

# JAMES

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## *Publisher's Note*

William C. Placher worked with Amy Plantinga Pauw as a general editor for this series until his untimely death in November 2008. Bill brought great energy and vision to the series and was instrumental in defining and articulating its distinctive approach and in securing theologians to write for it. Bill's own commentary for the series was the last thing he wrote, and Westminster John Knox Press dedicates the entire series to his memory with affection and gratitude.

William C. Placher, LaFollette Distinguished Professor in Humanities at Wabash College, spent thirty-four years as one of Wabash College's most popular teachers. A summa cum laude graduate of Wabash in 1970, he earned his master's degree in philosophy in 1974 and his PhD in 1975, both from Yale University. In 2002 the American Academy of Religion honored him with the Excellence in Teaching Award. Placher was also the author of thirteen books, including *A History of Christian Theology*, *The Triune God*, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, *Jesus the Savior*, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, and *Unapologetic Theology*. He also edited the volume *Essentials of Christian Theology*, which was named as one of 2004's most outstanding books by both *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* magazines.

## *Series Introduction*

*Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* is a series from Westminster John Knox Press featuring biblical commentaries written by theologians. The writers of this series share Karl Barth's concern that, insofar as their usefulness to pastors goes, most modern commentaries are "no commentary at all, but merely the first step toward a commentary." Historical-critical approaches to Scripture rule out some readings and commend others, but such methods only begin to help theological reflection and the preaching of the Word. By themselves, they do not convey the powerful sense of God's merciful presence that calls Christians to repentance and praise; they do not bring the church fully forward in the life of discipleship. It is to such tasks that theologians are called.

For several generations, however, professional theologians in North America and Europe have not been writing commentaries on the Christian Scriptures. The specialization of professional disciplines and the expectations of theological academies about the kind of writing that theologians should do, as well as many of the directions in which contemporary theology itself has gone, have contributed to this dearth of theological commentaries. This is a relatively new phenomenon; until the last century or two, the church's great theologians also routinely saw themselves as biblical interpreters. The gap between the fields is a loss for both the church and the discipline of theology itself. By inviting forty contemporary theologians to wrestle deeply with particular texts of Scripture, the editors of this series hope not only to provide new theological resources for the

church but also to encourage all theologians to pay more attention to Scripture and the life of the church in their writings.

We are grateful to the Louisville Institute, which provided funding for a consultation in June 2007. We invited theologians, pastors, and biblical scholars to join us in a conversation about what this series could contribute to the life of the church. The time was provocative, and the results were rich. Much of the series' shape owes to the insights of these skilled and faithful interpreters, who sought to describe a way to write a commentary that served the theological needs of the church and its pastors with relevance, historical accuracy, and theological depth. The passion of these participants guided us in creating this series and lives on in the volumes.

As theologians, the authors will be interested much less in the matters of form, authorship, historical setting, social context, and philology—the very issues that are often of primary concern to critical biblical scholars. Instead, this series' authors will seek to explain the theological importance of the texts for the church today, using biblical scholarship as needed for such explication but without any attempt to cover all of the topics of the usual modern biblical commentary. This thirty-six-volume series will provide passage-by-passage commentary on all the books of the Protestant biblical canon, with more extensive attention given to passages of particular theological significance.

The authors' chief dialogue will be with the church's creeds, practices, and hymns; with the history of faithful interpretation and use of the Scriptures; with the categories and concepts of theology; and with contemporary culture in both "high" and popular forms. Each volume will begin with a discussion of *why* the church needs this book and why we need it *now*, in order to ground all of the commentary in contemporary relevance. Throughout each volume, text boxes will highlight the voices of ancient and modern interpreters from the global communities of faith, and occasional essays will allow deeper reflection on the key theological concepts of these biblical books.

The authors of this commentary series are theologians of the church who embrace a variety of confessional and theological perspectives. The group of authors assembled for this series represents

more diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender than most other commentary series. They approach the larger Christian tradition with a critical respect, seeking to reclaim its riches and at the same time to acknowledge its shortcomings. The authors also aim to make available to readers a wide range of contemporary theological voices from many parts of the world. While it does recover an older genre of writing, this series is not an attempt to retrieve some idealized past. These commentaries have learned from tradition, but they are most importantly commentaries for today. The authors share the conviction that their work will be more contemporary, more faithful, and more radical, to the extent that it is more biblical, honestly wrestling with the texts of the Scriptures.

William C. Placher  
Amy Plantinga Pauw

## *Acknowledgments*

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And as always, to my family, especially Chris, Miriam, and Fiona, for welcoming James to our table for the past few years. Thank you for your hospitality to him, and for your patience and good humor with me. This book is dedicated to you, with my enduring love.

## *Introduction*

### *Why James? Why Now?*

“Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak,” says James early in this book (1:19), for “if any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless” (1:26). In the middle of the book, the author says, “the tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. . . . No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:6, 8). Repeatedly this writer warns against the dangers of words misused: grumbling, boasting, disputing, cursing. It is ironic indeed to write a volume of so many words about James, when he raises such serious concerns about the “unbridled tongue.”

