

THE PILLAR NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

General Editor

D. A. CARSON



The Letter
of
JAMES

DOUGLAS J. MOO

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Series Preface

Commentaries have specific aims, and this series is no exception. Designed for serious pastors and teachers of the Bible, the Pillar commentaries seek above all to make clear the text of Scripture as we have it. The scholars writing these volumes interact with the most important, informed contemporary debate, but avoid getting mired in undue technical detail. Their ideal is a blend of rigorous exegesis and exposition, with an eye alert both to biblical theology and the contemporary relevance of the Bible, without confusing the commentary and the sermon.

The rationale for this approach is that the vision of “objective scholarship” (a vain chimera) may actually be profane. God stands over against us; we do not stand in judgment of him. When God speaks to us through his Word, those who profess to know him must respond in an appropriate way, and that is certainly different from a stance in which the scholar projects an image of autonomous distance. Yet this is no surreptitious appeal for uncontrolled subjectivity. The writers of this series aim for an evenhanded openness to the text that is the best kind of “objectivity” of all.

If the text is God's Word, it is appropriate that we respond with reverence, a certain fear, a holy joy, a questing obedience. These values should be reflected in the way Christians write. With these values in place, the Pillar commentaries will be warmly welcomed not only by pastors, teachers, and students, but by general readers as well.

* * *

At first glance some might think it rather surprising that the author of one of this century's major commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans

SERIES PREFACE

should turn his hand to write a sympathetic commentary on James. But that is what Douglas Moo has achieved. More than an enlargement of his well-received little commentary on James in the TNTC series, this volume is a fresh and detailed work that displays, in particular, two great strengths. The first is a deceptive simplicity. Even when he is handling remarkably complex exegetical points, Dr. Moo argues his case with an economy and simplicity of style altogether enviable and sure to be appreciated by every reader. The second is a gentle tone of thoughtful application. Without forgetting that this book is a commentary and not a homily, Dr. Moo expounds the text not only with the cool objectivity of the seasoned scholar but with the warm reflection of the pastor. It is an enormous privilege to work with him as a colleague in the institution both of us serve.

D. A. CARSON

Author's Preface

I am very grateful to Don Carson, general editor of the Pillar New Testament Commentary, and to the Eerdmans Publishing Company for the opportunity to write this commentary on the Letter of James. As many readers of this commentary will know, fifteen years ago I wrote a commentary on James for the Tyndale series (*The Letter of James* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1985]). The opportunity to revisit this letter has proved to be very profitable for me and, I hope, for students of James. The Pillar series has enabled me almost to double the space I could devote to commentary on the letter. I have therefore been able to pursue issues of background and theology at greater length. I am more impressed than ever by James's creative use of Hellenistic Jewish traditions in his exposition of practical Christianity. And I remain convinced that the heart of the letter is a call to wholehearted commitment to Christ. James's call for consistent and uncompromising Christian living is much needed. Our churches are filled with believers who are only halfhearted in their faith and, as a result, leave large areas of their lives virtually untouched by genuine Christian values. Nor am I immune to such problems. As I quite unexpectedly find myself in my "middle age" years, I have discovered a tendency to back off in my fervor for the Lord and his work. My reimmersion in James has challenged me sharply at just this point. I pray that it might have the same effect on all readers of the commentary.

In addition to series editor Don Carson and Eerdmans editor Milton Essenburg, I have several others to thank for their help with this volume. My research assistant at Trinity, Stephen Pegler, helped compile bibliography and edit the manuscript. My office assistant, Leigh Swain, keyed my earlier commentary into WordPerfect as a source for this work. She and Trinity doctoral fellow Pierce Yates also helped with the indexes. But

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

most of all I want to thank my wife Jenny, to whom I dedicate this book. She also helped with the indexes; but, more than that, she encouraged me in the work when my self-confidence was at a low ebb.

DOUGLAS J. MOO

Chief Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
<i>AusBibRev</i>	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i> (2d ed.)
BK	<i>Bibel und Kirche</i>
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDF	F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ISBE	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JTS	<i>Journal for Theological Studies</i>
KJV	King James Version
LSJ	Liddell-Scott-Jones, <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i>

CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

LW	<i>Luther's Works</i>
LXX	Septuagint
MM	J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, <i>The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament</i>
MT	Massoretic Text
NA	Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament (27th ed.)
NAB	New American Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIDNTT	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NLT	New Living Translation
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum, Supplements
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
REB	Revised English Bible
ResQ	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TEV	Today's English Version
TLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
TrinJ	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
UBS	United Bible Societies Greek New Testament (4th ed.)
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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Introduction

Few NT books have been as controversial as the Letter of James. Its place in the canon was contested by some early Christians. The reformer Martin Luther called it an “epistle of straw” and relegated it to a secondary status within the NT. And modern theologians often dismiss the letter as a holdover from Judaism that does not truly express the essence of the Christian faith. Yet quite in contrast to the sometimes negative view of the letter among academics and theologians is the status of James among ordinary believers. Few books of the NT are better known or more often quoted than James. It is probably one of the two or three most popular NT books in the church. In the sections of the Introduction that follow we will investigate just why some theologians have had difficulties with James. But why is James so popular among believers generally? Three characteristics of the letter seem to provide the answer.

First, James is intensely practical; and believers looking for specific guidance in the Christian life naturally appreciate such an emphasis. Typical of the letter is 1:22, arguably the most famous command in the NT: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (1:22). James is filled with similar clear and direct commands. In fact, the Letter of James contains a higher frequency of imperative verbs than any other NT book. James’s purpose is clearly not so much to inform as to chastise, exhort, and encourage. It is not, as we will show, that James is unconcerned with theology or that he does not have solid theological basis for his commands. It is, rather, that he touches only briefly and allusively on the theology while concentrating on the practical outworking of the theology.

A second factor making James so attractive to believers is his conciseness. He rarely develops the points he makes at any length, being

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content to make his point and to move quickly on. Interpreters of James are often, indeed, puzzled to figure out a clear organization in the letter. But what troubles interpreters is a virtue for many readers, who can immediately appreciate the point that James is trying to make. Indeed, in this respect James is somewhat similar to OT and Jewish wisdom books, such as Proverbs; and Christians appreciate these books for similar reasons.

Third, James's lavish use of metaphors and illustrations makes his teaching easy to understand and to remember. The billowing sea, the withered flower, the image of a face in a mirror, the bit in the horse's mouth, the rudder of the ship, the destructive forest fire, the pure spring of water, the arrogant businessman, the corroded metal, and moth-eaten clothes — all are images of virtually universal appeal.

Nevertheless, without denying the direct and often obvious point in what James writes, his letter does come from circumstances far removed from ours. To appreciate fully what James wants to communicate to the church of our day, we need to understand these circumstances as best we can. In the sections that follow, we will take up the various facets of James's situation so that we may gain as accurate and detailed a picture as possible of the context in which God used him to communicate his word for his people.

