INTRODUCTION

The Epistle of James is a distinctive book of the New Testament in that it does not resemble the normal format for an epistle. The author of the book does not clearly identify himself, nor can we be absolutely certain concerning the audience to whom he wrote or the circumstances which warranted the letter. In contrast to Ephesians, for example, James is not written to a specific church nor are greetings extended to any known persons. Furthermore, there is no final farewell at the end of the book.

Nevertheless, the Epistle of James is a much-loved and often-quoted book, especially with its straightforward exhortation: “be ye doers of the word.” James enjoys a place in the New Testament as a very practical book. There is little in the way of developed doctrinal teaching, but much in the way of living the Christian life. Sadly, James has not always received the esteem that it is due. Luther, for example, claimed that James “mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture,” though we must understand that Luther wrote out of a concern (especially crucial during the Reformation period) for defending the doctrine of justification of faith alone.1

I. AUTHORSHIP

The epistle opens with a declaration of the author’s name, James, which in the Greek text appears as Ἰάκωβος, i.e., Jacob (the English name James is derived from the Latin translation). Yet the author does not identify himself as an Apostle nor give any other explicit clues to his identity. There are several people in the NT with the name James who could serve as potential candidates. For example, we know of James the son of Zebedee from the Gospels and James the son of Alphaeus (Mt 10:3), the latter being favored by many Catholics and even Calvin. James the son of Zebedee was beheaded by Herod Agrippa I in AD 44 (see Acts 12:2), which would disqualify him unless the book was written before that date. Erasmus and Luther both suggested an unknown James as the author. More recently, some critical scholars have suggested that a pseudopigraphal figure wrote the book who merely assumed the name James to make his writing appear more authoritative. The problem, however, with this latter view is that such a person would have been more likely to have clearly identified himself as an apostle or as “the Lord’s brother” if he were really wanting to disguise his work as authoritative.

The traditional opinion (and the one favored by this writer) is that James the brother of the Lord authored this book. The primary line of support for this is the presumed authority by which the author writes. He does not call himself an apostle nor does he explicitly identify himself as

1 Luther’s Works 35:397. The tension that Luther imagined by the passage in James 2:14-26 may not, however, be a threat to the doctrine of justification at all. James may have been addressing a different issue altogether.
having been an actual brother of the Lord Jesus. This suggests that he did not feel a need to more precisely identify himself and that the readers would readily know who he was. There is only one person in the early church who enjoyed this kind of stature, and that is James the brother of the Lord. From the Book of Acts as well as early church history, we know that this James was a recognized leader at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) as well as the primary leader of the "mother church" at Jerusalem.

Catholic scholars (motivated more by a sense of defending the "perpetual virginity" of Mary) have quite naturally resisted the suggestion that James was the brother of the Lord. Mt 13:55 quite clearly states that the Lord Jesus had brothers and that one of them was named James (which would imply that Mary did not remain a virgin after the birth of Jesus). Catholics, of course, are aware of this verse, but have typically avoided the implication by arguing that the Greek word translated "brothers" could be translated "cousins." Yet the Catholic view does not have good support for several reasons: (1) why would Matthew, having stated that Joseph kept her a virgin (Mt 1:25), feel the need to add the words "until she gave birth to a Son" unless he knew that her virginity was only a temporary matter?; (2) in Lk 2:7, Luke states that Mary gave birth to her "first-born son" which implies that there were other sons, Jesus being distinguished as the "first-born" among them; (3) the word υἱός commonly means "brother" in the NT, not cousin, though the meaning "cousin" can be found in extrabiblical literature. Furthermore, there is a more specific word for "cousin," namely ἀδελφός (see Col 4:10); and (4) Origen (ca. AD 185-254) mentions the view of "perpetual virginity" and remarks that this view was held by "some" (which implies that most did not).

Aside from this Catholic issue that would contest the authorship by James the Lord's brother on theological grounds, others have opposed the traditional view for other reasons.

1. Some have claimed that the book is characterized by too excellent a Greek for a Palestinian Jew. Yet this is a very subjective argument (not all scholars would agree with this assessment), and we should take note that it is not as high a Greek as the Book of Hebrews nor is it beyond the capability of a Christian leader who spent much of his life in cosmopolitan Jerusalem where Greek was widely employed.

2. Others have disputed the authorship by James due to the absence of reference to Christian topics such as the death and resurrection of the Lord. Yet we must respond that James's choice of subject matter was dictated by the concerns from which he wrote (in this case, ethical concerns).

