



The Book of James: Introduction

AT A GLANCE

Author: James, brother of Jesus **Audience:** Jewish Christians

Date: AD 45–47

Type of Literature: A wisdom letter

Major Themes: Wisdom, trials, the law, faith and works, poverty and wealth

Outline:

- Greeting — 1:1
- Introducing the Three Themes: Wealth, Wisdom, Trials — 1:2–27
- Theme 1: Riches and Poverty — 2:1–26
- Theme 2: Wisdom and Speech — 3:1–4:12
- Theme 3: Trials and Temptation — 4:13–5:18
- Closing — 5:19–20

ABOUT JAMES (JACOB)

The Holy Spirit speaks through the Bible, God’s Holy Word. His life-giving expression comes through each verse, and we are changed by receiving the Word of God. The book of James (Jacob) is rich with life-changing revelation, a feast to strengthen you and keep you on course. We thank God that this book is included in our Bibles for it gives us the understanding of the power of faith to produce good works. Faith works! Actually, this letter is titled “Jacob.” By calling this book James instead of Jacob the church loses a vital component of our Jewish beginnings. There is no “James” in Greek; it is Jacob. We would never say that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and James. Neither should we call this letter James, when it is in fact, the letter of Jacob! Most scholars don’t believe that he was a believer until after Jesus died and rose again (see John 7:5). Can you imagine growing up with the Son of God and not knowing it? Yet today many are able to see the works of Jesus all around them and still remain unconvinced. However, Jacob (James) did become a powerful voice in the early church as the presiding apostle of the church of Jerusalem. And like his older brother, Jesus, he also was killed for his faith, in AD 62 according to the Jewish historian Josephus. The book of Jacob (James) and the book of Galatians are considered to be the first letters penned by the apostles most likely sometime between AD 45–47. So when we read this letter we are reading the earliest insights of the first generation of followers of Jesus who

were mostly Jews. Jacob (James) gives us practical truths about what it means to be declared righteous by God. He gives us many clear insights on faith and walking in the truth. You might want to view this book as the New Testament version of Proverbs, for much of his writings speak of God's heavenly wisdom that can transform us. I have fallen in love with Jesus! And I love his brother Jacob (James). I think you will too.

PURPOSE

Although the book of Jacob (James) is a letter, it reads more like a wisdom sermon addressing a number of crucial topics relevant to Jewish Christians using familiar language from the Old Testament. His letter was similar to so-called "diaspora letters" from ancient times written to the scattered Jewish people. Like those, it offers comfort and hope during persecution and trials, encourages faithful obedience to God, and provides spiritual instruction and encouragement on important matters relating to the unity and life of the church.

AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE

Although debated by some, it is believed that the Jacob (James) who wrote this book (also known as James the Just) was the half brother of our Lord Jesus referred to in Galatians 1:19 and in Mark 6:3. This is amazing to think that the actual half brother of our Lord and Savior gives us truth to live by. We should listen to what Jacob (James) has to say and take it to heart! Given the dominant Jewish flavor of the letter, it appears he originally targeted Jewish Christians. Jacob (James) said, "I'm writing to all the twelve tribes of Israel who have been sown as seeds among the nations." His thoughts were meant to reach out to all the Christians who converted from Judaism who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, calling their attention to the fulfillment of the promises for a Messiah in Jesus.

MAJOR THEMES

Wisdom from Above. The Greek word for wisdom, *sophia*, occurs four times in Jacob's (James') letter. His letter could be considered a wisdom sermon, for the style of the letter is similar to the Proverbs. Throughout his letter Jacob taps into the long tradition of Jewish wisdom and applies it to various practical topics for wise Christian living. He recognizes wisdom is necessary for trying circumstances; it involves insight into God's purposes and leads to spiritual maturity; and God is the source of all true wisdom.

Testing and Trials. In many ways, the wisdom letter of Jacob (James) is written to help guide those whose faith in God is being threatened by daily struggles and hardship. The kinds of testing and trials Jacob speaks of can range from religious persecution to financial difficulties, from health problems to even spiritual oppression. Jacob is clear such experiences are never a waste, there's a goal: Spiritual maturity born through perseverance.

The Law of Moses. While Jacob (James) doesn't directly refer to the law of the Old Testament, he does refer to "the royal law of love as given to us in this Scripture: 'You must love and value your neighbor' " (2:8). Of course Jesus Christ himself gave us this royal law, which he said summed up all the Law and Prophets. And for Jacob, anything that violates this law is as serious as violating any of the Ten Commandments. The law is relevant to Christian living not as legalistic rules and rituals, but as love of neighbor and God.

Faith and Good Deeds. One of the ongoing debates with Jacob's (James') letter is whether it contradicts the teachings of Paul and his theology of salvation by faith alone. While some of what Jacob says may seem like a contradiction, it isn't. Instead of undermining and opposing Paul's teaching that works cannot save, Jacob explains the kind of faith that does. "Faith that doesn't involve action is phony," Jacob argues. Faith that saves is a faith that works!

Poverty and Wealth. One of the major concerns of Jacob (James) seemed to be the huge gap between the rich and poor, even within the church. He encourages poor believers that they have been blessed with every privilege from God, though society may dismiss them. And to the rich he reminds them no amount of wealth from below could buy what they've been given from above. Jacob also writes against favoritism in the church of any kind, especially based on the size of one's pocketbook or the brand of their clothes.