I. THE LETTER IN THE CHURCH

The Letter of James is not addressed to a single church but to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (1:1). This general address led early Christians to categorize James, along with the similarly vaguely addressed 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude, as a “general” or “catholic” (in the sense of “universal”) letter. Perhaps because the letters did not find a home in any single church, each of them had something of a struggle to find general acceptance as canonical books. James was not finally recognized by both the eastern and western parts of the church until the fourth century.

The Letter of James was, of course, known and used by many Christians long before then. The letter is first mentioned by name early in the third century. But ancient Christians were in the habit of quoting from books and using their content without naming them. So determining how early James was used in the early church depends on identifying places in early Christian literature where the teaching of James is cited or referred to. But such an identification is not always easy since much of

THE LETTER IN THE CHURCH

what James teaches is traditional. What might seem to be a reference to James could simply be a reference to a widespread teaching that James shares with many other Jews and early Christians. J. B. Mayor, in his classic commentary on James, takes a maximal approach, identifying allusions to James in many NT books and early Christian writings.¹ But many of these allusions prove to be no more than similarities in rather common language or ideas. A more sober and realistic estimate comes from L. T. Johnson, a recent commentator on James. He thinks a good case can be made that two Christian books from the late first and early second century depend on James: *1 Clement*, a letter written in Rome about A.D. 95, and *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a series of homilies from the early or middle second century.² Similarities between James and the Mandates section of *The Shepherd* are particularly striking.

An early Christian writer, Cassiodorus, claims that Clement, head of the catechetical school in Alexandria, wrote a commentary on James. But it has never been discovered, and Clement does not show dependence on James in his other writings.³ Clement's successor in Alexandria, Origen, is the first to cite James by name. He attributes the letter to James, "the apostle" (*Commentary on John*, frag. 126), and cites the letter as Scripture (*Selecta in Psalmos* 30:6). In the Latin translation of Origen's works, the author is more explicitly identified as "the brother of the Lord," but the reliability of this addition is doubted. Several other third-century Christian writings allude to James, and the letter is quoted as scriptural in the pseudo-Clementine tractate *Ad Virgines*. In the early fourth century, the historian Eusebius both cites James and regards the letter as canonical. However, he also relegates it to the status of a "disputed book" in his survey of the state of the canon in his day (*History of the Church* 3.25.3; 2.23.25). This category encompasses books that were accepted by many Christians as scriptural but rejected by others. The doubts about James probably came from the Syrian church, where the general letters were often rejected. Theodore of Mopsuestia, one of the most influential Syrian theologians, for instance, refused to accept into the canon any of the general letters. Nevertheless, James was included in the fifth-century Syriac translation of the NT, and it is quoted with approval by two other giants of the eastern church: Chrysostom (d. 407) and Theodoret (d. 458).

While dissenting voices are found, therefore, the eastern church as a whole generally accepted James as a scriptural document. A similar pat-

1. See esp. pp. lxix-lxxi, lxxxviii-cix.

2. Johnson, 68-80.

3. B. F. Westcott speculated that "Jude" should be read in place of "James" in Cassiodorus's statement (*A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* [6th ed.; London: Macmillan, 1889], 357-58).

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tern emerges in the western church, although James was slower to gain acceptance there. Neither the Muratorian Canon (late 2d century) nor the Mommson catalog (listing the African canon of c. 360) includes James.⁴ In fact, the earliest undisputed reference to James in the western church comes only in the middle of the fourth century (Hilary of Poitiers and Ambrosiaster). Decisive, perhaps, for James's eventual place in the canon of the western church was the endorsement of the major figure Jerome. He included James in his Latin translation and cited it frequently. Moreover, he explicitly identified the author as the brother of the Lord. Augustine followed suit, and James landed a secure place in the canon of the Christian church.

How should we evaluate the rather slow and hesitant adoption of James into the early Christian canon? Some scholars think that the uncertainties expressed by some early Christians about James should raise doubts in our minds about the authenticity or authority of the letter for the church. But two factors suggest that this conclusion is unwarranted. First, the evidence we possess suggests that James was not so much *rejected* as *neglected*. While evidence for the use and authoritative status of James is not as early or widespread as we might wish, very few early Christians, knowing the letter, dismissed it. Second, the neglect that James experienced can be readily explained. Early Christians tended to accord special prominence to books written by apostles; and James was such a common name that many probably wondered whether the letter had an apostolic origin or not. Moreover, James is filled with rather traditional and quite practical admonitions: it is not the kind of book that would figure prominently in early Christian theological debates. At the same time some early Jewish-Christian groups misrepresented some of the teaching of James in support of their own heretical agendas. Knowledge of this use of James among orthodox theologians may well have led them to look askance at James.⁵ Finally, the destination of the letter may also account for its relative neglect. The letter was probably written to Jewish Christians living in Palestine and Syria. These churches, partly as the result of the disastrous revolts against Rome in 66-70 and 132-35, disappeared at an early date; and letters written to them may similarly have disappeared for a time.⁶

The canonical status of James came under scrutiny again at the time

4. The absence of James in the Muratorian Canon may be accidental, since the text is mutilated (see Westcott, *History of the Canon*, 219-20; and, for a contrasting interpretation, Mussner, 41).

5. Martin, lxi.

6. It may be significant in this regard that Origen cites James only after his move from Alexandria to Palestine (see Laws, 24).

of the Reformation. The humanist scholar Erasmus raised doubts about the letter's apostolic origin, questioning whether a brother of Jesus could have written a letter composed in such good Greek. Luther also doubted the apostolic status of the letter, but his criticism of James went much further. His objections to James were primarily theological. Luther's quest for peace with God ended with his discovery of Paul's teaching about justification by faith alone. Justification by faith became for him and his followers, as later Lutheran theologians put it, "the doctrine on which the church stands or falls." It was because Luther gave to justification by faith central importance in defining NT theology that he had difficulties with letters like James that were silent about, or even appeared to be critical of, this doctrine. Hence Luther claimed that James "mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture" (*LW* 35:397). James was "an epistle of straw" (*LW* 35:362), to be relegated to the end of the NT, along with Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation. Clearly, then, Luther had doubts about whether James should be regarded with the same respect and authority as the more "central" NT documents. But we should be careful not to overemphasize the strength of his critique. He did not exclude James from the canon and quotes the letter rather frequently in his writings.⁷ A balanced assessment of Luther's view of James is summed up well by Luther himself: "I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him" (*LW* 35:397).

The other reformers did not share Luther's negative view of James. Calvin, for instance, while admitting that James "seems more sparing in proclaiming the grace of Christ than it behooved an Apostle to be," also rightly noted that "it is not surely required for all to handle the same arguments."⁸ He accepted the full apostolic authority of the letter and argued that Paul's and James's perspectives on justification could be harmonized so as to maintain the unity of Scripture. Calvin's approach to James is standard among the community of believers. And it is surely the right one. With a better appreciation of the Jewish background against which James is writing and the benefit of distance from the battles Luther was fighting, we can both value the distinctive message of James and see how that message can be harmonized with the message of Paul. James has his own contribution to make to our understanding of Christian theology and practice. That contribution, as we will argue later, provides an important counterweight to a potential imbalance from reading Paul (or

7. See D. Stoutenberg, "Martin Luther's Exegetical Use of the Epistle of St. James" (M.A. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, 1982).