3. Yet others have objected to the traditional authorship due to the fact that the author makes no claim to being an apostle or the Lord's brother. On the other hand, such ascriptions to James are not made by Luke in the Book of Acts either (note Acts 15:13). It is fair to say that James's spiritual relationship to the Lord Jesus overshadowed the earthly relationship that he had known with Him.

James the brother of the Lord was no doubt the most well-known Christian leader associated with the church at Jerusalem. Yet there are also internal arguments from the epistle that support

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2 This view was propagated by the early church father, Jerome, and is sometimes called the Hieronymian view (after the name of an early church father).

3 We should observe that Luke does not call Mary's son her "only son" (μονογενῆς υἱός), an expression he used of the widow with an only son in Lk 7:12 (cf. 8:42), but rather her "first-born son"(τόν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τῶν πρωτότοκον).
this identification. Though this could be said of others, the author was certainly well-versed in the Old Testament and thought in such terms (as James the Lord's brother would have been). Our author is the only NT writer to employ the designation "the Lord of Sabaoth" (5:4), a common OT expression. He mentions the unity of God as the central fact of the faith (2:19), which reflects the daily recitation by Jews of the Shema (Deut 6:4). He was also acquainted with Jewish formulas in the use of oaths (5:12). A more substantial argument for the authorship by James the Lord's brother is the similarity of James's Acts 15 speech with the epistle. For example, the word "greetings" (Gk χαίρειν) is used in James 1:1 and Acts 15:23, though only used one other time in all the NT.

The argument for James the Lord's brother as the author is not surprising at all. Paul insinuates that he was an apostle in Gal 1:19. As previously mentioned, he became the leader of the early church in Jerusalem (note Acts 12:17; 15:13; and 21:18). Yet James was not always a spiritual stalwart. At the Feast of Booths that took place about six months before the crucifixion (see Jn 7:5), we observe that Jesus' brothers were not believing in Him. In 1 Cor 15:7, however, we are told that the resurrected Christ appeared to James, an event that surely changed this hardhearted brother of Jesus who may have had a difficult time seeing Him as the Messiah. From this point, James very quickly gained prominence in the early church. Paul's visit with James recorded in Gal 1:19 probably took place in the summer of AD 37 at the time of Paul's first visit to Jerusalem, and Paul wrote of him as being one of the "pillars" of the church (Gal 2:9). His prestige at Jerusalem is also reflected in Acts 12:17 where Peter's miraculous release from jail was to be reported to James (prior to the death of Herod Agrippa I in AD 44). In Acts 15, James appears as the key leader at the Jerusalem Council (Autumn AD 49). After his missionary journeys, Paul visited James in Jerusalem where the latter was clearly still the leader there (Acts 21:18-25—probably to be dated about AD 57).

James faithfully served the Lord Jesus at Jerusalem for nearly thirty years. His fame as the Christian leader was known far beyond the circle of the early church. Even Josephus, the noted Jewish historian of the 1st century, records his death. Upon the death of the procurator Festus (ca. AD 62), the newly appointed young high priest Ananus II "assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned." The Jewish masses, on the other hand, condemned the murder. In light of his godly life, he gained the title "James the Just."

In view of his close ties with the Jerusalem church, James was very closely associated with the Law and the Jewish lifestyle. Many in the Jerusalem church, James included, lived by the Law as a way of life (but not as a means of salvation). Yet James was no narrow-minded Judaizer, as the events of the Jerusalem Council demonstrate. He writes with the spirit of an Old Testament prophet... not just chastising, but with a passion for truth, commitment, compassion and justice. For James, the Christian life must be lived out in word and deed!

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4 For details, see Hiebert, The Epistle of James, rev. ed., 17; and J. B. Mayor, The Epistle of Saint James, iii-iv. Hiebert (18) also notes the similarities of James with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5—7, e.g., James 5:12 with Mt 5:33-37.


6 Cited from Hiebert, 32.
II. THE DATE OF WRITING

If we are correct in our identification of the author as James the brother of the Lord, then the epistle had to have been written before AD 62, since James died in that year. A good case, however, can be made that James wrote the epistle long before his death. The following observations should be noted: (1) there is no mention of Gentiles or of Jew/Gentile conflicts; (2) there is no mention of the circumcision controversy of Gentiles (which was the prominent issue at the time of the Jerusalem Council in AD 49); (3) there is no mention of missionary journeys; and (4) he writes about faith and works, but without sensing any need to defend justification by faith as if his comments might have conflicted with what Paul had written in his epistles (which would suggest that he wrote before Paul).

