

Joel B. Green

James

A Commentary

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# ABBREVIATIONS

## General

&	and
/	or
§(§)	paragraph(s) or section(s)
×	times
AT	author's translation
BCE	before the Common Era
ca.	circa
CE	Common Era
cf.	<i>confer</i> , confer, compare
ch(s).	chapter(s)
ed(s).	edition, editor(s), edited by
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
esp.	especially
ET	English Translation
et al.	<i>et alia</i> , and others
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and so forth, and the rest
Gk.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
καὶ τὰ λοιπά	(= and the rest; etc.)
Lat.	Latin
LXX	Septuagint
ms(s).	manuscript(s)
n(n).	note(s)
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
p(p).	page(s)
pl.	plural
rev.	revised
sg.	singular

trans.	translated by
US\$	U.S. dollar(s)
v(v).	verse(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)

## Biblical and Other Ancient Texts

### *Old Testament*

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
1 Sam	1 Samuel
2 Sam	2 Samuel
1 Kgs	1 Kings
2 Kgs	2 Kings
1 Chr	1 Chronicles
2 Chr	2 Chronicles
Neh	Nehemiah
Ps(s)	Psalms(s)
Prov	Proverbs
Eccl	Ecclesiastes
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Ezek	Ezekiel
Hos	Hosea
Hab	Habakkuk
Zech	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi

### *New Testament*

Matt	Matthew
Rom	Romans
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
2 Cor	2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians

Eph	Ephesians
Phil	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians
1 Tim	1 Timothy
2 Tim	2 Timothy
Phlm	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
1 Pet	1 Peter
2 Pet	2 Peter
Rev	Revelation

***Apocrypha/Deuterocanonicals***

2 Esd	2 Esdras
4 Macc	4 Maccabees
Sir	Sirach, Wisdom of
Tob	Tobit
Wis	Wisdom

***Pseudepigrapha***

Apoc. Ab.	Apocalypse of Abraham
2 Bar.	2 Baruch (Syriac Apocalypse)
1 En.	1 Enoch
3 En.	3 Enoch
Jub.	Jubilees
Let. Aris.	Letter of Aristeas
Pss. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon
T. Ab.	Testament of Abraham
T. Iss.	Testament of Issachar
T. Jac.	Testament of Jacob
T. Job	Testament of Job
T. Sim.	Testament of Simeon

***Dead Sea Scrolls***

CD	Cairo Genizah copy of the Damascus Document
1QS	Rule of the Community

***Apostolic Fathers***

Barn.	Barnabas (Epistle of)
1 Clem.	1 Clement
2 Clem.	2 Clement
Did.	Didache

***Other Ancient Writings***

Cicero	<i>Amic.</i>	<i>De amicitia</i>
Josephus	<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>
Origen	<i>Hom. Luc.</i>	<i>Homiliae in Lucam</i>
Philo	<i>Abraham</i>	<i>On the Life of Abraham</i>
	<i>Sobriety</i>	<i>On Sobriety</i>
	<i>Spec. Laws</i>	<i>On the Special Laws</i>
Seneca	<i>Ira</i>	<i>De ira</i>

**Modern Literature**

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . 6 vols. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
ASV	American Standard Version
AV	Authorized (King James) Version
BDAG	Bauer, Walter, et al. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Revised and edited by Frederick William Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BDF	Blass, F., and A. Debrunner. <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . Revised and edited by Robert W. Funk. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BHGNT	Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament
<i>BibAnn</i>	<i>The Biblical Annals</i>

BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
CEB	Common English Bible
CGL	<i>The Cambridge Greek Lexicon</i> . Edited by J. Diggle, B. L. Fraser, P. James, O. B. Simkin, A. A. Thompson, and S. J. Westripp. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
CSS	Cistercian Studies Series
DPL <sup>2</sup>	<i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i> . 2nd ed. Edited by Scot McKnight. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023.
DSE	<i>Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics</i> . Edited by Joel B. Green. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–1993.
ESEC	Emory Studies in Early Christianity
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
FC	Fathers of the Church
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HvTSt	<i>Hervormde teologiese studies</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Int	<i>Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology</i>
Int	Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
L&N	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains</i> . 2 vols. Edited by Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida. New York: United Bible Societies, 1988.
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LENT	Linguistic Exegesis of the New Testament
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LSJ	Liddel, H. G., R. Scott, and H. S. Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. With revised supplement. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.



