

Epistles of James - Introduction

by Arno Clemens Gaebelein

The sermon introduces the Epistle of James, highlighting its Jewish context, authorship, and practical exhortations for believers.

Scripture: James 2:26

Topics: "Christian Living", "Faith And Works"

Description

Arno Clemens Gaebelein delves into the Epistle of James, highlighting its Jewish character and its focus on practical Christian living. The Epistle addresses Jewish believers, emphasizing the importance of faith evidenced by works, patience in suffering, doing God's will, and awaiting His will. James, the brother of the Lord, is identified as the author, a godly man and leader of the Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem. The Epistle, though initially treated with suspicion, offers valuable exhortations applicable to all believers, regardless of their background.

Transcript

Introduction

The Epistles of James, First and Second Peter, the three Epistles of John and the Epistle of Jude constitute the so-called Catholic, or General Epistles. They were thus named in earliest days, and in the ancient manuscripts these seven Epistles are grouped together as we have them in our English version; however, they always follow the book of Acts. It is claimed that they were named General Epistles because Christians in general are addressed in them, which does not hold good with the second and third Epistles of John, for these were addressed to individuals. The first Epistle in this group, following the book of Acts in the manuscripts, is the Epistle of James.

Its Peculiar Character

That there is a great difference between the great Pauline Epistles and the Epistle of James is seen at a glance. If one reads even the Epistle to the Hebrews, addressed to the same class of people, believing Hebrews, to whom the Epistle of James is also addressed, and reads James immediately after, a great and notable change is seen at once. The character of the Epistle of James is essentially Jewish. In the second chapter the word synagogue is used as the place of their assembly, "if there come unto your synagogue a man, etc." They were then still in the synagogue. Nothing about the Church, the body of Christ is mentioned in this Epistle, nor do we find here the great doctrines of Christianity and the

corresponding Christian relationship. The law is also prominent; and there are other Jewish features which will be pointed out in the annotations. The character of the entire Epistle corresponds with those to whom the Epistle was originally addressed "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad." It is evidently a document written at an early date during the transition period and before the great doctrinal Epistles of the apostle to the Gentiles had been produced, in which the fulness of redemption, the body of Christ, the church, and its unity and other cardinal doctrines of our faith are revealed.

What do we mean by "transition period"? That the beginning of Christianity had a decidedly Jewish cast is known to all Bible students. For years all the believers were Jews. There was a great Jewish-Christian assembly in Jerusalem and many more throughout Judea. As we learn from the book of Acts there were many thousands of Jews who believed, but who were also zealous for the law; they still made use of the temple worship, went there at the accustomed hours of prayer. There were also many priests who at one time were obedient to the faith, believed that the Crucified One was the Messiah; they also continued undoubtedly in their priestly ministrations in the temple. They still had their great national hope of a restoration of the kingdom. That hope indeed was preached by Peter in Acts 3:19-20.

That the Epistle of James is put in all the ancient manuscripts next to the book of Acts is therefore of significance. We breathe in this Epistle the same Jewish-Christian atmosphere which we find in the beginning of the book of Acts.

James, the Author of the Epistle

What we have stated above identifies the author of this Epistle. Who is James (Greek: Jacobos--Jacob)? Certainly not James, the apostle, the son of Zebedee. He was martyred in the year 44, as recorded in Acts 12:2. Nor can the author be James, the son of Alphaeus, another apostle. His name is mentioned for the last time in the New Testament in Acts 1:13. We hear nothing more about him, and it is inconceivable that he should have held a position of authority which belongs to the author of this Epistle. There is another James, who is designated as "the brother of the Lord." He has been generally accepted, even by critics, as the author of the Epistle.

The Apostle Paul speaks of him in Gal. 1:19. Three years after his conversion he returned to Jerusalem to interview Peter, and Paul adds, "but of the other apostles saw I none, save James, the Lord's brother,"

James, the brother of the Lord, belongs to those mentioned in John 7:5: "For neither did His brethren believe in Him." James and his brethren did not believe on Jesus, the Virgin-born Son of God, as the Messiah. But in the first chapter of Acts we find mentioned among those who waited in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father "Mary, the mother of Jesus, and His brethren." They had been converted and were now believers. How were they convinced that Jesus was the Christ? There can be no question that the James mentioned, distinct from the apostles, in 1 Cor. 15:7, to whom the risen Christ appeared, is the brother of the Lord. He saw the Lord risen from the dead; He had appeared to him and that became the great turning point in his life and he and his brethren believed.