8. Calvin, 277.

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certain of Paul's letters) alone. The early Christians who, under the providential guidance of God, accorded to James canonical status recognized the inherent value of James in this regard. We can be grateful for the opportunity to read, appropriate, and live out the distinctive emphases of this important NT letter.

This is not to say that the acceptance of James as authoritative Scripture has been unquestioned since Calvin's time. Two challenges in particular need to be addressed. First, the academic community has raised several questions about the origin of James that have the real or potential effect of seriously undermining the letter's authority. We will deal with these matters in the sections that follow. Second, even when the letter is acknowledged to be fully canonical and authoritative for the church, Christians can effectively avoid the contribution of the letter to theology and practice by simply ignoring it or by failing to interpret the letter in its own terms. We can almost unconsciously operate with a "canon within the canon" that fails to do justice to the full scope of the revelation God has given us.

II. NATURE AND GENRE

Several facets of the book of James need to be considered as we think about the kind of book that we have before us.

First, the book's opening words identify what follows as a letter. The letter was a very broad literary category in the ancient world, encompassing everything from brief notes of information and request to long argumentative discourses. Identifying James as a letter is, therefore, both obvious and not very helpful. A closer examination of the nature of this particular letter takes us a bit further. Absent from James are the customary greetings, references to fellow workers, and travel plans that mark many ancient and NT (especially Pauline) letters. Also missing are references to specific people, places, or situations in the body of the letter. Where James does refer to a situation, he casts it in a vague, even hypothetical manner (e.g., 2:2-3, 15-17; 4:13-17).

As we noted above, it was for these reasons that early Christians classified James as a "general" letter: one written to the church at large rather than to a specific church or group of churches.⁹ But while the letter does not single out individuals or places, it pretty clearly reflects a specific set of circumstances that would not be true of people living just any-

9. A few modern scholars agree; see, e.g., Klein, 185-87; Vouga, 24-25.

where. Most scholars agree, therefore, that James addresses a specific church or, more likely, group of churches. The letter is the form in which James has transmitted general admonitions concerning their situation. James is therefore more a "literary" than a personal letter; the closest parallel to it in the NT is perhaps 1 John.¹⁰

A second feature of James that would immediately impress the ancient reader is the degree to which James borrows from traditional teaching.¹¹ Two kinds of sources figure especially often in the letter. First, James depends more than any other NT author on the teaching of Jesus. It is not that James directly quotes Jesus — although Jas. 5:12 is virtually a quotation of Jesus' teaching about oaths in Matt. 5:33-37. It is, rather, that he weaves Jesus' teaching into the very fabric of his own instruction. Again and again, the closest parallels to James's wording will be found in the teaching of Jesus — especially as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. And the topics he addresses as well as the particular slant that he takes on these topics mimics Jesus' own emphasis. The author of the letter seems to have been so soaked in the atmosphere and specifics of Jesus' teaching that he can reflect them almost unconsciously. Second, the letter also betrays a striking number of similarities to the words and emphases of a certain segment of Hellenistic Judaism, represented to some extent by the Alexandrian philosopher Philo, but especially by the apocryphal book Sirach and the pseudepigraphical book *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. The letter's dependence on such sources offers some help in identifying the author and place of writing; but we are concerned here with what this use of traditional material might suggest about the nature of the letter. But before we draw possible conclusions from this factor, another factor needs to be mentioned.

Striking to both the ancient and modern reader alike is the letter's lack of clear organization. The author moves quickly from topic to topic, and the logical relationship of the topics is often not at all clear. Recent scholarship, influenced by modern literary techniques and insights, has reopened the question of structure with a vengeance; and we will consider this matter more carefully later. But the very number of suggestions for the outline of the letter betrays the very point we are making here: the letter has no obvious structure, nor even a clearly defined theme. Moral exhortations follow closely upon one another without connections and without much logical relationship.

10. See esp. F. O. Francis, "The Form and Function of the Opening and Closing Paragraphs of James and 1 John," *ZNW* 61 (1970) 110-26; P. H. Davids, "The Epistle of James in Modern Discussion," *ANRW* 2.25.5 (1988) 3,628-29.

11. For a recent survey and sound conclusions, see Johnson, 34-46.

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These three facets of the letter, combined with its hortatory focus, led Martin Dibelius to classify the letter as *paraenesis*.¹² And because Dibelius wrote one of the most influential modern commentaries on James, his view of the nature of the letter has found a good number of adherents. The ancient genre of *paraenesis*, according to Dibelius, was characterized by four factors that make it a perfect fit for James: (1) a focus on exhortation; (2) a general rather than specific situation; (3) the use of traditional material; and (4) loose organization. But the popularity of Dibelius's approach to the letter has waned considerably in recent years. Scholars have cast doubt on the whole idea that there was an identifiable *genre* such as *paraenesis* in the ancient world.¹³ And where Dibelius saw nothing but isolated sayings, modern scholars are far more inclined to find important motifs and themes that bind the apparently diverse exhortations of James together.

Taking the place of *paraenesis* as probably the most popular genre identification for James is wisdom.¹⁴ Indeed, many contemporary scholars insist that *paraenesis* should be seen as one component of wisdom literature.¹⁵ The letter speaks directly about wisdom in a central passage (3:13-18; cf. also 1:5), and the brief, direct, and practical admonitions found at many places in the letter resemble the style of wisdom books from the OT (e.g., Proverbs) and the intertestamental period (e.g., Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon). Moreover, some of the concerns of James are also key concerns in these wisdom books (e.g., speech, dissension, wealth and poverty). But the issue of wisdom is not at all central to the book as a whole; and most of the letter, in fact, does not consist of the brief "proverbs" familiar from wisdom books. Much depends on how broadly we understand "wisdom"; contemporary scholarship has a tendency to subsume a great deal under that rubric. Suffice it to say here that only a very broad definition of "wisdom" would enable us to categorize James as a whole as wisdom; and we are not convinced that so broad a definition is justified.

Several other specific genre identifications have been suggested by scholars. But none has gained much acceptance. Perhaps the closest we can get to anything specific is to think of James as a sermon or homily.¹⁶

12. Dibelius, 1-11.

13. See the strictures of L. J. Perdue, "Paraenesis and the Epistle of James," *ZNW* 72 (1981) 241-56.

14. With varying emphases and in different degrees, see, e.g., Frankemölle, 80-88; Baker, 7-12; B. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 238-47.

15. J. G. Gammie, "Paraenetic Literature: Toward the Morphology of a Secondary Genre," *Semeia* 50 (1990) 43-51; Hartin, 21-80.

16. See esp. Wessel, 962 (reflecting the conclusions of his doctoral dissertation); also Rendall, 35; Davids, 23; Johnson, 17-24.

The author, separated from his readers by distance, cannot exhort them in person or at length. So he must put his preaching in written form, using a letter to cover briefly the main points that he wants them to understand.