MGS	Montanari, Franco. <i>The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek</i> . Edited by Madeleine Goh and Chad Schroeder. Leiden: Brill, 2015.
MNTS	McMaster New Testament Studies
<i>ModT</i>	<i>Modern Theology</i>
NA <sup>28</sup>	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , Nestle-Aland, 28th ed.
NETS	New English Translation of the Septuagint
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
<i>NIDB</i>	<i>New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–2009.
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version (2011)
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testament
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTOA	Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus
NTR	New Testament Readings
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
<i>OCD</i> <sup>3</sup>	<i>Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> . Edited by Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
<i>OTP</i>	James H. Charlesworth, ed. <i>The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . 2 vols. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–1985.
PBTM	Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs
PiNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>RBL</i>	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and Its World
STT	Studia Traditionis Theologiae: Explorations in Early and Medieval Theology
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
SymS	Symposium Series
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76.

<i>TLNT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the New Testament</i> . Ceslas Spicq. Translated and edited by James D. Ernest. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
<i>TLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
VCSup	Supplements to <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZSNT	Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament

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# INTRODUCTION

## Reading and Hearing the Letter of James

The prospect of commenting on the Letter of James ought to raise a collective eyebrow. After all, doing so is not without its existential challenges. On the one hand, James himself warns that “teachers will be judged more stringently” (3:1)—and what are commentators if not women and men engaged at some level in the craft of teaching? Happily, those cautionary words of James focus on the fiery, venomous tongue rather than on getting the letter’s message right at every turn. Even so, the concern James documents, not only in Jas 3 but also throughout the letter, for nurturing the faithful life of those people and communities who hear and read his words is enough to give one pause.

On the other hand, those of us who consider James as the church’s Scripture can hardly entertain his message about listening to the word versus doing it without recognizing the need for some reflection and introspection with regard to both ourselves and our churches. “You must be doers of the word and not only listeners who mislead themselves. This is because those who listen to the word and are not doers—they are like those who look closely at their natural selves in a mirror, for they look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like” (1:22–24). A more penetrating call to shift our focus from reading a text like James’s letter for *information* to reading it for *reformation* or *transformation* is difficult to imagine.

The fantasy novelist Ursula Le Guin wrote, “*To learn a belief without belief is to sing a song without the tune.*” She goes on: “A yielding, an obedience, a willingness to accept these notes as the right notes, this pattern as the true pattern, is the essential gesture of performance, translation, and understanding.”<sup>1</sup> Learning from James requires such gestures and postures as this, and more. Simply put, it is not enough to get James’s message right if all that is meant by the exercise is concluding that we have drawn some conclusions about what he has to say. For James, hearing well goes much deeper. His practical wisdom is aimed at fashioning faithful life patterns by which to conceptualize, experience,

1. Le Guin 2000, 97–98 (emphasis original). See further, Green 2007, 1–23.



and respond to a world that is not so friendly to those who have declared and seek to live out their allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly, if one wanted to expound on the importance of readerly virtue in interpretation of Scripture, the Letter of James would have a major role to play.<sup>2</sup>

We need more James, we who live in the first half of the twenty-first century. His letter speaks prophetically and pastorally about a range of issues that plague us. Two jump off the page, requiring not so much that we recognize them but that we recognize their address to us. The first comprises a host of issues related to wealth and poverty, and the second is our apparent incapacity to control our tongues. The contemporary evidence for both is clear enough, whether we are talking about life locally or globally. For the first, we need only consider the seemingly ever-growing distance between the annual salary of almost any celebrated chief executive officer and the yearly sum of wages for those in the same company but on the lower end of the pay scale; or the global rise in the number of billionaires versus the billions of people who live at or below the poverty line set by the World Bank or the World Health Organization; or the surprising, perplexing existence of people with at least one full-time job who, despite their working full-time, cannot afford any place to lay their heads at night other than their own cars. For the second, one need only review how people speak to each other on social media or in the “comments” section of articles posted in traditional media, or point to the general loss of restraint in the public square or within our households. Unfortunately, vexing speech habits characterize those who claim to be Christ-followers, too, and not only so-called secular folk. We sometimes act as though our words are powerless, allowing us to use them in dismissive, slanderous, ostracizing ways. Too many of us have turned a deaf ear or blind eye to the personal and relational work that words actually perform, whether constructive or deconstructive.