He early held in Jerusalem the position as leader. When Peter had been miraculously led forth from prison and appeared in the midst of a company of believers, he said, "Go show these things unto James and to the brethren" (Acts 12:17). He was the acknowledged head of the Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem. He is the spokesman in the first council held in Jerusalem, in the language of our day "the presiding officer" (Acts 15:13). Through him the Holy Spirit gave a very important revelation. Years later when Paul undertook the fateful journey to Jerusalem and had reached the city, he called on James, and after

salutation reported to him "what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry." And James spoke the fatal words which enticed the Apostle Paul to conform to the keeping of the law, when James told him, "Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe, and they are all zealous for the law" (Acts 21:19-26). According to ancient sources, like Eusebius, James was a godly man and a strong observer of the ceremonial law, and, though he was ready to see the hand of God in the ministry of Paul and Barnabas among the Gentiles (confirmed by the second chapter of Galatians), he adhered closely to the law and the Judaistic form of Christianity to the end of his life. "Had not a Peter and above all Paul arisen, Christianity would perhaps never have completely emancipated from the veil of Judaism and asserted its own independence. Still, there was a necessity for the ministry of James. If any could win over the ancient covenant people it was he. It pleased God to set so high an example of Old Testament piety in its purest form among the Jews, to make conversions to the gospel, even at the eleventh hour (preceding the destruction of Jerusalem) as easy as possible for them. But when they would not listen to the voice of this last messenger of peace, then was the measure of divine patience exhausted and the fearful and long-threatened judgment broke forth. And thus the mission of James, the brother of the Lord was fulfilled. According to Hegesippus James died a year before the destruction of Jerusalem " (Dr. P. Schaff--Kirchengeschichte). The Jewish historian Josephus records this in the following paragraph: "Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but on the road, so he assembled the Sanhedrin or judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others. And when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned" (Josephus, Book 20).

For various reasons this Epistle was, even among the church fathers, treated with suspicion. It seems that the uncertainty as to the writer, and that it was addressed entirely to Jewish believers, raised these doubts. These doubts were revived during the Reformation and Luther especially called it "an Epistle of straw," meaning by it that it did not contain the wheat.

"On the whole, on any intelligent principles of canonical reception of early writings, we cannot refuse the Epistle a place in the canon. That that place was given it from the first in some parts of the church; that, in spite of many adverse circumstances, it gradually won that place in other parts; that when thoroughly considered, it is so consistent with and worthy of his character and standing whose name it bears; that it is marked off by so strong a line of distinction from the writings and Epistles which have not attained a place in the canon; all these are considerations which, though they do not in this, any more than in other cases, amount to demonstration, yet furnish when combined a proof hardly to be resisted, that the place where we do now find it in the New Testament canon is that which it ought to have, and which God in His providence has guided His church to assign to it."--Dean Alford, Prolegomena.

When Was It Written

James lived and labored in Jerusalem. There is no likelihood that he ever left the city of his fathers, hence we cannot doubt that the Epistle was written by him in Jerusalem and sent forth from there. As to the exact date scholars have been divided on that. That it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, and not after, is obvious, for James died before the city was taken by the Romans. But does not the Epistle of James refer to Paul's teachings in Romans as to righteousness by faith, and therefore, it is argued, James must have written the Epistle after Romans, and perhaps also Hebrews, had been written. But the argument is weak. James did not answer Paul's teaching at all; he was guided by the Spirit of God to emphasize a holy life, as a justification of real faith before man. That he cites Abraham, as Paul did in Romans, is no evidence that he had the Epistle to the Romans in his possession. "It is much more

probable, that all which James saith respecting works of faith has respect to a former and different state and period of the controversy, when the Jewish Pharisaic notions (as to the boast in the law) were being carried into the adopted belief in Christianity, and the danger was not, as afterwards, of a Jewish law-righteousness being set up, antagonistic to the righteousness which is by faith of Jesus Christ, but of a Jewish reliance on exclusive purity of faith superseding the necessity of a holy life, which is inseparably bound up with any worthy holding of the Christian faith." Some of the most painstaking scholars, like Drs. Neander and Schaff have assigned to the Epistle a very early date. The absence of any mention of the decision at the church council (Acts 15) in the Epistle strengthens the early date. The date must be put around the year 45 A.D. and this makes the Epistle perhaps the earliest of the New Testament writings. Why should it not be so, considering that the Judaistic church in Jerusalem was the beginning of Christianity and the message of the Epistle harmonizes so fully with the character of that church?

The Twelve Tribes Scattered Abroad

As already stated James addressed the Epistle "to the twelve tribes scattered abroad." We hear much in our days about "the ten lost tribes." But were they lost when James wrote his Epistle? If they were lost how could he have addressed this Epistle to them? But further-more he addresses also those among the twelve tribes who were believers, so that it is but logical to assume that the twelve tribes, perhaps remnants of them, were known in the days of James, and that a number of each of the tribes had accepted Christ, the Messiah. Of course, like so much else, the term "twelve tribes" has been spiritualized as if it meant "the real Israel of God," that is, all believers, Jews and Gentiles. But this cannot be done. The fact that the literal tribes of Israel are addressed has been recognized by most expositors. James as the head of the Jerusalem church came in touch with many Israelites, who, according to their age-long custom, came up to Jerusalem to the feasts. Perhaps many of these visitors becoming acquainted with James and their believing brethren were also convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah and believed on Him. They went back to their different communities in Central Asia and beyond, in the dispersion, and formed their synagogues. Later James learned from them the spiritual conditions in these different centers in the dispersion and addressed this Epistle to them as well as to those who were not believers.