Why spend so many words on James? Why engage in such unbridled verbosity regarding such a terse text? Three simple reasons: because of the uniqueness of the book in the New Testament canon, because of its history of bad press (especially among Luther-influenced Protestants), and because of its timely wisdom for our world today.

#### *Uniqueness of James: What Is This Book?*

If you are approaching James for the first time, or for the first time in a long while, you may initially find it puzzling to read. There is no narrative or plot, and the characters that appear briefly (Abraham, Rahab, Job, Elijah) are moral exemplars whose real significance requires knowledge outside the text. If we try to read it as a letter, it

seems oddly disjointed and impersonal, hardly like a letter written to “brothers and sisters.” It seems to jump from one topic to another without a consistent theme. We cannot immediately tell what has prompted the writer to address his community, though we recognize that they are enduring trials and temptations from outside as well as struggling with internal divisions. It begins without fanfare, and it ends without so much as a “farewell.”

Many readers of James, especially in recent centuries, have wrestled with these features of the book, wondering how we should interpret it and whether it is really a “letter” at all. Martin Dibelius, in his influential commentary, classifies the book as loosely connected “paraenesis” (exhortation to moral living), not a letter addressed to a specific community or situation. He claims that “the entire document lacks continuity in thought” and has no “theology.”<sup>1</sup> This judgment regarding James has had lasting impact on interpreters through the twentieth century, leading many to dismiss the book as no more than an ad hoc collection of wisdom sayings without clear purpose or theme. More recent interpreters, however, have employed rhetorical analysis and discovered James’s deft use of strategies from the Greco-Roman literary world. Several have pointed out that, like other similar texts of the time, James uses his rhetorical skill to persuade the audience to adopt certain values (here, values such as patience, endurance, and equity). Margaret Aymer, for instance, interprets James as an epistle to communities in diaspora, written in the tradition of other Jewish letters composed to bolster identity among dispersed Jewish communities in the Hellenistic world. By comparing James to other writings of the time, these interpreters have uncovered more coherence and purpose in James than previously recognized. Though the debate continues as to whether James constitutes a letter, most contemporary scholars have greater respect for its literary unity and skill than did earlier generations. Other interpreters, attending to the sociocultural history of similar texts like Q and Thomas, have begun to glimpse the religious, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions out of which James may have

1. Martin Dibelius, *James*, 5th ed., translated from the 1964 German ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 2, 21.

emerged.<sup>2</sup> Though it is still impossible to reconstruct exactly James's original context, these new scholarly approaches have opened up fresh appreciation for James as a significant source for learning about Christian origins.

But what sort of writing is this? Amid the surge of publications on James in the past twenty-five years, scholars have variously emphasized it as a wisdom text, as eschatological/apocalyptic writing, and as prophetic literature.<sup>3</sup> Many have followed Dibelius in highlighting James as wisdom literature, similar to Ben Sira, sometimes referring to this as the only wisdom text in the New Testament. Todd Penner affirms the wisdom character of James, but he argues that its eschatological framing is key to understanding the letter, illuminating the relationship of wisdom and eschatology in early Christianity as a whole. John P. Keenan concurs that James is a wisdom text, but one that also anticipates an apocalyptic reversal beyond history.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Penner, Keenan prefers the term "apocalyptic" to "eschatological," because he sees James emphasizing a "reversal of historical time," not "the end period of history."<sup>5</sup> Through his moral teachings, James is seeking to motivate engagement in compassionate justice here and now, not removal from the world. Elsa Tamez and Pedrito Maynard-Reid likewise highlight this book's call for justice, but they emphasize the continuity of James with the prophetic tradition, noting how James, like Amos, focuses on God's condemnation of the rich and preference for the poor.<sup>6</sup>

In this commentary, I will not mount a specific argument regarding James's genre, though I have learned much from the biblical commentators who have engaged in these discussions, especially

2. See Todd C. Penner, "The Epistle of James in Current Research," *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 7 (1999): 267–300 for discussion.

3. See, e.g., Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Todd C. Penner, *The Epistle of James and Eschatology: Re-reading an Ancient Christian Letter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); John P. Keenan, *The Wisdom of James: Parallels with Mahayana Buddhism* (New York: The Newman Press, 2005).

4. "It is not the culmination of history but the abeyance of history. . . . God is in charge from beginning to end, and no human effort can pretend to engender wisdom or trigger the final revelatory reversal. There is no human strategy for coping with the world" (Keenan, *The Wisdom of James*, 21).

5. *Ibid.*, 22.

6. Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead*, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2002) and Pedrito Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

in recent decades. Instead, what strikes me most in reading James today is how the author weaves together insights from the law (especially Leviticus 19), prophets (such as Amos and Isaiah), and wisdom (especially Ben Sira) into one powerful whole, offering his audience then and now a genre-defying piece of biblical interpretation. Is it perhaps a mistake to try and classify him? He does draw on Hellenistic rhetorical strategies, of course, but perhaps above all he seeks simply to interpret for his own time the richness of the whole Hebrew Bible, not just one piece. And he does so to inspire his audience to lives of righteousness. For James, the word (*logos*) of God, law (*nomos*), and wisdom (*sophia*) are nearly interchangeable terms, and God implants/imparts this word in order that we, the readers, might not just hear it but also do it.