III. AUTHOR

A. The Case for James the Brother of the Lord

The writer of the letter identifies himself simply as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). The English name comes from the Latin *Jacomus* via old French *Gemmes*. The Greek name it translates, *Iakōbos*, occurs forty-two times in the NT and refers to at least four different men. Three of them are mentioned in one verse, Acts 1:13: “When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.” James the father of Judas is mentioned only here and in Luke 6:16 in the NT. His name occurs only because there is a need to distinguish this particular Judas from the better-known Judas Iscariot. James the son of Alphaeus is rather obscure, mentioned only in lists of apostles such as this one (cf. also Mark 3:18; Matt. 10:3; Luke 6:15) and perhaps in Mark 15:40 (“James the younger”) and Matt. 27:56.¹⁷ He was probably not well known enough to have written an authoritative letter to Christians under his own name alone. But James the son of Zebedee is one of the most prominent apostles in the gospel narratives. Along with Peter and John, he belonged to the “inner circle” of the Twelve and was therefore privileged to witness, for instance, the resurrection of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:37 and par.) and the transfiguration (Mark 9:2 and par.; see also Mark 10:35, 41; 13:3). But this James was put to death by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:2), perhaps in about A.D. 44. And we probably should not date the letter of James quite this early. This leaves us with the other prominent James in the NT: James the brother of the Lord. He is mentioned in the Gospels (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3), but he became a follower of Jesus only after the resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15:7 and John 7:5). He attained a position of leadership in the early church (Acts 12:17), where we find him dialoging with Paul about the nature and

17. A few scholars (e.g., W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* [rev. ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1976], 411) surmise that this James might be an entirely different person.

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sphere of the gospel ministry (Acts 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12). None of the other Jameses mentioned in the NT lived long enough or was prominent enough to write the letter we have before us without identifying himself any further than he does. Of course, it is always possible that a James not mentioned in the NT was the author of the letter. But we would have expected that so important a person would have left traces of himself in early Christian tradition. It is not surprising, then, that, with a few late exceptions,¹⁸ Christians have traditionally identified the author of the letter with James the brother of the Lord.

The case for authorship to this point is inferential: a well-known James must have written the letter, and the brother of the Lord is the only James we know of who fits the profile. Proof is, in the nature of the case, unavailable. But several circumstances about the letter at least corroborate this conclusion.

First, the letter has a few suggestive similarities to the wording of the speech given by James of Jerusalem, the brother of the Lord, at the Apostolic Council (Acts 15:13-21) and to the letter subsequently sent out by him to Gentiles in northern Syria and southern Asia Minor (Acts 15:23-29). The epistolary “greeting” (Gk. *chairein*) occurs in Jas. 1:1 and Acts 15:23, but in only one other place in the NT; the use of “name” (*onoma*) as the subject of the passive form of the verb “call” (*kaleō*) is peculiar, yet is found in both Jas. 2:7 and Acts 15:17; the appeal “listen, my brothers” occurs in both Jas. 2:5 and Acts 15:13; and several other, less striking, similarities are also found.¹⁹ None of the similarities proves common authorship, but they are suggestive.²⁰

Second, the circumstances reflected in the letter fit the date and situation in which James of Jerusalem would be writing. We sketch some of these circumstances in the section that follows. Briefly, the readers seem to have been Jewish Christians who have left their homes in Palestine and are facing economic distress, including persecution at the hands of wealthy landowners. James, the NT makes clear, ministered mainly to Jewish Christians. The middle first century in the Middle East was marred by famine and general economic distress as well as by a tendency for wealthy people to buy up land and force farmers to work their land on their own terms (cf. Jas. 5:1-6). As leader of the Jerusalem church,

18. For example, some Spanish writers, from the seventh century on, claimed that their patron, James the son of Zebedee, was the author; and Calvin (p. 277) suggests that James the son of Alphaeus may have written the letter.

19. See esp. Mayor, iii-iv.

20. J. Painter (*Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* [Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1997], 234-48) uses these similarities and several other factors to argue that Luke was the editor of the letter that we now have in the NT.

James would have been in a perfect position to address a letter to Jewish Christians who had been forced to flee from Jerusalem and its confines because of persecution. In fact, the situation Luke describes in Acts 11:19 fits very neatly with the scenario we are proposing: “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.” We can well imagine these early Jewish Christians leaving their homes, trying to establish new lives in new and often hostile environments, and, because of the sense of dislocation, losing some of their spiritual moorings. James, as their “pastor,” would naturally want to encourage and admonish them.

Another aspect of the letter of James also fits well into the kind of early Jewish-Christian environment associated with James the brother of the Lord: its primitive Christian theology. James is far more theological than many scholars have given the letter credit for. But the theology rarely goes beyond accepted OT and Jewish perspectives, combined with some very basic, distinctly Christian conceptions: Jesus as Lord (1:1; 2:1) and coming judge (5:7, 9); the tension between the “already” of salvation accomplished (1:18) and “not yet” culminated (1:21; 2:14; 5:20); “elders” functioning as spiritual leaders in the local church (5:14). This is just the kind of theology we might associate with James as we know him from the NT.

B. The Challenge to the Traditional View

For seventeen centuries Christians, with only a few exceptions, accepted the view that the letter of James was written by the Lord’s brother of that name known from the pages of the NT. But in the last two centuries a growing number of scholars have challenged this tradition. Before we investigate this challenge, it is worth asking why we should bother to debate the point. It is certainly not worth spending a lot of time to validate or overthrow the tradition as such. The point might be of interest to church historians but would have little import for those of us interested in reading and understanding the letter. But more than tradition is involved. The letter makes a claim about authorship: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to. . . .” Identifying the James who wrote the letter may enable us to set the letter more accurately into its historical and canonical context. And by doing so, our interpretation of the letter and its contribution to the teaching of Scripture generally will be enhanced. An obvious case in point with respect to James is the teaching of chap. 2 on justification. But the matter of authorship is important for

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another reason. Precisely because the letter makes a claim about the author, the truthfulness of the letter as a whole is ultimately at stake. Of course, the letter makes no claim about *which* James wrote the letter; and so no question about the truthfulness of the letter is raised if we decide, with Calvin, for instance, that James the son of Alphaeus wrote the letter. But if, as many contemporary scholars maintain, the person who wrote the letter was not a person named James but someone writing in the name of the famous brother of the Lord, then new questions arise. Is the author trying to deceive us about the origin of the letter and thereby claim apostolic authority for a letter that does not deserve it? Or is the author simply utilizing a well-known ancient literary device whereby a famous person's teaching could be "reapplied" to a new situation? Our answer to these questions inevitably will effect the authority that we attribute to this letter. And so the issue needs careful investigation.

Three general theories of authorship need to be considered, although the first two can be quickly disposed of.²¹ In what is now to be regarded as nothing more than a curiosity in the history of scholarship, a few scholars suggested that the letter, in its essence, is not a Christian book at all. They argued that an original Jewish document had been "Christianized" with a couple of superficial references to Jesus (1:1; 2:1).²² The decisive blow to this extreme view is the degree to which the letter is permeated with references to the teaching of Jesus. A few others have suggested that the letter might have been written by another man named James: either the member of the Twelve by that name, James the son of Alphaeus (Calvin), or an unknown James (Erasmus, Luther).²³ But these views have none of the strengths and all of the weaknesses of the more usual identification with James the brother of the Lord.