Less obvious points of contact with James’s letter proliferate. It is one thing to recognize the disparity between rich and poor, for example, but quite another to recognize, say, the effects of that disparity on health care or average lifespan—both of which concern James, too.<sup>3</sup> And what about the world system against which James’s letter sets itself, a system too easily embraced by both the powerful and the weak, both the wealthy and the needy, that unselfconsciously accords privilege to those with wealth and power? Is this not the very favoritism—in the courtroom, for example, or in the assembly of Christ-followers—against which James rails?<sup>4</sup> What of the “masters of the universe,” wizards of times and seasons and commerce whose arrogance leads them to plan and

2. Indeed, someone ought to take up the concern with NT texts that Briggs brought to OT narrative (2010).

3. See below, on Jas 1 and 4.

4. See below, on Jas 2.

live as they please, quite apart from any consideration of what God is up to in the world?<sup>5</sup> Consider well, too, the baseline vocation that James everywhere promotes among his readers and hearers: consistency and integrity of heart and life in devotion to God (in opposition to double-mindedness or practices that can only be described as double-faced and double-tongued).

No one would accuse James of being “the church’s first great theologian.” This popular way of describing Paul would not make much sense of James and his contribution. Clearly, though, James is an exemplary theologian of the Jesus movement, a practical theologian, we might say, who has devoured Jesus’s message and ruminated on it in relation to Israel’s Scriptures. He articulates for his audience practical wisdom, wise habits of perception and practice.

Of course, knowing James’s letter includes coming to terms with its “stuff,” its arguments, its appeals, its perspectives, its interpretation of Jesus’s message, its engagement with Israel’s Scriptures, its grasp of contemporary Jewish and Greco-Roman thought, and so on. But James cultivates the kind of *knowing* that calls for his readers and hearers to envisage the world as God does and act accordingly, personally and communally. How might twenty-first-century audiences thus receive his words? Let me recommend three paths, none of which excludes the others and, indeed, each of which crisscrosses the others.

First, read and interact with James for no good reason. By this I mean to urge that we do not come to James in order to mine wise nuggets of wisdom or to formulate ideas for modern-day application. We can trace a sharp line between utilitarian approaches that treat scriptural texts like James as a how-to manual or a database for addressing our questions, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the formation of James-patterned minds that stand ready to receive the Lord’s wisdom. The latter requires patient, deliberate reading (and rereading)—reading, as it were, for no good reason but for the sake of having our dispositions and reflexes shaped by James-as-Scripture.

Second, enter as fully into James’s world as humanly possible, recognizing that the primary challenge we face is not that we transform James’s message into a relevant word for today but that we are transformed by James’s message to have renewed minds and hearts and ever-renewing lives in our contexts. This is really a corollary of the first recommendation, since research has demonstrated how significantly reading influences readers. For example, empirical studies have shown that those who read Harry Potter books generate increased empathy. Textually, this is associated with the company Harry Potter keeps with stigmatized out-groups. Functional neuroimaging (fMRI) of fans of *Game of Thrones* has demonstrated that identifying with this or that character transforms one’s sensibilities so that fans become more similar to the character with whom they identify. And, strange as it may seem, reading vampire novels stimulates

5. On “masters of the universe,” see below, on 4:13–16.

readers' psychological transformation into vampires.<sup>6</sup> What might James's readers and hearers become if they (or we) were to find their (our) homes in this letter? How would they (we) come to hear and internalize his words about perfection, moral purity, humans made in God's likeness, and prayer for the sick and disabled? How might their (our) lives be shaped by James's central concern with double love: love for God and love for neighbor?