### *Uniqueness of James: A Minority Report in the New Testament*

The book of James offers a minority report in the New Testament, an alternative view to the ones we more often hear from the Synoptic Gospels, Paul, and John. Unlike the Gospels, James has no explicit references to narratives of Jesus, including his death and resurrection; indeed, he says little directly about Jesus at all. Unlike Paul, he says nothing about a distinction between Jews and Gentiles, which is vital to Paul's understanding of Christ's reconciling work. Further, unlike Paul, James does not describe the church as the body of Christ, which would explicitly connect the Christian community to the ongoing work of Jesus in the world. Unlike John, who portrays serious tension between the Jews who recognized Jesus as Messiah and those who did not, James recognizes no such divide. Unlike almost all the New Testament texts, the moral teachings of James are not connected to any experience of conversion or becoming a Christian. Apparently, he did not see a significant divide between pre-Christian and Christian life.

Instead, James preaches to his community on the same texts that Jesus did: the ancient Israelite Scriptures—Torah, prophets, and wisdom. His audience must have been well versed in these texts, as

well as in the communal practices these texts inform. James's hearers may have been part of the community later called "Ebionite," whose name means "the poor" and who were Jewish Christians later condemned as heretics.<sup>7</sup> As interpreter John Keenan says, "There was a period when Christians were all Jews at peace within their tradition, and that, I think, is the time and the world of the Letter of James."<sup>8</sup> There is no hint of distance in this writing between the Jewish community and earliest followers of Jesus. This is one distinctive gift that James offers us today.

Though James says very little about Jesus, his teachings echo Jesus' teaching at many points. In particular, James challenges the economic and social divide in his community, repeatedly encouraging "the lowly" and chastising "the rich," like Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. In doing this, the author speaks directly to the economic situation of Palestine in the first century, in which there was growing wealth for a few but great poverty for most, provoking social and religious unrest.<sup>9</sup> Most of the early followers of Jesus were of this poor and uneducated group.

Thus, while James knows no conflict between Torah followers and Jesus followers, he describes pronounced conflict between the privileged and the oppressed. The book may have been written at a time when people of higher social status were being welcomed into the nascent Jewish-Christian community, as we glimpse unequal treatment of rich and poor in "the assembly" in chapter 2. Elsa Tamez suggests that in response, James was insisting that "the vocation of the church, its mission, is the poor, who are rich in faith and the heirs of God's reign."<sup>10</sup> From the text, we can see that the writer seeks to nurture a community of solidarity, characterized by sharing, compassion, and mercy. James explicitly condemns boasting (3:14), arrogance (4:6, 10), and the rich who use their power over those who have less (1:11; 2:6-7; 5:1-6). He focuses attention on establishing a community that seeks to heal the sick and raises up those who have little. In his teaching, then, though he rarely mentions

7. See Keenan, *The Wisdom of James*, 10.

8. *Ibid.*, 14.

9. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 17-18.

10. Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, 26.

Jesus at all, James “possibly represents the heart and soul of the ministry of Jesus as a reformist prophet within Judaism.”<sup>11</sup>

### *Who Is “James”?*

This is an appropriate point to pause and ask what we can know about the author of this book called “James.” As I will discuss further in the commentary on 1:1, the author identifies himself simply as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” without further specification, suggesting that those originally hearing the letter did not require any more identification than this. But we wonder: Who was this “James”?

The New Testament offers three main characters called James: two of the twelve disciples, and James “the brother of the Lord.” Of the two disciples named James, the first is the more well-known: the brother of John and son of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21; 10:2), who, with Peter and John, is one of the inner circle of disciples present at the transfiguration (Matt. 17; Mark 9). This James was martyred by Herod Agrippa, as mentioned in Acts 12:1–2, in about the year 44. The second disciple is “James son of Alphaeus” (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15). He is not mentioned again after Jesus’ resurrection. The third James is the brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55), represented as the head of the Jerusalem church in Acts (12:17; 15:13; 21:18), likely from about 44 to 62. Almost all interpreters of this letter from the earliest centuries to the present have agreed that this James, the brother of Jesus, is the ascribed author of the text—though whether he is the actual author is a question we will explore further below.

Jewish historian Josephus (37–100) attests to the importance of this James in the earliest decades of the Jesus movement in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. According to Josephus, during a brief period without a Roman ruler present in Palestine, the high priest in Jerusalem brought to trial “a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, along with certain others.”<sup>12</sup> The priest, who

11. Penner, *The Epistle of James and Eschatology*, 281.

12. Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 99.

was a Sadducee, accused the group of transgressing the law and condemned them to death by stoning, a punishment consistent with cases of blasphemy. The Pharisees apparently protested this action to the next Roman procurator. This brief account confirms that James was generally known as the brother of Jesus, and that he was an important leader of the Jerusalem community of those who called Jesus “the Christ.” It also provides a clear date for his death (62 CE). Later Christian writers elaborated on James’s martyrdom; Eusebius, for instance, cites Clement of Alexandria, who says that James was “thrown down from the pinnacle of the temple and beaten to death with a fuller’s club.”<sup>13</sup> Because of this legend, later iconography of James often portrays him with a club, recalling this alleged mode of his death.