We must also remember that a similar Jewish-Christian remnant will be in existence once more in Palestine during the coming great tribulation; it is the godly remnant, which we have pointed out many times in the prophetic books and in the Psalms. Then the gospel of the kingdom will again be preached, and as it was in the Jewish beginning of the age, signs and miracles will follow, in healing (James 5:14) and otherwise. The Epistle of James will then have a special meaning for this remnant.

Is the Epistle of James for us?

The Jewish character of this Epistle has lead some to say "it is for the Jews and not for us." We have known believers who refuse to read this Epistle. But that is a serious and deplorable mistake. Here are written great and needed truths which are as needful for us as they were for those to whom the Epistle was originally addressed. The Christian who passes by the Epistle of James rejects a most important part of the Word of God and as a result he will suffer loss. We quote from another: "I am persuaded that no man, I will not say despises, but even attempts to dispense with the Epistle of James except to his own exceeding loss. Luther would have been none the worse, but all the stronger, for a real understanding of this writing of James. He needed it in many ways; and so do we. It is, therefore, a miserable cheat that any should allow their own subjective thoughts to govern them in giving up this or any portion of the Word of

God; for all have an important place, each for its own object. Is it too much to ask that a document be judged by its express and manifest design? Surely we are not to take Paul's object in order to interpret James. What can be conceived more contrary, I will not say to reverence for what claims to be inspired, but even to all sense and discrimination, than such a thought? And it is thus that men have stumbled and fallen over this--it is little to say--precious and profitable, and above all, practically profitable position of the Word of God.

"At the same time we must read it as it is, or rather as God wrote it; and God has addressed it, beyond controversy, not merely to Christian Jews, nor even to Jews, but to the twelve tribes that were scattered abroad. Thus it embraces such of them as were Christians; and it gives a very true and just place to those who had the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only it is a mistake to suppose that it contemplates nobody else. People may come to it with the thought that all the Epistles were addressed to Christians, but this is simply wrong. If you bring this or any other preconception to the Word of God, no wonder His Word leaves you outside its divine and holy scope. For He is ever about us, and infinitely wise. Our business is to gather what He has to teach us. No wonder, therefore, when persons approach the Scripture with preconceived thoughts, hoping to find confirmation there instead of gathering God's mind from what He has revealed--no wonder that they find disappointment. The mischief is in themselves and not in the divine Word. Let us prayer fully seek to avoid the snare" (William Kelly).

The exhortations in this Epistle are, therefore, of great value; and there are many precious gems to be found scattered throughout the Epistle of James, the brother of the Lord.

The Division of the Epistle of James

We have already pointed out that this Epistle is not a doctrinal document. Addressed as it is to the twelve tribes in the dispersion it has nothing to say about Gentile believers, nor about their place in the Church, the body of Christ. They were believers, yet distinctly Jewish believers. This is seen in the opening verse in which James calls himself "the servant of God," an Old Testament expression; but he adds "of the Lord Jesus Christ." He and those to whom he wrote were serving God, still zealous for the law, adhering to it in every way, yet they believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and served Him. Their national hope as the people of God was theirs still. The Epistle is taken up entirely with the difficulties these Jewish believers had; it refers to the trials (like Peter's first Epistle) they were undergoing, exhorts them to faith. It points out the serious errors in the lives as believers; while they believed their lives did not correspond with such a belief. The correction of the faults, while common to all believers, has a striking Jewish aspect. They had respect of persons, looked to outward circumstances, and they are reminded of the royal law of the Scriptures, and insistence is made that their faith in the Messiah must be evidenced by works. They are exhorted to be more than mere hearers of the Word, by which they had been begotten anew, but to be doers of it. Many of them evidently wanted to be teachers, had great ambitions, but their Jewish character, looseness of their tongues in speaking evil, had become prominent and that is corrected. There is a repeated reference in the Epistle to the godly of their nation, to Abraham and Isaac, to Rahab, Job and Elijah. There is also quite a little which links with the Sermon on the Mount. Finally there are exhortations to godliness, prayer, the life of trust and a reminder of the coming of the Lord. The prominent word seems to be the word "patience." We find it five times. The trying of faith is to work patience (1:3); patience is to have her perfect work (1:4); they are to be patient unto the coming of the Lord (5:7); and be like the husbandman who waits in patience, and finally they are reminded of the patience of Job. The exhortations may be grouped around this word patience.

I. Exhortations to Patience in Suffering God's Will (1:1-18).

II. Exhortation to Patience in Doing God's Will (1:19; 4:17).

III. Exhortation to Patience in Awaiting God's Will (5:1-20).

We shall follow in our analysis and annotations the chapter division as we have them in our Bibles.

I. TRIALS AND THE EXERCISE OF FAITH (1)

II. THE ROYAL LAW: FAITH AND WORKS (2)

III. THE EVILS OF THE TONGUE CORRECTED (3)

IV. FURTHER EXHORTATIONS TO RIGHT LIVING (4)

V. THE COMING OF THE LORD AND THE LIFE OF FAITH (5)

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/arno-clemens-gaebelein-/epistles-of-james-introduction/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net