

# What Does the Bible Say About . . .?

January 28, 2008

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## The Epistle of James – part I

- I. Introduction
  - A. Announcements
    - 1. Open with prayer
    - 2. Any new people? If so, summarize need to bring paper, pen, and Bible (various versions helpful for comparison, but NRSV will be main one for reading, NASB for studying).
    - 3. Get list of names and how to contact (email preferred)
    - 4. 90 minutes on 4th Mondays at 7 p.m.
    - 5. Need volunteers to read passages listed in **bold**.
  - B. Does anyone have any questions/topics for us to consider for next time?
- II. Background and Introduction
  - A. A few times ago you requested that we spend half of our time each month on a study through a book of the Bible. That hasn't quite worked out as planned yet, but we'll try to make up for lost time today.
    - 1. We will be taking a pretty close look at the New Testament book of *James*. It's a book that I have worked on quite a bit in the past, and is also largely both neglected and misunderstood.
    - 2. In order for our study to be of the most value to each of us, it would be very helpful if everyone would read and become familiar with *James*.
    - 3. There are only 5 chapters, so it should not take a lot of time. And the payoff will certainly be worth the time we invest.
    - 4. This book is actually an epistle—a letter that was circulated among the very early churches. And today we are going to focus on some background and how this portion of scripture was put together, because it was written in a very different style that we do today. And we need to understand its structure if we're going to make real sense of its meaning.
  - B. If we look at New Testament commentaries on the book of *James*, one of the first things we will find is a lot of discussion of the modern debate over exactly who James, the writer was.
    - 1. That's not a real important thing for our study. Ultimately we will be more interested in what is written than in who did the writing.
    - 2. This is Scripture and the ultimate author is God. All scripture is inspired by God, and the book of *James* has thoroughly lived up to that. However, for background information, we will spend several minutes on who the human author, James, might be.

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- C. There are four men named James mentioned in the New Testament who would be possibilities.
1. **James the father of Judas** (one of the disciples, but not Judas Iscariot) This James is mentioned twice, only in passing. Luke 6:16, **Acts 1:13** (A number of Jesus' first followers were gathered in an Upper Room after Jesus' resurrection to see what would happen next. There are 3 James' mentioned here and the father of Judas is the last one listed.)
    - a. Nothing else known about him. Not presented as a very significant person in the spreading of the Gospel, and is mentioned mainly to differentiate his son, Judas, from Judas Iscariot.
    - b. Not a likely candidate as the sender of the epistle *James*.
  2. **James, the son of Alphaeus**. Also in **Acts 1:13**. Matt 10:3, **Mk 3:18**, Lk 6:15.
    - a. Also called James the Younger (or Less) in **Mk 15:40**.
    - b. He was one of the 12 disciples, but otherwise we know little about him either. So he is not very likely to be the James we are looking for.
  3. **James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John**: In **Acts 1:13** he is the first James listed, which implies his prominence. We find a number of other mentions of him in the gospels (Matt 4:21, 10:2, 17:1; **Mk 3:13-17**, 10:35, 13:3; Luke 9:54.)
    - a. He was one of the early martyrs killed for his faith in Jesus. **Acts 12:1-2** This would have been around the year 44 a.d.
    - b. The earliest believed date for this epistle is 45 a.d., but a later range of 55-60 a.d. is usually considered more likely. At any rate, it would have been written after James, son of Zebedee had been killed.
  4. That leaves **James, the brother of Jesus** (or cousin in Roman Catholic view). **Matt. 13:53-55**, Mark 6:1-3.
    - a. Look at **John 7:1-5** . . . **What was James' opinion of Jesus before the Resurrection?**
    - b. Things changed later. He was present with the other believers in the Upper Room after the Resurrection (**Acts 1:14**).
    - c. But here is what really changed him: **1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 15:3-8**. He was one of those to whom Jesus appeared after he rose from the dead. (By the time 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians was written no other James was prominent enough to mention specifically like this.)
    - d. Paul, early in his ministry, made a point of meeting with James. **Galatians 1:15-19**. **And how did Paul refer to James?** (called him an apostle) **Why would he choose Peter (a.k.a., Cephas) and James to meet with, do you think?** (Indicates their importance and their willingness to meet with former persecutor). Paul had more to say about James in **Gal. 2:9**.