If Galatians is the first of Paul's epistles (as is commonly believed) and it was written shortly before the Jerusalem Council in the autumn of AD 49, then the epistle of James was probably written sometime before this. Although the Gentile outreach may have begun as early as AD 41 when Barnabas was sent to Antioch (Acts 11:22), it was not until about AD 48 that Paul began his first missionary journey (Paul was brought to Antioch in the spring of AD 43).

The mention of "dispersion" in James 1:1 is not entirely clear (but see further discussion concerning this in Section IV below). The earliest dispersion that we know of was that associated with Stephen's martyrdom (see Acts 8:1-4). If Christ died in AD 33 (so Hoehner), then the dispersion of Acts 8:1-4 would probably have taken place in AD 35 (within a couple years of the crucifixion). Thus, the most likely parameters for the date of the epistle fall between AD 35 and AD 49, though it is hard to be more precise than this. Both Hiebert and Moo suggest a date in the mid 40's. Hodges, who takes the position that the epistle was written to the dispersed Jewish believers of Palestine not long after Stephen's martyrdom, prefers a date of AD 34 or 35. In light of my understanding about the "dispersion" mentioned in Jas 1:1, I would lean to a date sometime during the period AD 37-43. In any case, it is very plausible that James may have been the first NT epistle written, and probably preceded any of the Apostle Paul's.

III. ACCEPTANCE OF THE EPISTLE INTO THE NT CANON

The recognition of the Epistle of James as canonical was slow, perhaps due to the fact that it makes no claim to apostolic authority and was not written to a specific locale. Even Luther had questions about its canonicity at the time of the Reformation, though he did not exclude it from the canon. The earliest known writer to quote the book by name was Origen (ca. AD 185-254). In his Commentary on John (fragment 126), he cites the letter as Scripture. Though he personally had no doubts as to its canonicity, his writings also reveal that James was not universally acknowledged in the early church (see his Comm. on John 19.6). Though Origen is the earliest that we know of to refer to it as Scripture, there is evidence of its presence and use prior to him. For instance, there are striking echoes of the epistle in Clement's Epistle to the

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8 Zane Hodges, The Epistle of James; Proven Character Through Testing (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 12.
9 In his German New Testament of 1522, he placed the Epistle of James (along with Hebrews, Jude and Revelation) in a separate section from most of the other NT books. Elsewhere, he called James "an epistle of straw." See F. F. Bruce, The Canon of Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 243.
Corinthians (a post-apostolic work dated about AD 90-100) and in The Shepherd of Hermas (ca. AD 90-140).

The Epistle of James was not recognized by both eastern and western branches of the early church until the 4th century AD. [We should keep in mind, however, that there was a tendency in the Syrian church not to accept the general epistles]. The early church historian, Eusebius (ca. AD 325), was very aware of the reluctance to accept certain books as canonical and thus composed several categories of classification to distinguish them. He placed the Epistle of James among the “antilegomena”—the books being disputed by some section of the church. Yet he also noted that James and the other catholic epistles were publicly used in most churches. The recognition of the Epistle of James as canonical by Jerome certainly exerted a great deal of influence on the early church, and the Epistle was defined as canonical at the synods of Rome (AD 382) and Carthage (AD 397).

IV. THE INTENDED AUDIENCE

Unlike many of the NT epistles, James was not written to a specific church in a known locale. According to James 1:1, the epistle was for the "twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad" (NASB). The NIV offers a more interpretative rendition: "to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." The words "among the nations," however, are not in the original Greek, though this may be the proper way to understand the "scattering." The Greek merely says ἐν τῇ διασπορᾷ (among the diaspora, i.e., the scattering). Sometimes the word "diaspora" was used in a technical sense to refer to the lands outside of Palestine where many Jews had been living as a result of historical circumstances, such as one of the exiles (cf. Jn 7:35). Perhaps the NIV was influenced in its translation by this technical usage of the word.

In any case, there is no warrant for thinking that our author of the Epistle of James was addressing the Jewish world at large, i.e., including unsaved Jews. Immediately in Jas 1:2 he speaks of his readers as "my brethren" (cf. 1:16; 1:19; 2:1; 2:5; 3:1; etc.) and refers in 1:18 to their previous salvation from sin when he writes, "He brought us forth by the word of truth." Again in 2:1 he mentions their "faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." Throughout the epistle, he seems to presume their place among God's children (notwithstanding his strong words for those who were guilty of sin). Furthermore, why would James refer to himself as a "bondservant of Christ" (δουλὸς) if he were writing all Jews of the Jewish diaspora? Thus, the author is probably not using this term in its technical sense for the Jewish diaspora.