Third, if we think of James's letter as a script or a score, we can also reflect on how we "perform" James in our own contexts. Performance is not play-acting. Rather, it assumes the gravity of embodying and giving expression to James's letter. Whether one is thinking of an analogy with a musical or a theatric performance, a script or score stands complete on its own, but it also invites greater fulfillment, or activation, in the event of performance. In this respect, performance speaks to creative fidelity: *fidelity* in the sense that the notes on the score or words in the playscript set the contours of performance, *creative* in the sense that our differing contexts invite and call for different expressions of the same score or script. Combating favoritism in our lives and gatherings as God's people may look different in West Texas versus in West Africa, yet we can agree that favoritism (showing special favor) has no place among our personal and communal dispositions. Practices of humility may take different forms in Albany, New York, versus in Albany, New Zealand, but we can still receive James's instruction: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (4:10). (Some therefore prefer the metaphor of *improvisation* over *performance*.)<sup>7</sup> In some or perhaps many instances, we will discern that our contemporary situation is much like the situation James envisions in his time. Other parts of the letter will require more by way of reflection and imagination. Either way, the challenge is to learn from James both how he has drawn on his theological sources and norms, Jesus's message and Israel's Scriptures chief among them, and the contours of the script or score he has crafted, as he challenges and encourages those who read and hear his letter.

### Matters of Introduction

When we first pick up a book, we predictably ask—or perhaps we assume some answers to—a few basic questions that prepare us for what we are about to read: Who wrote it? When was it written? What kind of book is it? And so on. In biblical studies, we group such questions under the heading of "introduction."

Despite three hundred years of scholarly inquiry into such matters of introduction, these preliminary questions sometimes continue to perplex readers of biblical texts. Many of us have come to imagine that tying down reliable

6. See Stetka 2014; Gabriel and Young 2011; Broom, Chavez, and Wagner 2021.

7. See Barton 1999; Craigo-Snell 2000.

### James and the Jesus Tradition

Although the Letter of James never quotes the words of Jesus, or claims to be drawing on them, we find numerous instances of James's creative appropriation of Jesus's teaching. These encourage the view that the letter's author was more than familiar with Jesus's sayings, that he was deeply influenced by them in the formulation of the letter's practical wisdom. The following verses represent only a small sampling of the parallels.

James*	Jesus's Teaching
"Anyone among you who lacks wisdom should ask God, who gives to everyone without a second thought, without reservation, and it will be given to you." (1:5)	"Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives." (Matt 7:7–8 CEB)
"Whoever asks should ask in faith, without doubting." (1:6)	"If you have faith, you will receive whatever you pray for." (Matt 21:22 CEB)
"Truly happy are those who endure testing for, having proven themselves, they will receive the garland of life God has promised to those who love him." (1:12)	"But whoever stands firm until the end will be saved." (Matt 10:22 CEB)
"You must be doers of the word and not only listeners who mislead themselves." (1:22)	"But those who don't put into practice what they hear are like a person who built a house without a foundation." (Luke 6:49 CEB; cf. 8:15; 11:28)
"Has God not chosen the poor according to worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith, and to be heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him?" (2:5)	"Happy are you who are poor, because God's kingdom is yours." (Luke 6:20 CEB)
"After all, judgment will be merciless for anyone who has not shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment." (2:13)	"Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy." (Matt 5:7 CEB)
"Your wealth has rotted. Moths have ruined your clothes. Your gold and silver have become corroded. Their corrosion will be evidence against you. It will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days." (5:2–3)	"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt 6:19–21 NRSV)

<p>“Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not utter an oath—neither by heaven nor by earth, nor by anything else. But let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no, so that you may not fall under judgment.” (5:12)</p>	<p>“But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.” (Matt 5:34–37 NRSV)</p>
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\* Translations of James are my own (AT).

answers to these questions is necessary before we can make sense of the book. As it turns out, though, our interests are not always aligned well with the interests of the ancients: thus we find that the evidence before us does not always allow for the certainty we seek. In the mid-twentieth century, scholars often gave us their “assured results” on such matters, but subsequent study has recognized how tenuous those results often were, built as they were on the shifting sands of unconfirmed assumptions and problematic models of apostolic and postapostolic developments. In many cases, comments on introductory matters now come (or ought to come) with a healthy dose of humility regarding what we actually know.