Christian interpreters until the modern era commonly assumed that James, the brother of Jesus, named in Acts and named in the writings of Josephus and Eusebius, did indeed write this letter. In modern times, however, there has been serious debate about whether James actually wrote the letter or whether it was composed by someone writing in his name. Beginning in the sixteenth century with Erasmus, Cajetan, and Luther, biblical interpreters began to challenge the apostolic authorship of James.<sup>14</sup> In the nineteenth century, with the advent of the historical-critical method, biblical scholars settled into two basic camps: those who defended the traditional early dating of James (whether written by the brother of Jesus or pseudonymous) and those who argued that it was a late pseudonymous writing of the late first, second, or perhaps even early third century. Those two basic opinions continue to the present, but the preponderance of scholarly opinion has shifted, first toward the later dating and more recently to renewed arguments for early dating of James. However, scholars on both sides concur that it is difficult to make definitive claims about the historical context of the letter. As Luke Timothy Johnson puts it, judgments about authorship are based on “the cumulative force of probabilities rather than of mathematical demonstration.”<sup>15</sup>

13. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* II, 1, 5, quoted in Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 99.

14. Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 140–41.

15. *Ibid.*, 92.

Over the course of the twentieth century, most New Testament scholars came to argue that the book of James was not written by the historical James but is a later pseudonymous writing. Martin Dibelius was an influential earlier proponent of this interpretation, and Dale Allison represents one of the most distinguished representatives of this view today.<sup>16</sup> Arguments for late dating include the following:

- The letter was not mentioned or accepted into the canon until late: Origen in the third century is the first to refer to the letter as Scripture, and it was not officially received into the canon in the West until the Synod of Hippo in 393.<sup>17</sup>
- The writer seems to be arguing against Paul himself, or against followers of Paul who have misunderstood his “faith alone” emphasis, which would place the writer at least a generation after Paul.
- The writing consists of general moralizing without a definite train of thought, a genre which belongs to (at least) a late first-century church.
- It seems unlikely that one who grew up in Nazareth as the son of a carpenter would have been able to write in such accomplished Greek.

In the 1980s, several scholars began to reconsider the dating and the significance of James, suggesting that it may have been composed in the mid-first century after all, and perhaps even by the brother of Jesus. Luke Timothy Johnson summarizes the arguments in favor of early dating:<sup>18</sup>

16. For detailed arguments, see Dibelius, *James*, 11–21 and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of James*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 3–32. Gay Byron argues that “it was most likely written around the end of the first century or early in the second century by a pseudonymous author who lived in either Syria, Egypt, or Rome” (Gay Byron, “James,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline Lapsley [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012], 613).
17. See Allison’s review of this history in his *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of James*, 13–18; cf. Keenan, *The Wisdom of James*, 8.
18. See Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 118–21. See also Margaret Aymer, *James: Diaspora Rhetoric of a Friend of God*, Phoenix Guides to the New Testament (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 4–13, 16, and Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 6–7.

- James shows none of the “classic signs of late, pseudonymous authorship,” such as elaboration of the author’s identity, discussion of the delayed Parousia, or defense of a tradition to be handed on.
- The letter suggests social realities that fit a movement at the early stages of development: description of oppression from outside forces, a clear sense of imminent judgment, no concern about internal social structures (such as marriage or sexual relations), and overall emphasis on intimate social solidarity rather than developed institutional life.
- The letter clearly draws on Jesus’ teachings in ways that resemble the hypothetical Q source and early Palestinian Christianity.
- James’s writing in many ways resembles the “earliest datable Christian writer, Paul,” in language, allegiance to Torah, and influence of Greco-Roman moral traditions. Rather than seeing James as a later response to Paul, it makes more sense to see these writings as contemporaneous.
- Several incidental details in the text suggest a Palestinian context (e.g., the use of the term “gehenna” in 3:6 and the reference to “the early and the late rains” in 5:7).

Though the questions of dating and authorship cannot be settled conclusively, the historical debates can have theological implications. Those who argue for late pseudonymous authorship of James, particularly those who follow the interpretation of Dibelius, tend to downplay this letter’s theological significance, relegating it to the margins of the canon. Those who argue for an earlier date, however, contend that James gives us a glimpse of Palestinian Christianity in its earliest generation, a form of emerging Jewish Christianity whose teachings are closely linked to the Law/Torah and to Jesus’ own sayings.

This commentary will not attempt to resolve the historical debates. Readers who wish to wrestle further with the arguments will benefit from turning to the fine works of Dale Allison and Luke Timothy Johnson, among others. Instead, I will follow the lead of Elsa Tamez, who says, “what matters is not so much the true identity

of this man, but rather his message for us today.”<sup>19</sup> Whoever originally wrote the letter, it offers a perspective that enriches the choir of voices in the New Testament canon, balancing Paul and amplifying some themes we also hear in the Gospel accounts of Jesus. For James, to be a Christian is to be a Jew, to be a follower of Jesus is to be a follower of the Law, and to hear the word truly is to do it.