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5. In the early years of the Church in Jerusalem there are many indications that James was one of the key leaders.
    - a. After Herod killed James the brother of John in Acts 12:2, what happened? (Acts 12:3-5), God miraculously freed Peter, he went to the house of Mary, mother of John Mark (v. 12). Now read Acts 12:17. To whom did Peter want this news told? (James) Why would he single out James? (Leader of the church.)
    - b. Another indication of James' prominent role in the Church came in Act 15:12-22 There was a debate in the then still largely Jewish Church about how to accept new gentile believers. Notice who speaks the final word and what happens afterwards. (James issued the decision that all accepted.) What does this tell us about this James?
    - c. He is again singled out as a leader of the Jerusalem church in Acts 21:17-19.
    - d. Many noteworthy Church leaders in the first few centuries wrote about him as "James the Just," because he had a reputation as a righteous man. Even the famous Jewish historian Josephus called him that when he wrote about him in 93 a.d. Josephus reported then that Jewish authorities had James the Just stoned to death in 62 a.d.<sup>1</sup> He became another martyr for the name of Jesus.
  6. Now all of this does not prove that the Epistle of James was written by James the Just, the brother of Jesus. But all the way up to our more skeptical modern times that has been the traditional and universal belief of the Church, and seems most likely to me also.
- D. Even so, the epistle/book of *James* has not historically been given a lot of respect.
1. Martin Luther was responsible for some of that. He called it a "strawy" epistle, meaning he thought it weak and not worth much.
    - a. Anyone know why he thought that? (Jesus only mentioned by name twice: James 1:1 and 2:1, so not seem as central as in Paul's epistles.)
    - b. There is another reason. It has to do with the passage on faith and works in James 2:14-17.
    - c. Compare it with what Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8, 9. Do you see the difficulty? Looks like a contradiction, doesn't it? We will have to look at that more closely later.
  2. Another criticism of *James* is that it just sounds more like the Old Testament than the New Testament. It's a bit more "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" than "Jesus loves you and saves you by grace."

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<sup>1</sup>*Antiquities*, Book XX, Chapter 9, Section 1  
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/josephus/works/files/ant-20.htm>

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3. But there are a number of passages in *James* that directly reflect the things that Jesus himself said in the New Testament gospels. Let's compare a few of them just to get the idea:
  - a. **James 2:5** and **Luke 6:20** (blessing for the poor)
  - b. **James 3:6-10** and **Matt 12:34-37** (the tongue, our speech)
  - c. **James 3:10-12** and **Matt 7:16-20** (good fruit and bad fruit show our nature)
  - d. **James 3:18** and **Matt 5:9** (peacemakers)
  - e. **James 5:12** and **Matt 5:34-37** (don't swear by anything, just say what you mean)
  - f. So the style may sound Old Testament, but it is very clearly in alignment with the New and in agreement with Jesus.
4. Finally, many reputable commentaries on *James* find no clear structure or theme and think of the book as a more or less random collection of sayings/teachings.
  - a. In fact, as we will see, there is a very definite structure to *James*.
  - b. Recognizing that structure actually will be the key to understanding the theme and meaning of the whole of the book/epistle.

III. Let's begin our actual study of the book, then, with a look at the introduction, we'll observe something about its style, and dig into the structure so we can find the central message—the heart of *James*.

A. **Greeting: James 1:1-2**

1. Notice how James describes himself. **What could he have claimed as his credentials?** (Pillar of the Church, the brother of Jesus, an apostle, James the Just.) **What does he call himself instead?** (Servant of Jesus Christ.) If there had been P.R. people around then, they would have been very unhappy with his choice!
2. In fact the word “servant” (*doulos* in Greek), as we mentioned in a previous class, actually means a “slave.” The translators, as they do in some other places too, just softened the word a bit. And by doing so, they miss a point James was making.
3. **Why do you think James would have called himself a slave of Jesus instead of mentioning his other credentials? What does it tell us about him? And what meaning does it suggest for us as we read the rest of this book?** (Humility and obedience.) A servant might say no from time to time, but a slave obeys all the time.

B. This is one of only two direct mentions of Jesus by name in the whole epistle (2:1). However, James refers to the Lord 14 times, as in the very first verse.

1. He may mean Jesus in each case or he may mean the Father, or he may simply mean both as the one God.

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2. But James is not focused on telling us who Jesus is. His readers already know. Notice to whom it is addressed in verse 1 (the 12 tribes in dispersion). **Who are they?** (Jewish Christian believers)
3. He is writing to believers who were Jewish and perhaps could understand more quickly who Jesus the Messiah (the Christ) is than could gentile Christians such as Paul wrote to.
  - a. He wasn't trying to explain the meaning of the cross, as we often find in the epistles of Paul. He had a different readership and a different purpose than Paul, so we should expect a different content.
  - b. James wasn't teaching about the cross of Christ, but about how we should live if we truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.
  - c. Martin Luther didn't like *James*, because it didn't sound like Paul. We will try to be a bit more open-minded here.
- C. *James* is written in a different style than we are used to from reading the gospels or the epistles of Paul. Its style does more closely resemble Old Testament books that we call "wisdom literature."
  1. *James* is a New Testament version of a long, honored tradition of wisdom literature. By that, I mean that again and again it compares things that are wise with those that are foolish. **Can anyone think of a book in the OT that is also "wisdom literature?"** (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, some Psalms)
  2. There's no better example than Proverbs. **Prov. 1:1-7 What is the stated purpose of Proverbs?** (To teach wisdom.)
    - a. **What is wisdom according to Proverbs? Prov. 2:1-10**
    - b. **Then what is foolishness? Prov. 10:8, 14, 18, 21** Many other examples.
    - c. We can sum it all up with a quote from Psalms, which is also part of the wisdom literature: **Psalms 14:1**
  3. *James* has often been compared to Proverbs for its style and its subject matter. It has the same concern with wisdom and foolishness. And we can use the same definition: **Wisdom is faithful obedience to God, and foolishness is being unfaithful and disobedient towards God.**
  4. **Do you see how this fits right back into how James described himself in v. 1?**
  5. Compare and note other similarities between *James* and Proverbs.
    - a. **James 1:5 / Prov. 2:6**
    - b. **James 1:19 / Prov. 29:20;**
    - c. **James 3:18 / Prov. 11:30**
    - d. **James 4:13-16 / Prov. 27:1**
    - e. **James 5:20/ Prov. 10:12**