In most but not all respects, our approach to introductory questions begins with the same options formulated fifty years ago, among an earlier generation of students of James’s letter.<sup>8</sup> If the shape of those arguments has largely remained static, though, the general direction of scholarly opinion on some of them has shifted. My purpose here is to locate on the map my working assumptions and, briefly, to comment on why I have reached my conclusions. Our entry point is Jas 1:1:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are in the diaspora, greetings.

As we will see, what might seem like a straightforward orientation to questions of introduction has served more to focus the terms of the debate than to resolve it.

8. Fifty years ago, the standard, critical introduction to the NT was by Kümmel (German in 1973, English in 1975). With respect to James, he lays out the issues well, though the intervening years have witnessed some different conclusions.

### Who Is James?

Who is this James whom the letter identifies as its author? Although many first-century Christ-followers might have carried the name *James* (Gk: *Iakōbos*), the NT refers to only five:

1. James, brother of John and son of Zebedee, a Galilean fisherman, one of the Twelve;<sup>9</sup>
2. James, brother of Jesus, leader of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem;<sup>10</sup>
3. James, son of Alphaeus, one of the Twelve;<sup>11</sup>
4. James (or James the younger), brother of Joseph and son of (a) Mary;<sup>12</sup> and
5. James, father of one of the Twelve: Judas (not Iscariot).<sup>13</sup>

Given his status among the Twelve, James (1 above) might have been a candidate, but he was beheaded under King Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1–2), thus before Agrippa's death in 44 CE. We know next to nothing about three of these Jameses (3, 4, and 5), so it is highly unlikely that one of them could refer to himself simply as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” without further markers of identification. Accordingly, that Jas 1:1 refers to James (2), Jesus's brother, is universally acknowledged.

What is not universally recognized, though, is that James, Jesus's brother, actually wrote the letter that bears his name. Before taking up this question, we should recognize that identifying the actual author of James's letter as we turn to study it may carry only secondary importance. This is because, irrespective of our decisions concerning its actual authorship, we ought to recognize that those early Christ-followers who heard or read this letter would have believed that they were actually hearing the voice of James, the Lord's brother. At the very least, this James is the letter's implied author, and they would have had no reason to imagine they were receiving a communicate written by someone else in James's name.<sup>14</sup>

9. Matt 4:21; 10:2; 17:1; Mark 1:19, 29; 3:17; 5:37; 9:2; 10:35, 41; 13:3; 14:33; Luke 5:10; 6:14; 8:51; 9:28, 54; Acts 1:13; 12:2.

10. Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12; Jude 1; cf. Acts 1:14.

11. Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13.

12. Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40; 16:1; Luke 24:10.

13. Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13.

14. This point is articulated well by K.-W. Niebuhr: “In the light of the knowledge we have of the reception milieu of early Christianity, it seems inconceivable to me that the receivers of the letter could assume someone other than the Lord's brother James to be the sender” (2013, 226; cf. K.-W. Niebuhr 2004).

### Did James, Jesus's Brother, Author the Letter of James?

Can we take the self-attribution of James as the letter's author at face value? This question has two parts. First, what does it mean in antiquity *to author* a letter? This query turns on the ease with which we read modern, Western sensibilities back into the world of the ancient Mediterranean. Our concerns with individualism and originality, and thus with ownership of intellectual property and plagiarism, typically lead us to imagine first-century authors retreating alone to their desks, taking writing instruments in hand, and committing their thoughts to "paper" (that is, to a papyrus roll). However, ancient practices differed from our own in rather marked ways. Professional scribes (whom we may call "secretaries" or "amanuenses") often wrote on behalf of others, with the nature of their contributions appearing along a continuum. For example, they might serve as recorders, composers, editors, or even in a role like today's ghost writers. Their contributions might go named or unnamed. "Authors" of letters, then, might *authorize* documents that carry their names even when they did not dictate or write them from start to finish. Simply put, individual originality was not valued or mandated among the ancients in the way it is today. If James used an amanuensis, therefore, this would not detract from his authorial status.<sup>15</sup>