Is James the “brother of Jesus”? We cannot know if this is true biologically, but it is true theologically. The writer of this letter shares with Jesus a deep reverence for Jewish tradition as a living word for his community that is poised at the turning of a messianic age. In this commentary, I refer to the author as “James” for ease of reference and out of respect for the author’s own self-identification, while acknowledging that the authorship cannot be known for certain.

### *Lutheran Scorn of James*

Another reason to spend so many words on James is because of its particular history of interpretation, especially among Protestants influenced by Martin Luther. In his preface to the New Testament, Luther ascribed to several books of the New Testament different degrees of doctrinal value:

“St. John’s Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul’s Epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and St. Peter’s Epistle—these are the books which show to thee Christ, and teach everything that is necessary and blessed for thee to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book of doctrine. Therefore, St. James’s Epistle is a perfect straw-epistle compared with them, for it has in it nothing of an evangelic kind.”<sup>20</sup>

According to Luther, there is a contradiction between James and other parts of the New Testament, especially Paul. The major sixteenth-century Protestant emphasis on justification by “grace alone” through “faith alone” seemed to be contradicted by James’s assertion

19. Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, 7.

20. Martin Luther, “Preface to the New Testament” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd ed. (Fortress, 2012), 112–17.

that “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24). To talk of “justification by works” was anathema to Luther and his followers, so even though Luther did cite other parts of James approvingly in his writings, his scathing dismissal of the book overall as a “perfect straw-epistle” has had lasting influence on biblical interpretation of this book.

Well into the twentieth century, the majority of Protestant New Testament scholarship continued to dismiss or marginalize James as a puzzling addition to the canon without any particularly Christian theology or coherent message. One striking example of this is Rudolf Bultmann’s almost complete lack of engagement with James in his influential two-volume *Theology of the New Testament*.<sup>21</sup> Several recent prominent New Testament introductions have scarcely mentioned James at all, revealing the lingering assumption that James does not fit well into the canon, which is so centered on a certain reading of Paul.<sup>22</sup>

More troubling is the way that James’s deeply Jewish character has presented a problem for many earlier New Testament interpreters. As Penner says, a text so strongly rooted in Judaism does not fare well “in a world of scholarship that can still herald early Christianity as that which through the gift of spirit-enthusiasm brought about the early Christian recognition of Greek universalism, leading to the supersession of Judaism.”<sup>23</sup> If Christianity is by definition opposed to Judaism, then a text that blurs those boundaries is itself likely to be ruled out of bounds.

As I suggested earlier, new scholarly developments starting in the late 1980s have inspired fresh interest in this book, challenging old assumptions and seeing in James a significant window on early Jewish Christianity. This commentary takes its cue from such recent scholarship, approaching James differently from Luther and his heirs, without presupposing that “the gospel” is determined solely by Paul’s presentation of it. In this commentary, I invite you to encounter James as a glimpse of another early proclamation of the gospel, one that is not opposed to Romans and Galatians (in

21. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951/1955).

22. Penner, “The Epistle of James in Current Research,” 257–60.

23. *Ibid.*, 258.

fact, there is much in common), but emerging from a different early Christian community with different questions and concerns. From James we hear challenging words like these:

- “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless” (1:26).
- “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom . . . ?” (2:5)
- “Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten” (5:1–2).

In other words, James is challenging indeed, but challenging in the way that Jesus is challenging: inviting us to take seriously what it means to follow the law of God, which is the law of embodied, righteous love.

### *James’s Timely Word to the Contemporary World*

The third, and most important, reason to read and write about James is that this often neglected text offers remarkably timely wisdom for our world today. This letter is not just an historical artifact, but Scripture. Through these words, God not only spoke to a community long ago but also continues to speak to us now. The pages that follow will explore what God might be saying through the words of James in each particular passage. Taken as a whole, James offers five themes that connect directly to contemporary concerns.

First, as it is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion (*diaspora*)” (1:1), the letter speaks with special force to a world of **migration and refugees**. Though we do not know exactly what community James was addressing, the author identifies his audience as those who are in diaspora, scattered from their homeland.<sup>24</sup> Framed

24. For further discussion of historical context of James, see commentary on 1:1 below. For fine discussion of the diaspora perspective, see Margaret Aymer, *James: Diaspora Rhetoric of a Friend of God*.

in this way, the letter's emphasis on rooting the identity of the community in the enduring word, while it is under stress from outside and divided within, takes on new significance. Margaret Aymer suggests that we might helpfully read James as a "migrant writing" whose primary strategy is separation from the surrounding culture. James encourages his readers not to assimilate to the "world" around them but to maintain their distinctive traditions, especially rooted in the Torah. But migration is not just a long-ago and far-away situation.: "International migration has more than tripled in size since 1960, rising from 77 million to almost 244 million in 2015."<sup>25</sup> In the United States, while immigration policies are hotly contested, demographic patterns clearly indicate that the nation's immigrant population continues to grow. Increasingly, today's readers of James are either themselves in diaspora or live near communities in diaspora. How might James speak to us if we understand that "it was intended to be read by migrants rather than by landed citizen readers"?<sup>26</sup> How might James help those who are landed citizens hear more clearly the voices of those struggling to live in places that are not "home"?

Second, the "theological" (more than explicitly christological) perspective of James speaks helpfully into our world of *religious diversity and conflict*. As we noted above, James says little about Jesus but a lot about the God of Israel and the law God gave to the covenant people. The letter emerged from a context in which "Jewish" and "Christian" were not opposed or even distinct categories. This makes it a particularly fruitful resource for pondering the relationship between contemporary Jews and Christians, not to forget the intervening centuries of division but to engage a New Testament witness to a form of Christianity that does not make Jews into religious "others." James's unique perspective also holds promise for Christian engagement with traditions besides Judaism. I do not mean to suggest that interreligious engagement ought only to seek common ground, ignoring the differences that make religious traditions distinctive. Some of the liveliest interreligious encounters today are precisely those that start with particularity rather than

25. Migration Policy Institute, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/international-migrants-country-destination-1960-2015?width=1000&height=850&iframe=true>.

26. Aymer, *James: Diaspora Rhetoric of a Friend of God*, 2.

universal principles. But James's emphases on the generosity and goodness of God and on God's call to justice and righteousness can foster cooperation and dialogue with religious communities for whom the christological starting point is a serious obstacle. For the same reason, James can engage people who are suspicious of any kind of religion at all. We live in an age when there is conflict and contention over what we mean by "religion" and whether it can play a helpful role in the world today. For James, true "religion" is not a bounded institutional category called "Judaism" or "Christianity" nor is it explicitly about a set of doctrines. Religion for James is just this: "to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (1:27). Such an ethical imperative might appeal to those who identify as "spiritual but not religious," opening up conversation about, for instance, what commitments drive our pursuit of righteousness in the world.

Third, James offers practical guidance on *living in community with others*, a topic that speaks to many people today who are seeking to nurture community in a variety of forms. Christian readers have valued this aspect of James for centuries. Apparently, this letter was a favorite Scripture for early monastic communities in Egypt, Palestine, and Constantinople, who appreciated James because of his focus on practical living out of Christian ideals.<sup>27</sup> His warnings against harsh speech (3:1–12) and against division caused by wealth and privilege (2:1–7, 5:1–6) are particularly timely in a world in which hate speech and economic disparity fuel social division and violence. Furthermore, James's observations on the destructive power of envy and friendship with the "world" can draw our attention to the ways our behavior today threatens not only social relations but also the earth itself. James gives close attention to the habits of the human heart that lead to such destructive behavior.

Fourth, James's repeated concern for the *poor and the sick, those at the margins of society and community*, should stimulate Christians to reflect on our own practices and on the practices of any society that neglects and isolates those who are not powerful. He contrasts the rich and the lowly in 1:9–11, emphasizes that religion

27. Ibid., 78–79.; cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Book of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 72.

is about caring for orphans and widows in 1:27, condemns privileged treatment of the wealthy in 2:1–7, condemns the rich oppressors themselves in 5:1–6, and commends praying for the sick in 5:13–18. In these ways, the writer draws a stark contrast between the true wisdom of God, which summons us to care for all neighbors in distress, and the “earthly, unspiritual, devilish” (3:15) wisdom of the world, which cares only for its own wealth and privilege. Though this contrast is clear, commentators have responded to it in various ways. Elsa Tamez points out that in the global north, “many of the commentaries on James dedicate long pages to the rich, thus consciously or unconsciously attempting to relativize this contrasting picture that James paints.” By contrast, a Latin American reading of this letter “fixes its gaze on the oppressed and dedicates long pages to them, their sufferings, complaints, oppression, hope, and praxis.”<sup>28</sup> In these days of growing economic disparity, James offers a necessary critique of those in positions of power, and necessary hope for those who are oppressed.

Finally, in a time of anxiety and change, James emphasizes the ***enduring word of God and our corresponding call to endurance***. Unlike the wisdom of the world, which is fleeting and unreliable, with God “there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17). God is consistent, and consistently generous and just. Since the word of this God has been implanted in us (1:21), we should bear fruit consistent with the seed. Persevere. Endure. “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (1:19). Be “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield” (3:17). “The testing of your faith produces endurance,” he says, calling the readers to “let endurance have its full effect” (1:3–4). Again, in the last chapter, he counsels, “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord,” for “we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job . . .” (5:7, 11). These words were addressed to a community under pressure, witnessing social changes all around them, perhaps wondering where God was amid it all. The social changes and pressures today are different, but the anxiety is recognizable: Where is God in the

28. Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, 21.

chaos? Is God reliable? How should we live when things around us are changing so quickly?

And James says: wait for the Lord. Be patient. Endure. “For your anger does not produce God’s righteousness” (1:20). For all who are tempted to anxiety in the face of the rapid rate of change in our world, James reminds us to take the long view. Keep “doing the word,” walking in the ways of justice and righteousness, and don’t grow weary. Like the farmer who plants the crops and waits for the rains, “you also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near” (5:8).

1:1–15

*Greetings to a Community  
Being Tested*

1:1

*“James” Greets the “Twelve Tribes”*

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.”

This single opening verse both reveals and conceals, offers hints and at the same time refuses to answer some of the questions that the contemporary reader is most curious to learn: Who is this “James”? To whom is he writing? What is the relationship between the author and the original recipients of this . . . letter? (Is it even a letter?) What is the reason for the writing? And where do we, the contemporary readers, fit in?

