

# The Epistle of James

## Introduction

### Historical Evidence.

There are allusions to this epistle in the writing of Clement, Bishop of Rome, and so it would have been known of in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century. Similarly, there are indications that the writer of the 'Shepherd of Hermas' (1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD) knew of the work and was able to refer indirectly to it. Origen, 185-254, was the first person to assign the name 'James' to the Epistle and he referred to James as both Apostle and brother of the Lord. The works of both Justin (c. 150) and Irenaeus (c. 180) contain coincidences and some material which suggest that they were familiar with the Epistle. From the earliest times it formed part of the canon of the Syriac Peshitta (300-400 AD) version of the New Testament. The Epistle is not listed in the Muratorian Canon (originally a 2<sup>nd</sup> century document in Greek), and Eusebius (c. 330) declared it a contested writing, as did Jerome (c. 420). Erasmus 1466-1536 was not convinced that the work was, indeed, inspired, and Luther's (1483-1546) heretical opinion concerning James' Epistle is well known. The Council of Trent (1545-63) established the Epistle as canonical. The Epistle is found in all the major 4<sup>th</sup> century codices, and in a number of papyri – 23 (early 3<sup>rd</sup> century), 74 (7<sup>th</sup> century and contains a number of variant renderings), also in the following editions of the New Testament- Coptic, Sahedic, Ethiopian, Arabic and Armenian.

### Author.

Church tradition has it that the Epistles was written by 'James, the brother of the Lord' (Origen in Rufinus' (410) Latin translation), Eusebius said that the author was 'James, the brother of Christ', but doubted the authenticity of the Epistle, while Jerome described the work as that of 'James, called the Lord's brother, surnamed Just, who wrote one Epistle, which is amongst the seven catholic ones.'

Here we have two problems – 1. which James? 2. the Lord's brother?

Three James present themselves in the NT.

1.) The son of Zebedee and Salome; an elder brother of John the apostle. He was one of the twelve. He was by trade a fisherman, in partnership with Peter (Matt. 20:20; 27:56). With John and Peter he was present at the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1; Mark 9:2), at the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37-43), and in the garden with our Lord (14:33). Because, probably, of their boldness and energy, he and John were called Boanerges, i.e., "sons of thunder." He was the first martyr among the apostles, having been beheaded by King Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1, 2), A.D. 44. (Comp. Matt. 4:21; 20:20-23). This eliminates him from the possibility of authorship.

2.) The son of Alphaeus, or Clopas. To make this James the author of our Epistle requires some contrivance:-

- It requires that Mary the wife of Clopas was the sister of Mary the Holy Mother – so requiring two women of the same name in the same family. The problem arises because of the lack of punctuation in the original Greek text – John 19:25 is as follows :- <sup>25</sup>  
Εἰστήκεισαν δὲ παρὰ τῷ σταυρῷ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἡ ἀδελφὴ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ, Μαρία ἡ τοῦ Κλωπᾶ καὶ Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ.  
mother of him, Mary the *wife* of Clopas, and Mary the Magdalene. Is 'Mary the *wife* of Clopas' really in apposition to 'the sister of the mother of him' ? The Holy Mother's sister was Salome who was present at the crucifixion (Mark 15:40). Mary, wife of Clopas was the mother of James the little, so, had this Mary actually been the Holy Mother's sister, then this James would have been Jesus' cousin.

- Further it requires that Clopas and Alphaeus were the same person – this is based on the assumption that the two names are derived from the same Aramaic name – a spurious assumption.

3.) James the Lord's brother – one of the brothers who did not believe in Jesus – John 7:5, but later believed after the Lord's separate appearance following the resurrection – 1 Cor. 15:7 - *'afterwards he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.'* He became an important person in the Church in Jerusalem – facts recorded in Paul's Epistles and Acts. Gal. 1:18 *then, after three years I went up to Jerusalem to enquire about Peter, and remained with him fifteen days,*

1:19 *and other of the apostles I did not see, except James, the brother of the Lord.* Paul returned to Jerusalem after fourteen years and given the hand of friendship by James among others – Gal. 2:9 *and having known the grace that was given to me, James, and Cephas, and John, who were esteemed to be pillars, a right hand of fellowship they did give to me, and to Barnabas, that we to the nations, and they to the circumcision [may go],* James presided over the Council of Jerusalem and his decision was accepted without dissent – Acts 15: 4:34. James came to be regarded as the head of the Church in Jerusalem Acts 21:17 *And we having come to Jerusalem, the brethren did gladly receive us,*

21:18 *and on the morrow Paul was going in with us unto James, all the elders also came,* 21:19 *and having saluted them, he was declaring, one by one, each of the things God did among the nations through his ministration,* James was martyred about 63 AD as recorded by Josephus in Antiq. Book 20 Chapter 9:1 *Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned:*

Therefore, for those not hampered by the concept of the Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, this James, referred to throughout the NT as 'the brother of the Lord', would seem to be the most likely candidate for authorship.

- He was permanently resident in Jerusalem.
- He was a major figure in the Church there and the leading force at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15: 23-29)
- He was regarded as a conservative Jew, more conservative even than Peter.
- He was one of the 'pillars of the Church' and so had the authority to send out messages to the Jewish communities scattered throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.
- He was totally different from Paul, who believed that Judaism and Christianity were incompatible and that Jews had to give up most of their traditional beliefs; James on the other hand saw Christianity as a fulfilment and perfection of the Covenant given in the wilderness.