Second, can we credit James, Jesus's brother, with writing this letter, even after considering this somewhat less restrictive notion of "writing" or "authoring"? Primary among the objections raised is whether the son of a Galilean craftsman would be capable of writing with competence in the Greek language and with the literary flair sometimes demonstrated in this letter. Three considerations mitigate this now-outdated objection. First, as is now well-known, the use of the Greek language was far more pervasive in the region we call Palestine than scholars once assumed.<sup>16</sup> Second, also well-known, this was especially the case in Jerusalem, where James would have spent the twenty-plus years of his life after Jesus's death and resurrection and before writing his letter.<sup>17</sup> Given James's emerging significance and leadership role in the Jerusalem church, we can only assume his heightened ability to traffic in Greek. This

15. For an example of an uncritical adherence to contemporary, Western assumptions about authorship, we need look no further than Kümmel 1975, 412–13. First, he notes that we have no evidence to support James's dependence on a secretary. Although true, this is unremarkable, given widespread practice. Second, he observes that James's use of a secretary would leave unanswered the question of "which part of the whole comes from the real author and which part comes from the 'secretary.'" Cf. Richards 1991.

16. This was demonstrated in Sevenster 1968.

17. The cultural intermixing following the Gk. conquest of Palestine in the late 4th century BCE eventuated in its hellenization, including facility in the Gk. language generally and, in a city like Jerusalem, significant facility. See Hengel 1974 (his basic argument continues to hold, with later nuance); Hengel with Markshies 1989.

includes his ability to blend Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions.<sup>18</sup> Third, as I have already hinted, there is no reason to doubt that James, like authors more generally, drew on the professional expertise of a scribe in the preparation of this letter. None of this proves that James, Jesus's brother, was the author of the letter that bears his name. However, these considerations rule out of court any claim that the letter's Greek is cause for rejecting James's authorship.<sup>19</sup>

Other standard objections are less compelling, too. For example, one might wonder whether a conservative on issues of Torah like James could be responsible for the approach to Torah taken in the letter. In this scenario, James's attitude toward Torah is evaluated on the basis of Luke's presentation of James in the Acts of the Apostles, particularly in those instances where James addresses Jew-gentile relations (cf. Gal 2:12). These present no real parallel with this letter, however, since issues specific to the status of gentiles among Jewish messianists are never mentioned in the letter. Instead, James presses forward his argument with the Shema and love command (love of God, love of neighbor) (1) in continuity with Israel's Scriptures and scriptural traditions, (2) having been schooled by Jesus's instruction regarding love of God and love of neighbor (e.g., Matt 22:35–39; Mark 12:28–31; cf. Luke 10:25–27), so as (3) to address directly those concerns he has discerned among the Jewish messianists he addresses.<sup>20</sup>

Alternatively, questions might be raised about the range of matters James addresses, and particularly whether those issues belong to the early Jesus movement (i.e., before James's death in 62 CE) or later. This approach is problematic in two respects. First, the older, evolutionary models that posited a stage-one church followed by stage two, and so on, have been rejected as having no purchase in the evidence. Accordingly, the presumption that some topics were alive early on but others much later no longer convinces readers. Second, this letter reveals that the author reflects and instructs on an array of concerns at home already in the Jesus tradition (i.e., in the early decades of the Jesus movement): wealth and poverty, for example, or arrogance, purity, neighbor love, speech habits, confession, prayer, and so on. In the commentary itself, we will see how, on point after point, James's message is both deeply embedded in the Jesus tradition and aware of corresponding concerns in earlier Second Temple Jewish literature.

The primary question regarding the authorship of this letter, then, is why we would not take its self-attribution at face value. This would recommend

18. See Watson 2021. Note Watson's (2021, 432) assessment that James, Jesus's brother, wrote the letter in the 50s CE, "trying to give voice to the gospel with lots of tools at hand, but no conventional blueprint as to how to proceed."

19. Cf. Penner 1996, 35–47.

20. By *Jewish Messianists*, I refer to Torah-observant Jews whose allegiance is to God and the Lord Jesus Christ. See below: "What Has James Written? To Whom Is It Addressed?"



a date of composition in the 50s CE.<sup>21</sup> Although we cannot prove that James, Jesus's brother, authored the letter, we have no grounds for rejecting this working assumption.

### What Has James Written? To Whom Is It Addressed?

These two questions—genre and authorial audience—are intertwined. This is because most regard the Letter of James as, indeed, a letter, though lacking some of the trappings of a letter. (For example, it has no initial word of greeting nor an epistolary closing.) Given that genre forms allow for significant plasticity, this is not altogether surprising, and surely 1:1 establishes audience expectations that they are about to hear or read a letter addressed to them from James, Jesus's brother and leader of the church in Jerusalem. More to the point, most regard this document as an encyclical letter providing moral instruction (or concerned with moral formation) from James in Jerusalem to the diaspora.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the Letter of James compares favorably with similar early Jewish diaspora letters in terms of its aim, composition, and major motifs—for example, the Epistle of Jeremiah (Jer 29; 36 LXX), two letters reproduced (and a third referenced) at the beginning of 2 Maccabees (1:1–9; 1:10–2:18; cf. 1:7–8), an epistle that concludes 2 Baruch (chs. 78–86), and a letter from Baruch reproduced in 4 Baruch (6.19–25).<sup>23</sup>

If we find a broad consensus on genre, the contested question concerns the audience to whom James's letter is addressed: "the twelve tribes who are in the diaspora." Three options have their champions, though one of them, the third, garners by far the most support in scholarship today.

1. James writes to all Christ-followers, both Jewish and gentile, as the new Israel.<sup>24</sup> Although there is no reason to think the communities that would have received James's letter were entirely devoid of gentiles, this option falters on the complete absence in James's letter of instruction relative to the moral vices typical of gentiles (cf. 1 Pet 4:1–6) and the letter's thoroughgoing assumption that its audience is Torah-observant.

21. An earlier date would be difficult to square with the time required for James to achieve his status as central leader of the Jerusalem church. A slightly later date is possible, but only slightly, given James's death in 62 CE. The letter itself provides nothing on which to hang a chronological reference that might satisfy further curiosity about the letter's date. Attempts to pin down a date based on the relationship of James and Paul, on James's knowledge of Paul's letters, or on how best to square James's and Paul's instruction on faith and deeds—such efforts can do no more than construct hypotheses on top of theories. See the excursus "James and Paul."

22. See Bauckham 1999, 11–28.

23. See K.-W. Niebuhr 2021.

24. See, e.g., Kümmel 1975, 407–8; Marcus 2014.

2. James writes to Jews, including those who follow Jesus and those who do not. According to this viewpoint, apart from 1:1, the Letter of James is entirely explicable without reference to the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup> On the one hand, it is true that the Letter of James does little to distinguish itself as “Christian.” This is not surprising, though, given that this historical moment knew no distinct religion called Christianity. Instead, Christ-followers comprised a renewal movement within Israel. On the other hand, just beneath the surface of the entire letter flows the strong currents of the Jesus tradition. James never quotes Jesus, but the parallels with material in the Synoptic Gospels are inescapable (as the commentary will show). James’s instruction flows from Israel’s scriptural traditions through the Jesus tradition. The result is a collection of theological and ethical ruminations aimed at the ongoing formation of Christ-followers. Additionally, James refers to “the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (2:1). Also, he uses the term *Lord* (*kyrios*) of both God and Jesus (sometimes in ambiguous ways that could refer to either), and includes references to the *Lord* that almost certainly refer to Jesus (5:7–8, 14–15).
3. James writes to Jewish Christ-followers, or Jewish messianists, outside the borders of Israel’s historic land. Taken on its own, “the twelve tribes” could refer metaphorically to Israel, though here it more likely signifies “restored Israel.” That is, James’s reference to Jesus as Lord and Christ presses in the direction of a Jewish renewal movement comprising Torah-observant Jews whose allegiance, like James’s, is to God and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1).<sup>26</sup>