Perhaps we can arrive at a better understanding of Jas 1:1 by noting how the NT uses the cognate form of the word "diaspora" elsewhere. In Acts 8:1, the verb form of the word is used (i.e., διασπείρω) in reference to the scattering of believers following Stephen's martyrdom (perhaps about AD 35). We are told that "on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered (πάντες διασπάρθησαν) throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria." At this point, the church would have been composed of Jewish believers (not Gentiles!) who were forced to leave their homes and move to other parts of Judea and Samaria. In fact, they even moved outside the confines of Palestine as Acts 11:19 reveals, "So then those who were scattered (διασπαρέντες) because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone." Take note that the verb διασπείρω occurs again in this

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11 Ibid., 2.23.
verse. So, there was something of a "Jewish Christian diaspora" that took place in the inaugural years of the early church, and it is very likely that it is these Jewish Christians that James primarily had in mind (cf. 1 Pet 1:1).

The relocation of these Jewish Christians to other places would have meant a great disruption in their lives. As they went forth, they would have no doubt incurred much hardship and financial reversal. This certainly would be consistent with the situation of the readers, as we know it from the internal details of the epistle. They were facing significant trials (Jas 1) and may have been victims of the rich who used their position to take advantage of their misfortune (Jas 2 and 5). Though we cannot prove that James 1:1 should be connected with Acts 8:1 and 11:19, the use of the term diaspora and its verbal form in the NT seem to suggest that this is what James had in mind. I would add, however, that if this does happen to be the case, some time must have elapsed since the "scattering." There had at least been enough time for the believers to have formed churches (note 2:2), to have established jobs (4:13-17), and even for a certain degree of worldliness to have crept in to their lives (4:1-10).\textsuperscript{12} It is also possible that James 1:1 refers to a scattering of Jewish believers beyond the confines of Palestine (cf. 1 Pet 1:1).

In light of the details presented above, it seems best to say that James is writing an audience composed (at least primarily) of Jewish believers in Christ who had been victims of the early persecution against the church and had been forced to move to other regions. There is really no evidence for understanding the reference to "the twelve tribes" as denoting Christendom in general (i.e., Gentiles as a spiritual Israel). The Jewish nature of the Epistle would support the idea that he has Jewish Christians primarily in mind. Although James used the term ekklesia for a church in 5:14, we also note that he refers to their "assembly" by the more Jewish term synagogue (Gk συναγωγή) in Jas 2:2. Furthermore, his epistle reflects a widespread use of the OT and Jewish metaphors. For example, Jas 2:19 alludes to the famous Shema that Jews would daily recite. The reference to Jewish oath making in 5:12 without any clarification for the sake of Gentile readers suggests the readers were Jewish.

The identification of the readers as Jewish Christians who had been forced to move away from Jerusalem during the days of the early church does help explain their poverty and oppressed condition. Moo writes,

> 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 their 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).\textsuperscript{13}

V. THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

Personally, I disagree with Hiebert who sees the main purpose as "tests of a living faith." According to him, the author is presenting six basic tests for the readers to test their own faith to see if it is genuine or not. As I will seek to show in the exposition of the text, I think the author

\textsuperscript{12} Regarding the struggles with worldliness, Moo writes, "The worldliness of the church takes many forms: a fawning deference to the rich and callous indifference to the poor (2:1-4); uncontrolled, critical speech (3:9-12); 4:11-12; 5:9); wisdom that is 'earthly, unspiritual, of the devil' (3:15), leading to violent quarrels (4:1-3); arrogance (4:13-17); and, most basically, 'double-mindedness' (1:8; 4:8), a spiritual schizophrenia that interferes with prayer (1:5-8) and leads to a failure to believe (1:21-27; 2:14-26)" (Moo, 24-25).

\textsuperscript{13} Moo, 24.
presumes that his readers are genuine Christians, i.e., they had genuinely placed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Jas 2:1). Due to the historic persecution that the early church faced, however, they had been confronted with many trials. They needed help and encouragement to face their trials, which the author seeks to show them (trials, after all, do have intrinsic value). They also needed to be reminded that the Christian pilgrimage on earth is short, and one must learn to bear the trials by keeping his eyes on the Lord's return (Jas 5:8). At the same time, these believers had a responsibility to be "doers of the Word" and to live out their faith. They were not to become entangled in such sins as favoritism (Jas 2:1-12), abusive use of the tongue (Jas 3), and worldliness (Jas 4:1-5). James was reminding them that they had been called to nothing less than a whole-hearted commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ!