

The Forgotten Brother of Jesus? An Introduction to the Epistle of James

(1) James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:

Greetings.

(2) My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, (3) because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; (4) and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

(5) If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. (6) But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; (7-8) for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

(9) Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, (10) and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. (11) For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

(12) Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. (13) No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. (14) But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; (15) then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. (16) Do not be deceived, my beloved.

(17) Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (18) In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

1. Salutation and Address (1.1)

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ: The Epistle of James contains few details about authorship, dating and its audience. Tradition identifies the author as James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem church until his martyrdom in 62CE (see Gal. 1.19, Acts 15.13-21). James ('Jacob') was a common Jewish names, common even among early Christian leaders (cf. Mark 3.17-18, 15.40) and a particular James had usually to be distinguished from others by reference to his father. Bauckham argues that only one James was so uniquely prominent in the early Christian movement that he could be identified purely by the phrase 'a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ'. James was the eldest of the four brothers of Jesus (Mark 6.3). He is referred to in Acts 12.17, 15.13, 21.18; I Cor 15.7; and Gal. 2.9 and 2.12). He rose to prominence in the leadership of the Jerusalem church, and appears to have been one of the three most influential leaders in the first generation of the Christian movement, along with Peter and Paul (Cf. Acts 15.13-21; 21.18-25; Gal. 2.12; Jude 1; cf. Romans 15.25-31). In early Christian literature, he is sometimes called 'James, the brother of the Lord' or 'James the Just'. Some scholars put the writing of this letter just after 40CE. Other scholars see this letter as the produce of a later author who dedicated the letter to a hero of the faith, a practice common in the ancient world. Recent scholars have placed the writing of the epistle as later as 130-140CE.

The letter has provoked controversy over the centuries. Martin Luther described the letter as 'an epistle of straw'. Luther believed that Jesus Christ and his cross and resurrection were the heart of the scriptures. **A servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ:** The two brief references to Jesus Christ (James 1.1. and 2.1) and the lack of any reference to the death and resurrection did not place sufficient emphasis on the heart of the Christian faith. Many have been intrigued by the convergence between the message of James and the teaching of Jesus: 'James is the true heir to the message and way of life of Jesus. On him the mantle of Jesus truly rests' (Patrick Hartin, *James of Jerusalem* (Collegeville, 2004). **To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:** **To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:** the letter's address to 'the twelve tribes in the Dispersion' is also unclear. It probably refers to the early Christian community in its relation to the people of Israel, but it also provokes questions about the character of earliest Christianity. (cf. the distinction sometimes made between Pauline and Ebionite Christianity).

Greetings: the Greek of the letter is formal and stylised. The introduction which we have just read follows Hellenistic conventions in terms of letter-writing. The verb *chairein* (translated 'Greetings' but from the verb 'to rejoice') used in verse 1 is echoed in the following verse with the noun *charan* 'joy'. Note the repetition of 'endurance' in 1.3-4, 'lacking' in 1.4-5, 'ask' in 1.5-6, 'doubts' and 'doubter' in 1.6-7. These repetitions serve to reinforce the main themes and bind the passage together. How does the writer's grasp of Greek affect our judgements about the identity of the author?

And yet, commentators have struggled to see a clear structure to the letter (and some have questioned whether it is in fact a letter at all). Much of the material is taken up with moral exhortation or 'paraenesis'. It has the air of an extended sermon rather than a letter. It reads like 'Wisdom literature', with a succession of sayings or aphorisms. And yet, the collection of aphorisms seems to have some discernible pattern. The challenge over the next few weeks will be to work out that pattern.