To puzzle over these questions is to reveal our own peculiarly modern preoccupations with historical context and original authorial intent in Scripture. It is a good and worthy thing to ask such questions, to recognize the historical distance between ourselves and the original audience, to try and ferret out the assumptions of those hearers that might not be our own, and thereby to challenge our own interpretive authority. James, however, is not particularly interested in these questions. At least not directly. Instead, the author of the book of James is eager to deflect attention from himself in order to teach, challenge, and counsel those who will listen—whether in the first or the twenty-first century.

The opening verse does not tell us much, but it does reveal a few things worth noting. First, the author identifies himself simply as “James.” As discussed in the introduction, biblical scholars disagree

about the identity of this James: Was the book written by James the brother of Jesus or some other James? Was it a pseudonymous work from a later period, attributed to the early leader of the church in Jerusalem? The very fact that there is no further explanation of identity but simply the bare moniker “James” is suggestive in two ways. First, the identity and authority of the author are simply assumed. The writer does not spend time introducing himself or justifying his right to speak. He and his authority are simply known and do not need further attention. Second, the name “James” itself bears historical significance beyond the immediate author. In Greek, the name is *Jakōbos*: Jacob, the father of the original twelve tribes of Israel. The author does not develop this connection explicitly, but when we recognize the name, we cannot miss the web of associations that this would have carried for those who heard it in the first century.

Jacob, servant of God, addressing the twelve tribes. This opening image might have taken the original hearers all the way back to the patriarch Jacob’s last words to his twelve sons in Genesis 49. But even more, in addressing the twelve tribes “in the Dispersion,” this verse echoes Isaiah 49:1–6, a passage that also presents Jacob/Israel as the servant of the Lord, appointed to speak and to gather the scattered tribes—as well as proclaiming salvation “to the end of the earth.”<sup>1</sup> In any case, this verse signals to us that the author is speaking in a distinctively Jewish context, to an audience for whom such scriptural allusions would have been woven into their worldview, subtly framing this particular address.

Though the biblical resonance of the name itself is profound, the only explicit self-identification that “James” provides in the entire book is here in the first verse: he is “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” That is apparently all we need to know about the one who is addressing us. No fancy title, no lineage by blood or teaching. Just “servant”—or “slave.” The word *doulos* can be translated either way in English.

Such terminology is complicated. On the one hand, a servant, or slave, is clearly in a submissive position in relation to the one called “Lord.” Especially in the United States, it is impossible to hear the

1. See John P. Keenan, *The Wisdom of James: Parallels with Mahayana Buddhism* (New York: The Newman Press, 2005), 31–32.

term "slave" without recalling the history of chattel slavery—the horrors of the Middle Passage, the plantation system that thrived in the nineteenth century American South because of the traffic in black bodies, and the lasting political, social, and economic damage that this history has caused for African American communities until today. And other forms of slavery continue to infest our world. In the sex trade, in factories, in mines, on farms, millions of people are forced to work without pay under threat of violence. Contemporary readers should pause at this language of servant/slave and ask whether such a metaphor of slaveholding and bondage is necessary to our understanding of God today.

At the same time, "servant of God" was a common title in the Old Testament for those in special (though certainly subordinate) relationship with God. Jacob/Israel, Moses, David, and Daniel, among others, were all called "servant of the Lord." To be a servant/slave of God was to be an instrument, a mouthpiece, a trusted helper, a worshiper devoted only to the Most High. To serve the Lord was to recognize all other powers as relative and passing. Thus, though "slave" suggests oppression, the phrase "slave of the Lord/God" raised the status of the speaker in paradoxical ways.<sup>2</sup>

Conjunctions do not usually merit great attention in biblical texts, but this verse contains a conjunction that is tantalizing in its ambiguity. James calls himself "a servant of God *and* of the Lord Jesus Christ." It is striking, first, for a letter that purports to be written by the brother of Jesus that the author never calls himself "brother" but "servant" of Jesus. He does not presume on any family relationship for his authority but places himself in a subordinate position.

Beyond that observation, this little word "and" raises a question about the relationship between the two terms "God" and "Lord Jesus Christ." Is this a relationship of loose connection or close identification? James does not elaborate on how we are to understand the relation between the two (indeed, he says little about Jesus explicitly at all, only mentioning him by name in 1:1 and 2:1). Not

2. Margaret Aymer, *James: Diaspora Rhetoric of a Friend of God*, Phoenix Guides to the New Testament (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 20; cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 167.

for several centuries do church leaders find it necessary to clearly specify the implications of this “and,” at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Clearly, however, the “and” signals that there is agreement, not tension, between the two terms. All we need to know, for now, is that there is continuity between serving God and serving Jesus. The way of God and the way of Jesus are one and the same. Such simple and undefined Christology might offer us a gift today, inviting us to suspend any attachment or allergy to the theologically freighted term “one substance.” Instead, consider the wisdom of James, for whom the point is not whether Jesus is of the same ontological “substance” as God but that his way of life aligns with the wise and merciful way of God.