### James as Practical Theologian

Among the roles James played in the early Jesus movement is the one most on display in the Letter of James, which is James the practical theologian. This is not because he concerns himself with “practical matters” instead of “theological issues”—a dichotomy alien to James’s place in history. Nor is he trying to demonstrate the “practical application” of the gospel for daily life or seeking to bridge the chasm between “theory” and “practice”—again, dualisms more at home in the modern era than in his. Rather, in James’s hands, theology is critical reflection on the personal and corporate practices among communities of Christ-followers. Accordingly, we see James analyzing the lived experiences

25. See, e.g., Allison 2013, who regards the mention of Jesus in 2:1 as an interpolation, though no textual basis exists for excluding this reference to the “Lord Jesus Christ” in 2:1.

26. Cf., e.g., Bauckham 2021.

of Jewish messianists as a minority people in a world patterned after Roman social conventions and sensibilities. In James's perspective, their lives in the diaspora are set within the borders of the daily influence of a series of taken-for-granted values that work against Israel's confession to love God entirely and its corollary of neighbor love. These include such values as status-craving, economic security, bitter rivalry, and devious self-promotion, as well as forms of violence (including retaliation and violent speech) thought necessary to make something of oneself within this world system.

Diaspora life brings with it a steady diet of trials as a minoritized people, like these Jewish messianists, seek to thrive in their scattered settings while at the same time remaining faithful to their Lord. James invites his audience to step back from their day-to-day lives and review them from the perspective of God's wisdom. In doing so, he sets before them a practical wisdom that will guide their interpretation of their contexts and their lives within those contexts, challenge their assumptions about how to live out the true word by which God has chosen to give them new birth (1:18), furnish fresh insight into the possibilities of faithful life, and enable alternative responses to the trials that come their way.

His is not a theology seminar, but he is well aware that theological commitments—for example, about God, the Lord Jesus, the nature of humanity, and the end of time—are deeply embedded in the practices of his audience. We might say that he teases them out, exposes them, and redirects them. He is after a theological formation guided by, and guiding, practices aligned with this double love, love of God and love of neighbor.

James's efforts as a practical theologian are challenged by a divergent vision of life and faith, by people who apparently claim faith but whose practices reveal a divergent set of allegiances. This explains James's bodily metaphors: double-minded, double-tongued, and double-faced. It explains his call to purity and his concern with Christ-followers who are (or may be) contaminated by the world. And it explains the incredulity about their lives that he captures in down-to-earth language: "Both fresh water and salt water do not flow from the same spring, do they? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree produce olives or a grapevine figs? Of course not, and neither does a saltwater spring yield fresh water" (3:11–12). He thus sets before his readers two ways: Are you friend of God or friend of the world? And he drives home the impossibility of having it both ways.

### **Translations and Acknowledgments**

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of material from the Letter of James are my own, from NA<sup>28</sup>. At times, my translation parallels the CEB; this is due to my work as one of the translators of James in the CEB.

I worked out some of my thinking on the Letter of James in other publications, including the following:

- “Betwixt and Between: The Letter of James and the Human Condition.” *BibAnn* 12, no. 2 (2022): 295–308. Adapted with permission. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.13477>.
- “‘I’ll Show You My Faith’ (James 2:18): Inspiring Models for Exilic Life.” *Int* 74, no. 4 (2020): 344–52. Adapted with permission of SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964320936402>.
- “James, Theological Education, and Practical Wisdom.” Pages 96–107 in *Now to God Who Is Able*. Edited by Neal D. Presa and Anne Zaki. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023. Adapted with permission.
- “Reading James Missionally.” Pages 194–212 in *Reading the Bible Missionally*. Edited by Michael W. Goheen. The Gospel and Our Culture Series. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016. Adapted with permission.