By far the most usual alternative to the traditional view of authorship holds that the writer of the letter was an unknown Christian. The

21. We will not bother with some of the more imaginative (to put it kindly) theories, such as that the author was the Teacher of Righteousness known from the Qumran literature (R. Eisenman, "Eschatological 'Rain' Imagery in the War Scroll from Qumran and in the Letter of James," *JNES* 49 [1990] 173-84; for a brief response, see Painter, *Just James*, 230-34, 277-88).

22. L. Massebieau, "L'épître de Jacques — est-elle l'oeuvre d'un Chrétien?" *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 32 (1895) 249-83; F. Spitta, "Der Brief des Jakobus," *Zur Geschichte und Literatur des Urchristentums*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1896), 1-239. A. Meyer (*Der Rätsel des Jacobusbriefes* [Berlin: Töpelmann, 1930]) suggested that this original Jewish document was based on the "testament" of Jacob to his twelve sons (Genesis 49).

23. See also A. M. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 164-65 (although he is more cautious in the 3rd edition [1972], 168-69); Moffatt, 2.

name “James” in 1:1 may then have been added at a later date, in which case the letter in its original form would have been anonymous. Or it may have been added by the author himself to lend greater authority to the book and, perhaps, because the teaching of the letter had some relationship to James the brother of the Lord. In this case, the letter would be pseudepigraphical. This latter theory now dominates modern scholarship on James. Why is this so? Mainly because scholars are convinced that the letter contains features incompatible with authorship by James the brother of the Lord. Four such features are most often cited. We will examine each in turn.

1. If the letter had really been written by a brother of the Lord Jesus, the author would surely have mentioned that special relationship at some point in the letter. We might also have expected him to allude to the resurrection appearance that was perhaps instrumental in his conversion (cf. 1 Cor. 15:7).²⁴

This is obviously an argument from silence and boils down to the question: How important was James’s physical relationship to Jesus for his status in the early church? That his relationship to Jesus was known and could serve, if nothing more, as a mark of identification is clear from Gal. 1:19. But we have little reason to think that James’s physical relationship to Jesus was important for the position he held in the early community.²⁵ In Acts, where James figures prominently as a leader of the Jerusalem church, his relationship to Jesus is never mentioned. Physical ties to Jesus became important only after the time of James’s death. If anything, therefore, the author’s failure to mention the relationship is an argument against the pseudepigraphical view. Moreover, James’s physical relationship to Jesus never spilled over into a spiritual relationship. From what we can tell from the Gospels, James and the other brothers of Jesus remained estranged from him throughout the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry (see Matt. 12:46; John 7:5). When Jesus’ mother and brothers came to see him, he contrasted them with his “true family” — those who do the will of God (Mark 3:31-34 and par.). So the fact that James was Jesus’ brother did not bring him spiritual insight; nor was it the basis for his position and authority in the early church. His failure to mention the relationship is not, therefore, surprising. Nor is it surprising that James, if he wrote the letter, makes no reference to the resurrection appearance. Paul, whose vision of the resurrected Christ led to his conversion and constituted his call to apostolic service, mentions the appearance in only two of

24. For example, Laws, 40.

25. See esp. R. Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 125-30.

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his thirteen letters. Tasker has pointed out the capriciousness of this sort of argument: James must be pseudepigraphical because the author does not mention his encounter with the resurrected Christ; 2 Peter must be pseudepigraphical because the author brings up his encounter with the transfigured Christ.²⁶ Indeed, the occasional nature of our NT letters renders any argument from what is included or not included in the letter quite tenuous. So many factors — the author's circumstances, his relationship to his readers, the purpose of the letter, the issues in the community — affect the content of the letter that it is precarious in the extreme to draw wide-ranging conclusions from the failure to mention a particular topic.

2. A second feature of the letter that leads many scholars to doubt that James of Jerusalem could have written it is the nature of its Greek and its cultural background. The Greek of the letter is idiomatic and even contains some literary flourishes (e.g., an incomplete hexameter in 1:17). The author frequently alludes to Jewish writings typical of the Hellenistic diaspora (Sirach, *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Philo). Moreover, the author employs some words and phrases derived from Greek philosophy and religion (e.g., "the cycle of nature" [lit. trans.] in 3:6). Such Greek, critics argue, could not have been written by the son of a Galilean carpenter who, as far as we know, never left Palestine.

But this objection can be easily met.

First, we must not exaggerate the quality of James's Greek. While more polished and closer to the "higher *koinē*" than most NT Greek, the Greek of James is far from literary Greek. Absent are the elaborate sentences found, for instance, in Hebrews. As Ropes concludes, "there is nothing to suggest acquaintance with the higher styles of Gk. literature."²⁷

Second, the alleged technical philosophical and religious terminology in the letter proves, on closer examination, to involve words and phrases that seem to have found a place in the mainstream of the language. They are the kinds of words that an ordinary educated person, familiar with the Hellenistic world, would have known. One does not need a college degree in philosophy, for instance, in our day to use words and phrases like "existentialist" or "language game." And Martin Hengel's classic study documented the degree to which Palestine had been penetrated by Hellenistic language and ideas.²⁸ James must have had some

26. Tasker, 20. Dibelius, who thinks that James is pseudepigraphical, also noted the subjectivity of this argument (p. 17).

27. Ropes, 25. T. Zahn, on the other hand, is probably too critical of the quality of James's Greek (*Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1 [reprint; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1906], 112).

28. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

education to have been elevated to the position in the church that he held. To claim that he could not have known and used these kinds of words is to assume far more about James's background than any of our sources reveals.

Essentially the same point can be made with respect to the general level of Greek in the letter. Hengel's work, which we mentioned in the last paragraph, was part of a larger reassessment of the alleged division between "Judaism" and "Hellenism" that dominated much early and mid-twentieth-century scholarship. Current scholarship recognizes that any such antithesis must at least be nuanced. Judaism was rather thoroughly penetrated by Hellenistic language and ideas; and there was undoubtedly a spectrum of acquaintance with Hellenism among Jews both in Palestine and in the Diaspora. Particularly relevant to the current issue is research that shows that many Palestinians, especially in Galilee and even from poor families, would have grown up with fluency in Greek.²⁹ So the question is: Could James have been exposed to the kind of influences that would have enabled him to write the semiliterary Greek we find in the letter? Without knowing the details of James's education, the extent of his travels, the books that he read, or the people he conversed with, this question is impossible to answer. We could guess that a person recognized as the leader of the Jerusalem church (containing, at least at some point, both "Hebraists" and "Hellenists" [Acts 6:1]) would have been capable of learning Greek quite well. J. N. Sevenster, who uses James as a test case for his investigation of the use of Greek in Palestine, concludes that James of Jerusalem could have written this letter.³⁰ This does not, of course, prove that James did write it. But it does mean that the Greek of the letter constitutes no obstacle to the ascription of the letter to James.

