

# The Book of James – Background Information

## Who wrote James?

The traditional view is that the author of the letter is 'James the Lord's brother' (Galatians 1:18-19). A witness of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:5-7), James became leader of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:16-17; 15:12-21; 21:17-22; Galatians 2:9-14).

The Jewish historian Josephus recorded that James' martyrdom in AD 62 scandalised those citizens of Jerusalem most concerned with the observance of the Law (Antiquities 20:9), and in Christian tradition James was seen as a righteous man who prayed ceaselessly for his own Jewish people (Eusebius, History 2:23). Among scholars who accept the traditional view, some suggest that James may have been written earlier than Paul's letters, perhaps in the late 40s. Others argue that James wrote in the late 50s, perhaps in part to correct a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching on faith and works.

Some commentators disagree with the traditional view of authorship, but whoever the author was, commentators agree that the letter represents a distinctive Jewish-Christian perspective on the life of faith, and one that challenges early believers to integrate their faith in Jesus with the way that they lived.

## The recipients of James

James sends his letter to Jewish followers of Jesus, and – specifically – to 'the twelve tribes of the Dispersion' (1:1). Some think that this is a metaphorical expression for believers (cf. 1 Peter 1:1), while others argue that it refers to Jewish believers outside of the land of Israel.

If written by James the brother of Jesus, James writes as a key leader of the Early Church, and is well positioned to offer wisdom for Jewish disciples seeking to live out their faith in Jesus. Rather than responding to a particular difficulty or occasion within a single church, James addresses issues that a wide range of churches faced: dealing with suffering, living out one's faith, poverty and wealth, and relating to others in the community.

## James, the Law and Jesus

As 'a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ', James expects his fellow Jews who confess Jesus as Christ to observe 'the whole law' (2:10). Many Jewish Christians observed the Torah (Acts 21:20), and James' community, which is not dealing with the relationships between Jewish and Gentile Christians that Paul confronted, would have practised circumcision, observed the food laws and kept the Sabbath. Of course, the ritual and the moral response to God belong together, and James 4:8 echoes Psalm 24:3-4, which makes precisely the same point about true worship and honest living.

James is keen to stress the Law's 'care for orphans and widows in their distress' (1:27, see Exodus 22:24), and its command not 'to defer to the great' (Leviticus 19:15, see James 2:9). James' emphases are those of Jesus, who also used 'love your neighbour as yourself' in summary of the law (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31; James 2:8), and who taught, 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6:20). The 'royal law' is indeed 'the whole law' (James 2:8-10), obeyed for the sake of God who showed most clearly in Jesus that 'the poor of this world' are 'the heirs of the kingdom' (James 2:5).

Jewish tradition identified the Law with wisdom (Ecclesiasticus 24). Like the Law, wisdom teaches both the character of God, and the right way of being human. James' concern that 'your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom' (3:13) shows the influence of Jesus' Beatitudes and of his invitation, echoing Wisdom's in Proverbs 9:4-5, 'Come to me...and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:28-29). As the incarnation of divine wisdom (see also 1 Corinthians 1:24), Jesus is the most complete revelation both of God's character and of humanity's destiny.