

WHO, WHY AND WHAT?



The letter by James

Authorship

In introducing ourselves to this Bible book, we need to consider which James is the author. There are a number of men mentioned in the Scriptures by that name. We can eliminate the following men as not being the writer of this letter.

It is **not**

- ✘ the son of Zebedee (Matt.4:21) who was killed by Herod (Acts 12:2)
- ✘ the son of Alphaeus (Matt.10:3)
- ✘ the son of Mary (Mk.15:40) who was called “the younger”.
- ✘ the father of Judas (Thaddeus) (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13).

Who then is the author?

The author of the letter is most likely a brother of Jesus who before the resurrection of Jesus was an unbeliever (John 7:5), but became a disciple (Acts 1:14) and to whom Jesus made himself known after he rose from death (1 Cor.15:7). He became a leader in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; Gal.1:19).

Note: 1

We do not know for certain that the letter by James was written by our Lord’s brother of that name. Other authors have been suggested, but evangelical scholars are generally agreed that there is good reason to accept that the writer of this letter is indeed a brother of Jesus, and this is in harmony with a very ancient tradition.

Note 2

Assuming this to be true, we would expect James’ letter to throw some light on what Jesus was like to live with at home, before his public ministry. The following may be examples:-

Perseverance (1:3-4)

Self-control (1:19)



Impartiality (2:1)
Humility (3:13)
Purity and peace (3:17-18).

The message of this letter

The simple message of this letter is that “professed faith that is not accompanied by a life of faith is not true faith”. This message is important because:-

- ✓ there has always been the temptation to think that so long as we observe the right rituals God will be satisfied with us. Old Testament prophets constantly protested against this. As Samuel said to king Saul, “To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22-23). See also Isaiah 1:11-17 and Amos 5:21-27. James would have been well aware of this teaching in Jewish history as he wrote this letter primarily to Jewish Christians (the twelve tribes scattered among the nations 1:1).
- ✓ Jesus insisted that a claim to be a Christian had to be confirmed by a life of obedience (Matt. 7:15-23; John 14:15).
- ✓ Some people argue that if we are saved for ever by faith alone (Eph.2:8) we are then at liberty to live sinfully. Paul dealt with this argument (Rom. 6:1-7; Gal. 5:13) by insisting that faith unites us to Jesus Christ enabling us to “live a new life”.
- ✓ If our attempts to persuade people to come to faith in Jesus Christ for salvation are not accompanied by the evidence of our own changed lives, we will fail.
- ✓ In some kinds of evangelism people are exhorted to come to faith in Jesus Christ for deliverance from “the wrath to come”, and this is separated from a call to godliness. Jesus Christ as Saviour is separated from Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives. In theological terms this is separating justification and sanctification. We must always remember that the Holy Spirit who leads us to faith in Christ for justification at the same time gives us new birth beginning a life of obedience and submission to Christ as our Lord.

This letter by James is a powerful reminder of these things.

A problem that is not a problem

James’ letter is full of teaching about Christian conduct and he says little or nothing about the fact that we need salvation before ever we can either want to live as he says we should, or be able to do so. The question is, does this mean that James is saying that we can be saved by “works”, by living according to his teaching? The problem tends to be focused on chapter 2 verses 14-26, but when we come to those verses, we will see that James’ great burden is that his readers make quite sure that their faith proves to be

genuine because it tends to godly living. We can confirm this in at least two ways:-

1. James assumes his readers are professing Christians because he calls them “brothers” (15 times), which means that they are in the family of believers through faith in Jesus Christ. They already have “faith” which is being tested.

This is confirmed by the fact that they:

- love God (1:12)
- are believers in Jesus Christ (2:1)
- are waiting for the Lord’s return (5:7)
- believe “the truth” (5:19)

All these signs, taken together, mean that James’ teaching assumes that his readers are professing Christians already; he is not giving them guidance as to how to become Christians. Also, James knows that salvation begins with God’s choice (2:5) and is not on the basis of anything believers themselves can do.

2. James agrees with Paul. It is agreed that Paul’s great emphasis is on salvation through faith and not by “works” (Rom. 4:4-5; Eph.2:8). But Paul is equally clear that when we are Christians our faith shows itself in godliness (Rom. 6:12-13; 8:4; Gal.5:6). It is quite wrong to think of Paul and James in conflict with each other. As we go through this letter we will see good reasons for the stress that James puts on the need to be practical Christians.

James follows the teaching of Jesus

James reflects the teaching of Jesus to his disciples as the following list shows:-

<u>James</u>	<u>Teaching</u>	<u>Jesus</u>
1:5-6	Faith in prayer	Matt. 21:21
1:27	Caring	Matt. 25:34-40
2:8	Loving neighbours	Luke 10:25-37
2:10	Law-keeping	Matt. 5:18-19
2:13	Showing mercy	Matt. 5:7
2:15-16	Compassion	Matt. 15:32
3:2-12	Speech and tongue	Matt. 12:37
3:17	Purity	Matt. 5:8
3:18	Peaceableness	Matt. 5:9
4:6	Humility	Matt. 23:12
4:13-16	Submission to God	Luke 12:18-20
4:17	Obedience	Luke 12:47

5:1-2	Danger of riches	Luke 6:24
5:10-11	Response to persecution	Matt. 5:10-12
5:12	Honesty	Matt. 5:34-37
5:16	Prayer	Matt. 7:7-8
5:20	Winning others	Matt. 18:15

We see then that there is no conflict between James and any other part of the Bible; his letter is part of “all Scripture” that is “God-breathed” (2 Tim.3:16) and is totally trustworthy.

Outline of the letter

It is not easy to outline this letter because it is not a logical argument that can be followed from one point to the next one. James' letter is more like a collection of notes on different matters that he feels are important. After a fairly long passage about testings and temptations (1:2-18), he covers a whole range of Christian conduct, interrupted by an argument about faith and works (2:14-26) and a warning against ungodliness (4:13-5:6).

- I Greeting 1:1
- II Testings and temptations 1:1-18
- III Christian conduct 1:19 – 5:20
 - 1) Slow to be angry 1:19-20
 - 2) Obedient to the Word 1:21-25
 - 3) Pure in speech 1:26
 - 4) Caring 1:27
 - 5) Being the same to all 2:1-7
 - 6) Obedient to God’s law 2:8-13
(Interruption about faith and works – 2:14-26)
 - 7) Reluctant to teach 3:1-2
 - 8) Controlling the tongue 3:3-12
 - 9) Wise 3:13-16
 - 10) Right in motives 4:1-3
 - 11) Separated 4:4-5
 - 12) Humble 4:6-12
(Interruption with warnings against ungodliness 4:13-5:6)
 - 13) Patient 5:7-11
 - 14) Honest 5:12
 - 15) Prayerful 5:13-18
 - 16) Concerned for a saving ministry 5:19-20