So far, we have reflected on this “James” and his relationship as servant of God and of Jesus. But to whom is he writing, and why? The opening verse offers a clue, addressing “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” Only James 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1 in the New Testament use this term “Dispersion” to refer to Christians.<sup>3</sup> Such an unusual designation invites us to look both back and forward: to the scattered peoples of Israel whom Jesus came to restore, to the scattered Christian communities of the first century who quickly spread across the Mediterranean basin, and to all those today who live in exile from their original homeland. Into all of these situations of displacement, James speaks a word of hope.

The reference to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (or Diaspora) first of all refers to the Jewish communities that had been scattered from the land of Israel because of conquest by foreign powers. “From 323 to 63 BCE—that is, from the conquest of the land by Alexander the Great to that of Pompey—fully two hundred military campaigns are fought on the territory once ruled by King David. Great numbers of people emigrate or are carried away into slavery.”<sup>4</sup> Because of this scattering, Jewish communities by the time of Jesus had already flourished around the Mediterranean for centuries, at some distance from the center in Jerusalem. Indeed, by

3. See also occurrence of this term in John 7:35 to ask if Jesus is going to “the diaspora among the Greeks.”

4. E. Elizabeth Johnson, “The Church as Israel” in *Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, Core Biblical Studies (Nashville: Abingdon, forthcoming).

the first century CE, there are more Jews living outside Palestine than living inside it. Perhaps James was addressing the Christ followers in these previously dispersed Jewish communities. Or perhaps he was speaking primarily to the (also Jewish) Christ followers who scattered from Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen.<sup>5</sup> There was a new wave of migration of early Christians who fled after the martyrdom of this leader, as described in Acts 6–7. Whether James was targeting one or both of these scattered peoples, he identifies his audience as displaced, not at home. They are in exile in another empire.<sup>6</sup>

In speaking to “the twelve tribes” without further specification, James also signals that he is writing at a time when the borders between “Christian” and “Jewish” communities had not yet become fixed. The establishment of the twelve tribes of Israel constituted the beginning of Israel’s history as a nation, and in the first century CE, expectation of the restoration of the twelve tribes permeated Jewish as well as emerging Christian hopes for redemption. Jesus’ calling of twelve disciples clearly signaled this hope for the restoration of the tribes as a part of the messianic age (as we see, for instance, in Matt. 10). To what extent does James bear hope for the restoration of the twelve tribes as a sign of redemption? We cannot tell, but this allusion in the opening verse does tell us that he does not feel the need to distinguish between Jewish and Christian self-understanding.

How might such an address to people in diaspora speak today, in an age of unprecedented migrations of people across borders because of war or economic hardship? There are 65.6 million people in the world today who have been forcibly displaced from their homes, of whom 22.5 million are classified as refugees.<sup>7</sup> In our contemporary context, most of those displaced persons are from Afghanistan, Syria, and South Sudan. In addition to this recent and unprecedented escalation in forcible migrations, we must also acknowledge the millions of descendants of the transatlantic slave trade.

5. Aymer, *James: Diaspora Rhetoric of a Friend of God*, 20.

6. Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead*, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 18.

7. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

The word “diaspora” is also used to describe the millions of Africans who are scattered and dispersed throughout various parts of North and South America, the Caribbean, and other areas of the world as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. This dispersion brought with it a number of problems and hardships for those in the African diaspora, especially among African Americans, the effects of which are still being felt today. But many are now beginning to understand that those in the diaspora need not focus only on pain, hardship, and despair. The African diaspora is a rich collection of many persons who are an integral part of this rapidly changing world. As Psalm 147 indicates, those in the diaspora are sometimes best positioned to experience the mercy and power of God.

Gay Byron, *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 463.

James uniquely in the New Testament speaks to those in dispersion without specifying which communities he is addressing. For this reason, James might speak in a particularly compelling way to all those today who find themselves exiled from their homeland, in situations of suffering caused by displacement. Margaret Aymer reads James from this diaspora perspective, discerning in this book a particular strategy for negotiating the relationship of a “home culture” (in this case, Jewish identity) to “host culture” (wherever James’ audience may be scattered in the Greek-speaking Roman Empire). As she says, the book of James “proposes to its audience a subject positionality of withdrawal from the ‘world.’ It melds tradition and host culture in a kind of syncretism, and then claims that its particular blend of culture marks it as ‘unstained by the world’ (1.27).”<sup>8</sup> We will see this strategy unfold in the chapters to come. For now, it is enough to hear James’s address to those “in diaspora” as an invitation to all diasporic peoples today to listen for the word from this servant of God.

And what is the first word he offers to the scattered people? “Greetings!” or literally, “may joy be with you.” It is another uncommon phrase in the New Testament, used among Greeks rather than the common Jewish greeting *shalom*. Luke also uses this conventional Greek greeting in Acts 15:23, at the beginning of the

8. Aymer, *James: Diaspora Rhetoric of a Friend of God*, 79.

letter from the council of Jerusalem to Paul and Barnabas. The term signals James's mastery of Greek (the word also connects with "joy", in the following verse) but also underscores the theme of joy and hope that James offers to those in oppression.<sup>9</sup>

9. Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, 29.