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- IV. Looking for the subject of wisdom in *James* is also going to give us our first clue as to the structure of the book. And that will help us find the central theme.
- A. The subject of wisdom is introduced in **1:5**. Then it is discussed in two passages.
1. **James 2:18-20** This is part of the famous (or infamous) passage that includes the statement that “faith without works is dead.” We will discuss it in detail later, but for now, **do you see something of wisdom literature here?** (Foolish person; i.e., not faithful to God).
  2. The topic of wisdom and foolishness is left alone for awhile, but returns in **James 3:13-17**. **How are we told to recognize wisdom and its opposite?** We will look at this more later in our study. For now just note that the subject is discussed twice (after initial introduction).
- B. Wisdom and foolishness is not the only subject that is presented, left, and returned to.
1. **James 1:2-4** **What idea/subject is/are prominent here in the introduction?** (Joy and perseverance)
  2. Now compare that with **James 5:7-12**. **What do these have in common?** (Patience, endurance, perseverance.) I haven’t forgotten about joy, but you’ll have to be patient for that.
- C. This pattern of repetition appears again in another pair of passages.
1. **James 1:9-12** **What (who) is being talked about here?** (Rich and poor)
  2. Compare it with **James 5:1-6** **What do these passages have in common?** (Rich)
  3. Again, let’s not go into the meaning just yet, but observe the subject matter. We find writing about the rich near the beginning and again near the end of *James*.
- D. These repetitions of subject are not accidental or random. They are important indications of how *James* was put together. When we understand that, we will be able to read it with wisdom.
1. The rich and poor are the subject shortly after the first discussion of perseverance and again just before the second discussion of perseverance.
  2. The writing about wisdom and foolishness comes after the first passage on the rich and the poor, and again before the last passage on the rich and the poor.
  3. I have picked out just three of the instances in which a subject is discussed in the first part and again in the last part of the epistle. If we were to chart the pattern it would look something like this:
  4. **perseverance–rich/poor–wise/foolish–wise/foolish–rich/poor–perseverance**

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- E. Some of you may recognize this as a pattern of writing we have seen before.<sup>2</sup> This epistle is a well-crafted example of a traditional Near Eastern style of writing in which the main point is in the middle and, like mirror images, the sub-topics appear on either side of that main point. It is essential to see this in order to truly understand what *James* is all about.
1. I've called this pattern *ascendio*, which means "to climb," because it is like climbing a mountain. The goal is to reach the peak, but everything we've seen on the way up, we'll see again on the way down. The peak is like the main point. And everything we find before the main point, we will see again after it.
  2. When we know what the main theme is, we can understand the sub-points better. We'll know their context.
  3. And knowing which sub-points go together let's us use one passage to clarify the other. We will see that in our study.
- F. Rather than taking us through the whole detailed process of analyzing all the patterns and structure, I have an outline already developed. We will use that as our guide for the rest of our study in *James*. (Hand out outline of *James*)
1. We will close today by looking at the very center of *James*, the peak of the mountain. We will find it sandwiched right between our two passages discussing wisdom and foolishness.
  2. **James 3:1-12**
  3. This is where we will pick up next time. Let's just close with two questions for us to think about.
    - a. **What is this central concern in *James*?** (v. 2)
    - b. **And what is it about the tongue that we should avoid?** (v. 10)
    - c. Please read *James* carefully this month with these in mind. And may our words be ones that please God and our Lord Jesus Christ.
- V. Summary
- A. Have we answered today's questions satisfactorily? Are there still questions on this topic we need to discuss more? What questions for next time?
  - B. Next meeting: 4<sup>th</sup> Monday, February 25, 2008. 7:00 p.m.
  - C. Closing prayer
  - D. **Archives of class notes can be found online at: [www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa](http://www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa)**

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<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 30 Oct. 23, 2006