2. **Trials (1.2-4)**

My brothers and sisters: The letter is addressed to *adelphoi mou*, and appears throughout the letter. Those who think of the audience as exclusively Christian or Jewish Christian naturally compare NT passages that use familial language for community relations. But this was a common term for Jewish co-religionists and this is the sense demanded if the twelve tribes of 1.1 are Jews of the diaspora. **whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy:** The imperative to rejoice in the face of trials, is paradoxical. More often people view trials as a punishment or a calamity. We avoid trials because they bring misery, rather than joy. The Greek word for 'trials' – *peirasmoi* – is also sometimes translated as 'temptations' (hence the two different translations of the Lord's Prayer – 'Save us from the time of trial', 'Lead us not into temptation'. These 'trials' are described as *poikilois*, a word which means literally 'dappled', or 'variegated', hence **of any kind.** **(3) because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance:** Trials are often seen as an educational discipline, and the word used for 'testing' has the sense of being 'tried and tested', 'authentic', 'genuine'. The word 'faith' occurs in this book sixteen times. It is a word which incorporates 'trust' as well as 'belief'. And yet, James relates 'faith' to the virtue of endurance. For Luther, we are saved by faith alone. For James, the relationship between faith and works is more complex. **(4) and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.** From the worst and the most difficult of trials comes maturity and perfection.

3. **Wisdom, Faith and Doubt (1.5-8)**

(5) If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. James has just spoken of the trials and testing of one's faith producing endurance. The full effect of this endurance is that one becomes 'mature and complete, lacking in *nothing*'. And yet James notes, we may still lack wisdom! Wisdom may be the most important attribute that leads to completeness and perfection. It provides both the understanding of the true nature of trials and therefore the ability to endure those trials. Note the emphasis on the God 'who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly'. **(6) But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind;** James sees an intimate relationship between prayer and wisdom. Faith is the pre-requisite for prayer. Prayer, wisdom and faith are intimately related. **(7-8) for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.** The doubter is 'double-minded', lit. 'double-souled' and this is in contrast to the single-heartedness in Deut. 6.5 etc.

4. **Rich and Poor (1.9-11)**

This section picks up another major theme of James: the relationship between the rich and poor. Here James focuses not just on status, but primarily on status reversal, a double reversal of wealthy and poor that echoes the teachings of Jesus (e.g. Matt 23.12, Luke 14.11, 18.14). All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. This is also a major theme of Luke (e.g. 1.52-3, 12.20, 15.25) – the lowly will be lifted up and the rich will be sent away empty. James hones in on the fact that wealth does not provide any time of security, other than a false sense of safety. James emphasises the fragility of our lives and acknowledges our mortality: **(11) For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.**

5. **Trials and Temptations (1.12-15)**

Note the use of the word 'temptation' in these verses. 'Trial' and 'temptation' is the same word in Greek. Read through this passage using either word. How does that alter its meaning in your mind? James is wrestling with the idea of where trial, temptation or suffering comes from? Does he provide a good answer?

6. **The Goodness of God (1.16-18)**

James' discussion of temptation and its origins now continues with an abrupt warning: Do not be deceived! James has made it clear that God does not send temptations, humans are tempted by their own desire. God is the source of all good things, including **every perfect gift** and is the consistent and sole source of those gifts. God's actions are thus consonant with God's attributes. James 1.17 is one of the most celebrated verses of the letter. It was Soren Kierkegaard's favourite verse: 'The words of James 1.17 are not spoken incidentally but with special emphasis, not in passing but accompanied by an urgent admonition: DO not go astray, my beloved brothers and sisters (v.16). We dare, then, to have the confidence that they have not only the power to lift up the soul but also the strength to carry it, these words that carried an apostle through a turbulent life. They are not spoken without any bearing on other words; it is to warn against the terribly mistaken belief that God would tempt a person, to warn against the heart's delusion that wants to tempt God, that the apostle says: Do not go astray, my beloved brothers and sisters. We dare then to be assured that the word is also mighty to expose delusion and mighty to halt errant thinking'.

(1) How important is it to establish the identity of the author in making sense of this letter?

(2) James only mentions 'Jesus Christ' twice in the course of his letter? Do you think this letter is an authentic witness to Christ, or do you share Luther's misgivings about its message?

(3) How do we make sense of the trials we face in the course of our lives?

(4) Do you think James invites Christians to live lives of 'patient virtue' or 'reckless generosity'?