

Introduction to James

Chase Green

The book of James is sometimes called “the Proverbs of the New Testament,” the reason being that it is composed of many short, to the point verses that, like Proverbs, deal with spiritual wisdom. When I was at the Memphis School of Preaching, we had to memorize the entire book! While I won’t ask you to do the same, it is true that there are many pearls of wisdom and truth to be found in this wonderful, short inspired book.

Author: There are three, or perhaps four, men who wore the name “James” in the New Testament (Taylor, Jr. 1-4). These include 1) James, the son of Zebedee (together with John one of the “sons of Thunder,” and also a member of the “inner circle” of James, John, and Peter), 2) James the son of Alphaeus, 3) James the Lord’s brother, and (possibly) a fourth 4) James mentioned in Luke 6:16 (Ibid). Many apt scholars agree that the most likely candidate for authorship of this epistle is James, the Lord’s brother (Hampton 1-2). Reasons given are as follows: Both the James mentioned in Luke 6:16 and James the son of Alphaeus are very obscure men of which very little Biblical information is given. The fact that the author reveals himself only as “James” seems to indicate that this James was extremely well known in the first century brotherhood (Ibid). James the son of Zebedee might be a good candidate, were it not that he was martyred during the life of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-2), and considering that Herod died in A.D. 44, it is unlikely that this James wrote the epistle (Ibid). That leaves James the Lord’s brother as the most likely candidate for authoring the epistle (Ibid).

Immediate Audience: This is revealed in chapter 1, verse 1: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.” Who are these “twelve tribes which are scattered abroad?” The phrase “twelve tribes” is reminiscent of Judaism, but in all likelihood refers to SPIRITUAL Israel (the church), rather than physical Israel, although it is possible that the audience is largely composed of Jewish Christians (Woods 16). Regardless, it must be the case that Christians, rather than religious Jews, are under consideration, for James repeatedly uses the term “brethren,” and James makes no argument for the Deity of Christ (which he would have needed to do, except it was already agreed upon) (Hampton 3 and Woods 16). The phrase “scattered abroad” is likely a reference to the violent persecution of Jewish Christians mentioned in Acts 8:1-4 (Hampton 3).

Remote Audience: “Remote audience” refers to those living prior to the time this book was written, but can still glean much from its teachings. For instance, we may not have been around to know who James was confronting that were showing preference to certain individuals in the worship services (2:1ff), but does not the same attitude often prevail today? It does! Thus, we find the same need to read and apply the book of James today!

Purpose: According to Brother Woods, “the purpose of it was evidently intended to instruct them (Christians, TCG) in the Christian faith and to insulate them from all worldly temptation” (17). These Christians “were in frequent contact with rich and arrogant countrymen” who mistreated them greatly, and “it was not always easy to exhibit patience and forbearance in such trying situations and a large measure of Christian endurance and love was necessary in order properly to live the Christian life” (Ibid). Thus, we can learn a lot from this book in how we too should deal with the struggles of the blessed, but sometimes difficult, Christian life.

Works Cited:

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Taylor, Jr. Robert R. *Studies in James and Jude*. Ripley, TN: Taylor Publications, 1987. Print.

Woods, Guy N. *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*. Nashville, Tenn: Gospel Advocate Co, 1991. Print.