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MINISTRIES

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Living Faith: Introduction to the Book of James (James 1:1)

How should followers of Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—live out their faith in their everyday lives? Why does God allow suffering, and what lessons are we meant to learn from it? What distinguishes a living authentic faith in Yeshua from a dead counterfeit “faith”? James wrote a letter to early believers in Yeshua to answer these questions and more.

In this teaching series, we will be going through the Book of James verse by verse. This first teaching will serve as an introduction to the book. We’ll talk about authorship, date, and the original audience. Let’s begin by reading the first verse:

James 1:1

[James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ \[Yeshua Messiah\], To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.](#)

As we can see, the letter claims “James” as its author. The name translated as “James” comes from the Greek Ἰάκωβος, which corresponds to the Hebrew name יַעֲקֹב or “Jacob.” This was a common name in the first century, and there are actually four different men named James in the New Testament: James the brother of Andrew (Acts 1:13; 12:1-2), James son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), James the father of Judas (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13), and finally, James the brother of Yeshua (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:17-26; 1 Corinthians 15:6; Galatians 2:9, 12).

Authorship

Out of these possibilities, James the brother of Yeshua is the most likely author of this letter. As A. Boyd Luter writes:

James, the brother of Jesus, was the only “James” mentioned in the New Testament well-known enough to self-identify at the beginning of his letter as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” and expect his identity to be understood by his audience. In addition, his known position as head of the Jerusalem church would have provided the authority necessary for the Letter of James to be fully accepted by his audience.

—A. Boyd Luter, *The Epistle of James Within Judaism: The Earliest First-Century Window into Messianic Jewish Belief and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024), 18

Further evidence pointing to James, the brother of Yeshua, as the author of the Epistle includes unique similarities in wording with Luke’s account in Acts 15 of James’s speech and his letter written to the Gentile believers. As Douglas Moo explains:

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. None of the similarities proves common authorship, but they are suggestive.

—Douglas Moo, *James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 10

In light of these factors, we will proceed with the belief that James, the brother of Yeshua, wrote the Epistle of James. This is the historical tradition as well as the prevailing view among modern scholars (See A. Boyd Luter, *The Epistle of James Within Judaism: The Earliest First-Century Window into Messianic Jewish Belief and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024), 16-18).

Date

If we accept that James, the brother of Yeshua, was the author, then the Epistle of James would have been written quite early. According to first-century Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities* 20.199–201), James was martyred around 62 AD. Josephus describes a brief power vacuum following the death of the Roman governor Festus before the arrival of his replacement, Albinus. During this lapse in Roman oversight, the Sadducean high priest Ananus seized the opportunity to convene a council and have James condemned and executed. Josephus identifies James as “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ” (*Antiquities* 20.200). Based on what we know about the timeline of Roman governorship transitions, James’s death likely took place around 62 AD (Luke T. Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYBC 37A (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 99-100).

Therefore, since James died in 62 AD, obviously the epistle could not have been written later than that. Possible dates for the writing of James’s epistle before the early 60s range from the late 30s AD (Aida B. Spencer, *A Commentary on James* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2020), 33-34) to sometime in the 50s (Scot McKnight, *James*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 38). Generally, conservative scholars date the epistle no later than the mid-40s AD.

One scholar, A. Boyd Luter, places the writing of James sometime between 42 to 44 AD. James addressed his letter to believers facing persecution, and he describes them as “[in the Dispersion](#)” (James 1:1)—meaning they were living outside of Judea. Based on this, Luter suggests that the letter was written during the wave of persecution under Herod Agrippa I, as described in Acts 12. Here is what he writes:

The remaining mention of James in Acts is in 12:17. That is the initial passage in Acts in which James, the brother of Jesus, is spoken of in a leadership role in the Jerusalem church. In that passage, Peter, having been miraculously released from imprisonment in Jerusalem, instructed

those who been praying for his release to “Tell this to James and to the believers.” At that point, “[Peter] left and went to another place” (i.e., certainly outside of Jerusalem, where he would have been taken back to prison, if apprehended—and quite possibly outside of Judea or even Palestine [12:17]). The dating of this event is perhaps a year or two before 44 CE, when the death of Herod Agrippa I took place, as recorded in Acts 12:20-23. With Peter having left the Jerusalem leadership, James was the obvious successor as leader of the mother church, as the wording “James and the believers” in 12:17 strongly infers. Therefore, if a “pastoral letter” was to be written from the Jerusalem church during that time of persecution to those who had fled Jerusalem and the surrounding areas of Palestine, James was the obvious candidate to do so. Based on the inference noted above from Acts 12:17, such a letter could have been written somewhere between 42 to 44 CE, several years before the Jerusalem Council.

—A. Boyd Luter, *The Epistle of James Within Judaism: The Earliest First-Century Window into Messianic Jewish Belief and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024), 11-12.

We find Luter’s suggestion plausible and will proceed with the belief that James wrote his epistle sometime between 42 to 44 AD.

Recipients

Who were the original recipients of James’s letter? James addresses them as “[the twelve tribes in the Dispersion](#)” (James 1:1). Throughout Scripture, the term “twelve tribes” refers to the whole people of Israel descended from Jacob’s twelve sons (Exodus 24:4; 28:21; Joshua 4:5; Ezekiel 47:13). Following the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722-721 BC, ten of these tribes were effectively lost. Many were exiled into the Assyrian Empire, but some fled south to Judah. In any case, this meant that only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were left. Despite this, the Prophets foretold a future restoration of all twelve tribes (Ezekiel 47:13), and the New Testament echoes this hope. For example, Yeshua prophesied that his disciples would judge “[the twelve tribes of Israel](#)” in the age to come (Matthew 19:28).

The restoration of Israel was clearly a central concern for Yeshua’s disciples. As Luke records in the Book of Acts, just before Yeshua’s ascension, they asked the risen Messiah, “[Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?](#)” (Acts 1:6). Since Yeshua is the Messiah, and the Prophets foretold that the Messiah would restore Israel, the disciples’ question is perfectly reasonable. When will Israel’s restoration happen? Well, Yeshua responded that the timing was not for them to know, but that they would receive power from the the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:7-8). In the next chapter, this promise begins to be fulfilled: on the day of Shavuot, the Spirit descends upon the disciples, and they begin proclaiming the gospel to Jews “[from every nation under heaven](#)” who had gathered in Jerusalem for the feast (Acts 2:5). Peter proclaimed, “[Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus \[Yeshua\] whom you crucified](#)” (Acts 2:36). That day, three thousand people repented and were baptized in the name of Yeshua (Acts 2:37-41). The restoration of Israel had begun!

So, when James addresses his letter to the “twelve tribes,” the most natural reading is that he is referring to the descendants of Jacob’s twelve sons. In James’s mind, the long-awaited restoration of Israel had already begun through the Spirit-empowered witness of Yeshua’s early followers, and the recipients of his epistle were part of that ongoing restoration. It would seem that James’s readers were predominantly Jewish, especially in light of the early date of the epistle. Moreover, James explicitly identifies them as those who “[hold the faith in our lord Yeshua the Messiah](#)” (James 2:1), so his intended audience is made

up of *Messianic Jews* specifically. Also, these believers apparently met in Jewish synagogues: the word often translated as “assembly” or “meeting” in James 2:2 is the Greek word συναγωγή, which means “synagogue,” and that is how the term is translated everywhere else it appears in the New Testament.