3. The letter's approach to torah is a third reason that scholars cite for concluding that James of Jerusalem could not have written it. Assumed in the letter is what might be called a rather "liberal" understanding of torah. Phrases like "the law of liberty" (1:25; lit. trans.) and "the royal law" (2:8) suggest the kind of perspective that arose among Jews who were seeking to accommodate the torah to the general Hellenistic world. Such an approach downplayed the ritual elements of the law in favor of its ethical demands. The failure of the letter ever to mention issues of the ritual law and its concentration exclusively on ethical issues con-

29. See esp. J. N. Sevenster, *Do You Know Greek? How Much Greek Could the First Jewish Christians Have Known?* (NovTSup; Leiden: Brill, 1968).

30. *Do You Know Greek?*, 191. See also N. Turner, *Style*, vol. 4 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by J. H. Moulton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 114.

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firms that the author qualifies the law in the way that he does in order to match this “liberal” perspective. Yet such an approach to torah stands in stark contrast to the picture of James that we get from the NT and from early Christian tradition. It is “certain men . . . from James” who come to Antioch insisting that Jewish Christians observe kosher food laws and stop eating with Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-13). And it is James who requests that Paul demonstrate his loyalty to Judaism by undertaking to pay for and participate in purification rites in the Jerusalem temple (Acts 21:20-25). And in Christian tradition, James is famous for his loyalty to Judaism, being pictured an an example of “torah-piety.”

However, while several scholars think this point is virtually conclusive,³¹ it in fact rests on a serious overinterpretation of James, a questionable inference from the NT, and an uncritical acceptance of early Christian tradition. We begin with the Christian tradition.

James became a respected and beloved figure in the early church, especially among Jewish Christians. He was considered the first “bishop” of the Jerusalem church and was called the “righteous” or the “just” because of his faithfulness to the law and his devotion to prayer. Hegesippus, an early second-century Christian, describes James’s death in his *Memoirs* (which have survived only in fragments quoted by other authors, mainly Eusebius). He claims that James was stoned to death by the scribes and Pharisees for refusing to renounce his commitment to Jesus (Eusebius, *History of the Church* 2.23). The Jewish historian Josephus confirms the essentials of this story, and he also enables us to date the incident to A.D. 62 (*Antiquities* 20.200-201). Hegesippus provides other information about James, most of it tending to portray him as a zealot for the law and as a Christian who generally championed a strong continuity with Judaism. Other early traditions take a similar tack in their portrayal of James, and these sources have given rise to the traditional view of James as a radical Jewish Christian.³² However, scholars today recognize that most of these sources are quite tendentious, seeking to “capture” James for their own radically Jewish-Christian agenda.³³ Therefore, while

31. Dibelius (p. 18) claims that this is the decisive argument against the traditional view of authorship. See also Laws, 40-41.

32. The pseudo-Clementine *Epistle of Clement* 1:1 calls James “bishop of bishops”; the Gospel of the Hebrews (according to Jerome [*De viris illustribus* 2]) has the Lord appearing first to James after his resurrection; in *The Gospel of Thomas*, logion 12, the disciples ask Jesus, “Who is to be our leader?” and Jesus replies, “Wherever you are you are to go to James the righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being” (cf. *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. J. M. Robinson [New York: Harper & Row, 1977], 119).

33. See, e.g., R. B. Ward, “James of Jerusalem in the First Two Centuries,” *ANRW* 2.26.1 (1992) 799-810.

all our sources agree that James was a devout Jewish Christian, anxious to maintain good relationships with Judaism,³⁴ the picture of James as “an advocate of hidebound Jewish-Christian piety”³⁵ is a legend with no basis in fact.

The evidence from the NT is less clear-cut. James was certainly aligned with the Jewish-Christian wing of the early Christian community. And along with many Jewish Christians, he may well have assumed that Jews who recognized in Jesus of Nazareth their Messiah would continue to obey all the commandments of torah. In fact, the “incident” at Antioch may suggest that, at least at that date (around A.D. 46-47?), James was concerned to enforce torah-observance on Jewish Christians. But the whole episode that Paul describes in Galatians 2 is riddled with historical and theological issues. Among them is the question of the relationship between the “Judaizers” who came from Jerusalem and James himself. Did James himself send these people with his blessing? Or were they simply claiming to represent James without his authority?³⁶ Most interpreters think it is the former; and, if so, the text makes clear that James thought that Jewish Christians should continue to observe torah, even in the context of a mixed Christian community. He may have been especially concerned that news of Gentiles and Jews eating together would make the evangelism of Jews in Jerusalem all the more difficult.³⁷ James’s request to Paul in Acts 21 reflects a similar concern. Situated in Jerusalem as he was, and with a growing radical Jewish movement (the Zealots) to contend with, James was anxious to show that Jews who recognized Jesus as their Messiah were not traitors to the Jewish tradition or to the Jewish people. Torah-observance and worship of Jesus the Messiah could exist together. To this extent, the NT confirms what seems to be the authentic element in the traditions about James: he was personally loyal to torah and sought in every way possible to maintain ties between the emerging early Christian movement and the Judaism in which he had been nurtured and in which he ministered.

But the key question is this: Could a person with this kind of torah-loyalty have written the letter we have before us? We think the clear answer to this question is yes. The letter, with its concern with the ethical dimensions of torah, stands squarely in a widespread tradition among Hel-

34. Painter (*Just James*, 102) argues that James was particularly worried that Paul’s Gentile mission might lead to an abandonment of the mission to the Jews.

35. The phrase is Dibelius’s (p. 17).

36. As, e.g., Lightfoot thought (J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* [reprint; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1957], 113).

37. See, e.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 129-30.

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lenistic-oriented Jews and reflected, in some ways, in the teaching of Jesus. But the critical point is this: neither the tradition nor Jesus emphasized the ethical aspects of torah so as to dismiss the ritual elements of torah. Jesus criticized the scribes and Pharisees for concentrating so much on tithing that they had neglected “justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23). And so he calls them to practice these key ethical demands of torah. But he makes clear also that, in practicing these, they were not to “neglect” the other elements of the law. James also, following the lead of Jesus, focuses on the importance of obeying the royal law of love (2:8). And the fact that he illustrates the importance of every commandment of the law with reference to the prohibitions of adultery and murder (2:11) shows that he was concentrating at this point almost exclusively on the ethical aspect of the law. But nothing in James implies that he insisted on obedience to these ethical commands at the expense of observance of the ritual law. He is simply silent about the ritual law — presumably because it was not an issue in the communities he was addressing. So, in the end, we are faced with an argument from silence: the James who was so concerned about torah-observance in Galatians 2 and Acts 21 could not have written a letter in which this point was absent. But the argument is fallacious in that it ignores the occasional nature of the letter. James introduces only topics that were matters of concern for the people to whom he was writing. If they were, as we think, Jewish Christians who had fled Jerusalem but who had not yet mixed with Gentiles in worship, then observance of torah may not even have come up as an issue. What had come up was a failure to live out the basic ethical emphasis of torah: and James, much like Jesus in his day, focuses naturally on this matter.