### **Style and Content.**

Now, having said that 'James the brother of the Lord' appears to be the most likely author, a problem arises; when one considers the etymology of many of the words in the Epistle one has to ask as to where a Palestinian Jew, with as far as we know, no special education, managed to find so many remote words. The Jewish writer of the Epistle would need the education of Philo or Josephus, and the depth of knowledge of the Gentile, Luke. Karl Barth, a German Protestant commentator, has suggested that James had a Greek speaking amanuensis, and the Epistle was actually written by 'a hearer of James'. It seems quite natural that James, writing to Jewish Christians outside Palestine, would want what he said to be understood by Greek speaking Jews, who were in the majority in the greater Roman Empire. He would, therefore, wish his Epistle to be written down by a secretary fluent in Greek. In our time we are quite used to 'ghost writers' and we should not imagine that they are anything modern. Had we not received the tradition of the Church

and the phrases in the Scriptures we would have designated the Epistle of James to an unknown Greek speaking Jew.

The Epistle is a minor work of literature, well written in a Greek style far removed from the coarse language of say, Mark's Gospel. It is an Epistle in the true sense of containing messages, commands and commissions – much more than a letter. There does seem to be some instability - where a subject is discontinued, a new item started, and then the original subject returned to. The Epistle has an ethical and moral direction, urging its readers to be firm in their faith in spite of persecutions and difficulties, and also, reminding its readers of the requirement to conform to righteousness and that just believing is not enough – they have to believe and do.

As would be expected the Epistle shows a predilection for LXX styles – particularly the prophetic and wisdom books of the OT and Apocrypha, but shows evidence of a vast range of reading from which words have been taken and used in the articulation of the moral and ethical instructions contained.

### **Date.**

The Epistle must have been composed before 62, 63 when James was dragged before the Sanhedrin, and probably after the stoning of Stephen in 35. It is probable that it was not written after 51 since there is no reference to the Council of Jerusalem or of its conclusions. So we are given a range of dates from around 40 – 50 AD. Looking further at the internal evidence 2:6 indicates that the oppression was taking place at the time of writing -

<sup>6</sup> ὑμεῖς δὲ ἠτιμάσατε τὸν πτωχόν. οὐχ οἱ πλούσιοι καταδυναστεύουσιν ὑμῶν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔλκουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς κριτήρια;  
You but despised the pauper. Not the rich oppress you and they drag off you into court?

That would be in 44 A.D. when Herod Agrippa oppressed the Churches in Judaea and James, brother of John and son of Zebedee was murdered – Acts 12:1 12:1 *And about that time, Herod the king put forth his hands, to do evil to certain of those of the assembly, 12:2 and he killed James, the brother of John, with the sword,*

There is a possibility that 2:15,16 refers to the famine in around 45 A.D.

<sup>15</sup> ἐὰν ἀδελφὸς ἢ ἀδελφὴ γυμνοὶ ὑπάρχωσιν καὶ λειπόμενοι τῆς ἡμετέρας τροφῆς,  
If a brother or a sister naked should be and lacking of the daily food,

<sup>16</sup> εἴπη δέ τις αὐτοῖς ἐξ ὑμῶν· ὑπάγετε ἐν εἰρήνῃ, θερμαίνεσθε καὶ χορτάζεσθε, μὴ δῶτε δὲ αὐτοῖς τὰ ἐπιτήδεια τοῦ σώματος, τί ὄφελος;  
should say and anyone to them out of you; Go you in peace, be warmed and be filled, not you gave and to them the needful of the body, what advantage?

This famine came to pass in the time of Claudius as reported by Luke in Acts 11:28 *and one of them, by name Agabus, having stood up, did signify through the Spirit a great dearth is about to be throughout all the world -- which also came to pass in the time of Claudius Caesar – died 54 A.D.*

Reported by Josephus in Antiqu. Book 20, Chapter 2:5 *Now her coming was of very great advantage to the people of Jerusalem; for whereas a famine did oppress them at that time, and many people died for want of what was necessary to procure food withal, queen Helena sent some of her servants to Alexandria with money to buy a great quantity of corn, and others of them to Cyprus, to bring a cargo of dried figs. And as soon as they were come back, and had brought those provisions, which was done very quickly, she distributed food to those that were in want of it, and left a most excellent memorial behind her of this benefaction, which she bestowed on our whole nation. And when her son Izates was informed of this famine, he sent great sums of money to the principal men in Jerusalem.*

Josephus also gives a picture of rich Sadducees tyrannizing the poor until some starved – Antiqu. Book 20 Chapter 8:8 *And there was nobody to reprove them; but these disorders were done after a licentious manner in the city, as if it had no government over it. And such was the impudence and boldness that had seized on the high priests, that they had the hardiness to send their servants into*

*the threshing-floors, to take away those tithes that were due to the priests, insomuch that it so fell out that the poorest sort of the priests died for want. To this degree did the violence of the seditious prevail over all right and justice.*

This would have occurred after the death of Claudius in 54.

The evidence, therefore, suggests a date around 45 A.D. This date, of course, puts the Epistle earlier than Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle to the Thessalonians – an anathema to the modernists who claim that Paul invented Christianity and that 1 Thess. was the earliest written Christian document. However, it makes perfect sense for our Epistle to have been circulated and highly thought of quite early, and for the need for Paul to write those disagreeable and petulant first chapters of his Epistle to the Romans. It must be noted also that those first few chapters of Romans contain many very rare words – was Paul 'keeping up' with James?

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