That said, while James’s audience was predominately Jewish, it was not exclusively Jewish. Around the time James likely wrote his epistle, we see in Acts 13 that Gentiles were already gathering in synagogues. In fact, Luke repeatedly mentions Gentiles meeting in synagogues alongside Jews (Acts 13:14-16, 26, 43-45, 48; 14:1; 17:1-4; 18:4), and many of these Gentiles are described as coming to faith in Yeshua. In Acts 15:21, James himself implies that he expects Gentile followers of Yeshua to attend synagogue services every Sabbath to hear the Law of Moses proclaimed (Acts 15:21). So, it is not unlikely that Gentile followers of Yeshua were also among the dispersed communities that James wrote to.

For more on this, see our teaching “[Moses is Proclaimed Every Sabbath in the Synagogues \(Acts 15:21\).](#)”

In sum, we believe that James, the brother of Yeshua, is the author of the Epistle of James, based on his recognized leadership role in the early Messianic community and the linguistic parallels between his epistle and Acts 15. We also hold that the epistle was probably written sometime between 42 and 44 AD, during a time of persecution under Herod Agrippa I. James addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” a phrase that reflects the biblical hope of Israel’s restoration, which James believed had begun through the witness of Yeshua’s earliest followers. While his audience was primarily Messianic Jews meeting in synagogues, Gentile believers were probably among the recipients as well.

James the Just

Before we conclude this introduction, let’s talk a little more about who James was. James was a prominent leader in the church of Jerusalem. Paul even referred to him as a “pillar” of the early believing community (Galatians 2:9). Moreover, according to the ancient church historian Eusebius, he was also known as “James the Just.” This was “on account of the excellence of his virtue” (Eusebius, *Church History* 2.1.2).

In what way was James known for being virtuous? Obviously, he was one of Yeshua’s brothers, but that alone would not have gained him the reputation of having excellent virtue. After all, he didn’t even believe in Yeshua during his earthly ministry: “For not even his brothers believed in him” (John 7:5).

Perhaps James’s reputation for being virtuous may be attributed to his strong commitment to the Torah. After all, the Bible describes the Torah as “perfect” and a tool to make one wise (Psalm 19:7). James similarly calls the Torah the “perfect law of liberty,” and urges his readers to hear and obey it (James 1:25).

James’s commitment to the Torah is further evident in Acts 21:17-26. He mentions that there were “many thousands” of Jewish believers in Jerusalem who were all “zealous for the law.” However, false rumors were circulating among these Jewish believers that Paul was teaching believers to forsake the Torah. This was an issue because James fully endorsed Paul’s ministry, and James didn’t want there to be any misunderstanding about where he and Paul stood regarding the Torah’s validity. So, to counter these false accusations, James instructed Paul to join several men in completing a vow and participating in public worship at the Jerusalem temple, which Paul did (Acts 21:26). This was intended to demonstrate that Paul lived in accordance with the Torah and did not teach believers to forsake it (Acts

21:24).

James's desire to eliminate any confusion regarding the Torah's ongoing validity is reminiscent of Yeshua's teaching in Matthew 5:17-20. Yeshua commanded his listeners *not even to think* that he came to abolish the Torah (Matthew 5:17) and urged his followers to keep even the least of the commandments (Matthew 5:19). Yeshua said that nothing would pass from the Torah as long as heaven and earth exist (Matthew 5:18). Like Yeshua, James fully believed that the "whole law" (James 2:10) remained in effect and that followers of Yeshua should be doers of that law so that they would be blessed:

James 1:25

But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

As we will see in our study of this epistle, James's goal is to build us into people who don't just profess faith in Yeshua but who actively live out their faith through doing good works. According to James, our good conduct reveals our wisdom (James 3:13). And this kind of wisdom is precisely what the Torah is intended to produce:

Psalms 19:7

The law of the LORD [YHWH] is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD [YHWH] is sure, making wise the simple.

As we study this epistle, we pray that you will be encouraged to be not just hearers but also doers of God's perfect law of liberty. May we, like James, be known for our excellent virtue, so that others may see our good works and glorify God.

In the next teaching, we will learn about how God uses the trials in our life to help us become the people he created us to be. We'll see you there!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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