4. The fourth reason for denying that James of Jerusalem could have written this letter involves the famous problem of the relationship between James and Paul, especially with respect to their teaching on justification. The letter insists that works are required for justification: “a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone” (2:24). Paul, on the other hand, teaches that a person is justified by faith and not by “works of the law” (e.g., Rom. 3:28). The relationship of these two teachings is one of the biggest theological issues in the letter and, indeed, one of the most significant theological tensions within the NT. We will address the matter later in the Introduction (in the section on Theology) and in the commentary proper.

For now, however, we should note that, while the two seem to be in direct contradiction when statements of each are taken on their own, a careful study of the vocabulary of each and of the respective contexts in which they are speaking mitigates the tension significantly. In fact, most scholars now recognize that, like ships passing in the night, James’s

teaching does not really come to grips with what Paul was saying.³⁸ Either each is unaware of what the other is saying, or one of them is responding to a misunderstood form of the other's theology. Most scholars think the latter is the case and that James is reacting to a misunderstood Paulinism. They reach that conclusion because the slogan "justification by faith," to which James is responding, was so uniquely associated with Paul in the early church. For this reason, then, they argue that the letter could not have been written by James of Jerusalem, because this James had ample opportunity to learn the authentic Pauline view of justification. The two were key participants in the Jerusalem Council, where issues very much relating to Paul's teaching on justification were debated (Acts 15) and met later when Paul came to Jerusalem for a final time (Acts 21:18-25). And, in any case, the letter of James must have been written no earlier than the end of the first century, when Paul's theology was no longer understood in its proper context. W. G. Kümmel gives succinct expression to this argument: "The debate in 2:14ff. with a misunderstood secondary stage of Pauline theology not only presupposes a considerable chronological distance from Paul — whereas James died in the year 62 — but also betrays a complete ignorance of the polemical intent of Pauline theology, which lapse can scarcely be attributed to James, who as late as 55/56 met with Paul in Jerusalem (Acts 21:18ff.)."³⁹

Adequate evaluation of this argument can come only after careful consideration of Jas. 2:14-26 as it relates to Paul's teaching on justification. For now, however, we can point out that the situation we have described in the last paragraph is capable of a very different explanation. If, indeed, James 2 fails to come to grips with the real point of Paul's teaching and the letter is written after A.D. 48 or so, when James and Paul met at the Jerusalem Council, then indeed it is difficult to attribute the letter to James of Jerusalem. But suppose the letter was written *before* A.D. 48. James would not yet have had direct contact with Paul. All he would know about Paul's "justification by faith alone" would come to him indirectly — and perhaps perverted by those who had heard Paul and misunderstood what he was saying. Paul probably began preaching almost immediately after his conversion (in A.D. 33?). How soon Paul came to understand and proclaim his distinctive justification message is impossible to know. But what might be the earliest Pauline letter, Galatians (perhaps A.D. 47-48), already presents a fully developed doctrine of justification. Christians living in the area possi-

38. See, e.g., Martin, xxxiii-xli; Johnson, 111-16; contra, e.g., Klein, 197-204; M. Hengel, "Der Jakobusbrief als antipaulinische Polemik," in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis for His 60th Birthday*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne and O. Betz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 253-63.

39. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 413.

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bly addressed by James (Syria) would have had ample opportunity to hear Paul as he preached in Tarsus and, later, Antioch. On this scenario, James betrays a “complete ignorance of the polemical intent of Pauline theology” because James did not yet have direct knowledge of Paul’s teaching.⁴⁰ Indeed, it is more likely that a “complete ignorance” of the thrust of Paul’s teaching existed before his letters were written or widely circulated than long afterward. Many interpreters, for a number of reasons, reject almost out of hand an early date for the letter. But we hope to show below that a date as early as the scenario we have just sketched requires — the middle 40s — has much to be said for it.

C. Final Assessment

None of the four major objections to attributing the letter to James of Jerusalem is conclusive. But, to go on the offensive for a moment, a serious objection to the currently popular view of pseudepigraphical authorship needs to be mentioned. Proponents of the pseudepigraphical hypothesis often portray it in terms of a “transparent literary device.” The person writing in the name of James would not have been seeking to deceive anyone. He would simply have utilized a popular literary convention of the time, according to which one could claim continuity with a particular religious figure by writing in that person’s name.⁴¹ Viewed in this light, the claim that James is pseudepigraphical would pose no challenge to the full truthfulness of the letter. The connection of the letter with James established in 1:1 is not intended to be, and would not have been understood to be, a claim about who wrote the letter. It is rather a claim about the theological tradition in which the letter stands. However, there is a decisive objection to this line of reasoning: we possess little evidence that pseudepigraphical epistles in the ancient world were accepted as authentic and truthful. In fact, one of the latest researchers on this matter claims, “No one ever seems to have accepted a document as religiously and philosophically prescriptive which was known to be forged. I do not know of a single example.”⁴²

40. See esp. G. Kittel, “Der geschichtliche Ort des Jacobusbriefes,” *ZNW* 41 (1942) 96-97; Wessel, 965.

41. See esp. D. G. Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon: An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition*, WUNT, vol. 39 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986).

42. L. R. Donelson, *Pseudepigraphy and Ethical Argument in the Pastoral Epistles*, *Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie*, vol. 22 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1986), 11. See also S. E. Porter, “Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: Implications for Canon,” *BBR* 5 (1995) 105-23.

The very fact that James was accepted as a canonical book, then, presumes that the early Christians who made this decision were sure that James wrote it. Those who did not think that James wrote it barred it from the canon for this reason. This means that we have to choose between (1) viewing James as a forgery, intended perhaps to claim an authority that the author did not really have — and therefore omit it from the canon; and (2) viewing James as an authentic letter from James. The “have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too” theory of canonical pseudepigraphon does not seem to be an alternative.

A few scholars, sensitive to this problem yet convinced by one or more of the objections to James’s authorship examined above, have proposed compromise solutions, according to which James of Jerusalem, while not the final composer of the letter, had some connection with it. Those who have a problem thinking that James of Jerusalem could have written the Greek we find in the letter propose that he may have used an amanuensis.⁴³ We have solid evidence from extrabiblical literature and from the NT itself (cf. Rom. 16:21) that such amanuenses were regularly used. And James may well have done the same. Nevertheless, the hypothesis seems to be both unnecessary (since we think James could have written the Greek) and problematic. So much of the exact wording of the letter is bound inextricably to its content that it is difficult to separate the author from the final composer of the letter.⁴⁴ Another compromise view on authorship holds that the letter is a free translation of a discourse or series of homilies originally given by James in Aramaic.⁴⁵ Peter Davids has provided the clearest and best-worked-out defense of this kind of approach. Impressed with certain anomalies in the letter — good Greek alongside Semitisms, a curious unevenness in vocabulary, some disjointedness in flow — he suggests that a redactor has edited and expanded a series of Jewish-Christian homilies, given originally in Aramaic and Greek. James of Jerusalem may have been responsible for the first stage or even for both stages.⁴⁶ We have no way of proving or disproving this kind of proposal. But we question whether it is necessary. The Greek betrays no more inconsistencies than would be typical of a person writing in Greek whose native language was Aramaic; indeed, Dibelius claims that the Greek of the letter is “relatively homogenous.”⁴⁷ The “disjointedness” of the letter

43. See, e.g., A. Robert and A. Feuillet, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Paris: Desclée, 1965), 364; cf. also Mussner, 8.

