might go abroad at that time.

Hence the letter of James would become known in the wider Christian community only after the death of James himself and after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Since the Palestinian church effectively ceased to exist after the Roman war, the authenticity of the *Letter* bearing James’s name was hard to verify in the very area where it had originated.

A history something like this probably explains the relatively slow reception of the epistle of James in the larger Christian Church.

In summary, therefore, there is nothing in the early history of the epistle of James that would incline us to question its authenticity and early date. Those who find such questions in the history are usually guided by an unwarranted zeal to discover them.

IV. Literary Character. The extremely influential commentary on James by form critic Martin Dibelius maintained the view, still popular today, that James should be regarded as paraenesis². As previously noted, paraenesis was a form of ethical exhortation widely used in pre-Christian literature, both Jewish and Hellenistic. It was characterized by aphorisms and compact units of thought which were loosely strung together by the author—hence the term “string of pearls” to describe this form. Those who see James in this light usually give up on the idea that the epistle presents an organized development of a basic theme.

But other scholars do not accept this approach and are much more inclined than some older writers to see a thematic structure in the epistle.

² “Paraenesis,” an exhortatory composition: advice, counsel; see; “exhortatory”: to make an urgent appeal. (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 11th ed., 2014), 898, 438.



V. Purpose. James was writing to the Christians who had been scattered (1:1) by the persecution that arose after Stephen's death. The structure of James's Letter allows us to define his purpose even more closely. The threefold admonition of James 1:19, "*let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath*," in fact, is the key to the Letter's development. James adopts for his Letter a structure known and approved for speeches by ancient writers on rhetoric.³

2. The second writer we will consult is **A. T. Robertson**. The following are excerpts from his book, *Studies in the Epistle of James*.

1. **James, a Servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.**
THE BROTHER OF THE LORD. It will be well to put together the bits of information about James the brother of the Lord (Galatians 1:19). There are many proofs that the epistle was written by the author of the speech in Acts 15:13–21, delicate similarities of thought and style too subtle for mere imitation or copying. The same likeness appears between the epistle of James and the letter to Antioch, probably written also by James (Acts 15:23–29). There are in the same vividness of imagery in the epistle that is so prominent a characteristic of the teaching of Jesus.

Jesus had himself laid emphasis on the fact of his spiritual kingship with all believers as more important (Matthew 12:48–50). The fact that James during the ministry of Jesus was not sympathetic with His work would also act as a restraining force upon him. He rejoices in the title of "servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," just as Paul did later (Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1) and as Jude, the brother of James, did (Jude 1).

³ Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* (Irving: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 7–15.



Paul, however, added the term “apostle” in Romans 1:1 and Titus 1:1 which James and Jude do not employ. None of them were members of the twelve, although Paul claimed apostleship on a par with the twelve (1 Corinthians 9:1 f.; 15:8; 2 Corinthians 12:10 f.).

And yet Paul implies (Galatians 1:19) that James also is an apostle in a true sense of that term. Like Paul, he had seen the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:7). But James, though one of the pillars at Jerusalem with Peter and John (Galatians 2:9), is content with the humbler word “slave.” He is the bondsman of the Lord Jesus Christ as well as of God and so is a Christian in the full sense of the term.

He places Jesus on a par with God and uses Christ as a part of the name. He identifies his brother Jesus with the Messiah of the Old Testament and the fulfilment of the hopes and aspirations of true Judaism.

One must perceive that the term “Christ” in the mouth of James carries its full content and is used deliberately. He adds also “Lord,” which has here the Old Testament connotation of worship. It is not a mere polite term of station or courtesy. The use of “Lord,” by the side of “God,” places James unquestionably in the ranks of worshipers of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

I consider it settled that James was not the cousin of Jesus, the son of the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. There is no doubt that the Greek word for brother is used for members of a brotherhood in the current Greek of the first century A.D., just as we find it so frequently in the New Testament. This usage does not apply to the brothers of Jesus referred to in the Gospels (John 2:12; Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55; John 7:3). In Matthew 12:46, 49 we find both the literal and the figurative use of “brother” side by side. In this looser sense anyone may be called “brother.”

Jesus is “only begotten” of God (John 1:18), as the widow of Nain⁴ had an only son (Luke 7:12) and Jaírus an only daughter (Luke 8:42). But “firstborn” occurs in the true sense all through the Septuagint (cf. Genesis 27:19, 32; 43:33; Deuteronomy 21:15), where there were other children.

The inscriptions show it in the true sense. The New Testament instances of “firstborn” are all strictly correct from this standpoint, even Colossians 1:15 and Romans 8:29. “Firstborn” implies other children. Besides, the natural meaning of Matthew 1:25 leads to the same conclusion.

The theory (brother or half-brother theory) that Jesus and James were sons of the same mother, Mary, may be said to hold the field against the others. In fact, it is most likely that both of the other theories grew out of the desire to secure a greater imaginary sanctity for Mary under the impression that she was more holy if she bore only Jesus and did not live as wife with Joseph.

But this is contrary to all Jewish sentiment, and certainly there is nothing in the Gospels to countenance this notion but much to contradict it. We conclude, therefore, that James, the author of the epistle, is the brother of Jesus.

THE FAMILY CIRCLE IN NAZARETH. We must think of the family circle at Nazareth as composed of five brothers (Jesus, James, Joseph, Simon, Judas in Matthew 13:55) and the “sisters.” Every implication is that they all passed as sons and daughters of Joseph and Mary in the usual sense. The order implies also that while Jesus was the eldest, James came next among the brothers. Unfortunately, the names of the sisters are not given.

⁴ “Ναῖν (*Nain*): This town mentioned in Scripture only in connection with the visit of Jesus and the miracle of raising the widow’s son from the dead (Luke 7:11).” (W. Ewing, “*Nain*,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956], III:2111.



The author of the epistle is gifted with imagination and shows knowledge of the apocryphal books, especially the wisdom literature of the Jews. But he is a thorough Jew in his outlook and literary method, so much so indeed that it is contended by some that James wrote the epistle originally in Aramaic, an unlikely supposition. The widespread diffusion of Greek in Palestine amply accounts for the author's grasp of the language.

The epigrammatic and picturesque style is due to the writer's individuality, his environment, and his reading. His vocabulary is rich in words about fishing, husbandry, and domestic life, as one would expect.

A man of the force and position of James could easily broaden his acquaintance with the position of James could easily broaden his acquaintance with the Greek tongue as the years went by. The Greek is pure Koine, with few Hebraisms, though the tone is distinctly that of the Old Testament. He speaks like a prophet of old in the service of Christ. There is no doubt that James came to be a man of culture in a real sense.

He probably married early, as it was the custom of the Jews for men to marry at the age of eighteen. Paul expressly states that the brothers of the Lord were married (1 Corinthians 9:5).

We do not know, of course, the age of James when Jesus began his ministry. In all probability he had already married and had a home of his own in Nazareth. The sisters probably married and settled in Nazareth also (Mark 6:3).

We have no mention of the rest of the children going to Jerusalem when the boy Jesus was taken (Luke 2:41-52). Indeed, it is rather implied that they were not in the company, but this does not mean that James did not have his turn to go at the age of twelve and afterward.