44. See Sevenster, *Do You Know Greek?*, 10-14.

45. F. C. Burkitt, *Christian Beginnings* (London: University of London, 1924), 65-71; see also F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James and John: Studies in Non-Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 113.

46. Davids, 12-13.

47. Dibelius, 34.

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is a product of its genre and purpose; and would not an editor, as much as an author, seek to smooth out any rough spots? James may certainly have used some of his own sermons in writing the letter; but evidence for an earlier literary stage is not compelling.

When all the data are considered, the simplest solution is to accept the verdict of early Christians: the letter was written by James of Jerusalem, "the Lord's brother." Nothing in the letter is inconsistent with this conclusion, and several, albeit minor and indecisive, points favor it.⁴⁸

EXCURSUS

A point of great controversy concerning James "the brother of the Lord" is his exact physical relationship to Jesus. As asceticism became a more dominant impulse in the church over the centuries, the view that Mary remained perpetually a virgin became ever more influential. The NT references to James as "the brother" of Jesus accordingly became controversial. Jerome argued that "brother" (Gk. *adelphos*) in these texts means "cousin." This view, usually called the "Hieronymian" (after a church father by that name), became very popular in Roman Catholic circles. A major difficulty for this interpretation, however, is the entire absence of evidence from the NT that the Greek word *adelphos* could mean "cousin." The use of this word requires that James and Jesus share at least one blood parent. The "Epiphanian" view holds that James was an older brother of Jesus, born to Joseph and a wife before Mary. Finally, advocates of the "Helvidian" view insist that James was born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus. The close association between Mary and the brothers of Jesus implied in the NT (e.g., Mark 3:32; 6:3) might favor the Helvidian interpretation.⁴⁹ Richard Bauckham, on the other hand, the latest scholar to investigate this matter, declines to decide between the Epiphanian and Helvidian views, inclining slightly perhaps to the Epiphanian.⁵⁰

48. In the most recent critical commentary on James, Johnson concludes that the letter could well have been written by James of Jerusalem (see p. 121). See also Penner, 35-103; Hengel, "Jakobusbrief," 252; Bauckham, 11-25.

49. For a defense of this view, see esp. Mayor, vi-lv.

50. Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus*, 19-32. In favor of the Epiphanian view see also Lightfoot, "The Brethren of the Lord," in *Galatians*, 252-91.

IV. OCCASION AND DATE

We turn now from the question of the letter's literary features and form to the issue of its historical situation. What does the letter suggest about the situation of the readers? And what can we infer from that situation about the letter's place and time of origin?

A. The Readers and Their Situation

The letter reveals quite a lot about the people to whom it was written. First, they were almost certainly Jews. This conclusion, which is the scholarly consensus,⁵¹ is suggested by references to distinctive Jewish institutions and beliefs. The believers James addresses meet in a "synagogue" (2:2); they share with the author the assumption that monotheism is a foundational belief (2:19) and that the law is central to God's dealings with his people (1:21, 24-25; 2:8-13; 4:11-12); they understand the OT imagery of the marriage relationship to indicate the nature of the relationship between God and his people (4:4). Many scholars would also cite the letter's address as evidence that the readers were Jewish. "The twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1) certainly appears at first sight to be a reference to the Jewish people who live in the "diaspora" (a transliteration of the Greek word that the NIV translates "scattered among the nations"). But this initial conclusion is not so clear on closer examination. Intertestamental Judaism used the language of "the twelve tribes" to denote the true people of God in the last days — a usage that is also reflected in the NT (see the notes on 1:1). And since the early Christians came to understand that God's eschatological people included both Gentiles and Jews, James may have "transferred" the term from its original Jewish roots and applied it broadly to the church of his day. In a similar way, the word "diaspora," which originally denoted those places outside of Israel where Jews had been "scattered," could have here a spiritual sense: this world as the place where Christians must live, apart from their true heavenly homeland. However, while this interpretation is possible, the Jewish atmosphere of James, along with the probable early date of the letter, makes it more likely that the reference is more literal. The word suggests that the people to whom James writes are living out-

51. There are, however, exceptions: scholars who think that "twelve tribes" must stand for the entire people of God and, thus, all Christians (e.g., Klein, 185-90; cf. Vouga, 24-26; Baasland, 3,676-77). Adamson, on the other hand, suggests that James might have in view both Christian and non-Christian Jews (*James: The Man and His Message*, 11-12).

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side the confines of Israel and also implies that they are Jews. Like other Jewish authors before him, James sends consolation and exhortation to the dispersed covenant people of God.⁵²

The fact that the readers have been “dispersed,” forced to live away from their home country, helps explain a second major characteristic of the readers of the letter: their poverty and oppressed condition.⁵³ Wealthy landowners take advantage of them (5:4-6); rich people haul them into court (2:6) and scorn their faith (2:7). One of the key purposes of the author is to encourage these suffering Christians in the midst of these difficulties, reminding them of the righteous judgment of God that is coming (5:7-11) and exhorting them to maintain their piety in the midst of their trials (1:2-4, 12). Some scholars find the key to the letter at just this point. Liberation theologians find in the letter a clear antithesis between wealth and unrighteousness on the one hand and poverty and righteousness on the other. The true people of God, James is suggesting, are the poor.⁵⁴ Ralph Martin, on the other hand, suggests a more historically based scenario. On his view, a major thrust of the letter is a call to Jews, influenced by the Zealot movement, to renounce violence in the face of oppression.⁵⁵ But, without denying the importance of the socioeconomic situation of the readers in understanding the letter’s purpose, two considerations suggest that we should not give it a controlling role in understanding the letter. First, the most plausible interpretation of 1:10 yields the conclusion that some wealthy believers were also to be found in the community that James addresses (see the notes on that verse). This conclusion is reinforced by the admonitions to traveling merchants in 4:13-17. Careful reading of the letter prevents us from simply identifying the readers with the poor and their oppressors with the rich.

A second problem with the narrowly socioeconomic approach is the considerable amount of material in the letter that cannot be subsumed under this rubric. The situation of the church in the world provides one important context for the letter. But the letter ultimately has much more to say about the problem of the world getting into the church. In arguably the thematic center of the letter, the author warns his readers that “friendship with the world is hatred toward God” (4:4). One component of “pure and faultless” religion is “to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (1:27). The worldliness of the church takes many forms: a

52. See D. J. Versenput, “Wisdom, 4Q185, and the Epistle of James,” *JBL* 117 (1998) 700-703; Bauckham, 14-16.

53. Tamez, 23-24, and Vouga, 24-25 emphasize the sociological dimension of the address in 1:1.

54. See, e.g., Tamez.

55. Martin, lxvii-lxix.