

A LOOK AT A BOOK: JAMES

October 14, 2012

This is the first of the general epistles (also 1 and 2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude), so called because they lack indications of a specific address. It is difficult in these cases to reconstruct the historical situation to which they belong. The Epistle of James has suffered through misunderstanding, the most notable example of which was Martin Luther's description of it as an epistle of straw.

Authorship

Eusebius mentions that the Epistle of James was said to be by the Lord's brother.

The author's self-identification. The writer introduces himself quite simply as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ", but his very simplicity has turned out to be ambiguous; for James is a common name and the accompanying description is not sufficiently distinctive to assist the identification. Any man called James who was engaged in Christian work would fit the description, except for the obvious authority which the writer assumes. There are only two New Testament people known as James who could with much credence come into the picture and even these can be fairly easily narrowed down to one. James, the son of Zebedee, of the apostolic band, has found many supporters in the course of church history, but he would be ruled out almost certainly by the fact that he was killed by Herod in AD 44 and it is reasonably certain that the epistle was written later than that. There is now general agreement that the opening greeting is intended to point to James, the Lord's brother, who became leader of the church at Jerusalem.

That there are some parallels between this epistle and the speech and letter attributed to James in Acts is indisputable. These deserve mention in detail because of their significance. "Greeting" is used both in James 1:1 and in the letter recorded in Acts 15:23. Parallels are found in the case of isolated words such as: "turn" (James 5:19-20; Acts 15:19); "keep yourself" (James 1:27; Acts 15:29); "beloved" (James 1:16, 19; 2:5; Acts 15:25). These parallels are remarkable in that they all occur within so short a passage attributed to James in Acts.

The author's Jewish background. That the author's mind has drawn much from the Old Testament can hardly be denied. Admittedly the direct quotations number only five (cf. 1:11; 2:8, 11, 23; 4:6), three from the Pentateuch, one from Isaiah

and one from Proverbs. Yet the indirect allusions are innumerable (cf. 2:21, 23, 25; 3:9; 4:6; 5:2, 11, 17, 18). When the writer requires illustrations for prayer and patience he turns to Old Testament characters. His approach to ethical problems and his denunciations and warnings find striking parallels in the Old Testament prophetic books. He appears as a kind of Christian prophet.

Similarities with the teaching of Jesus

The following passages are compared with the Sermon on the Mount:

- 1:2 Joy in the midst of trials (cf. Matthew 5:10-12)
- 1:4 Exhortation to perfection (cf. Matthew 5:48)
- 1:5 Asking for good gifts (cf. Matthew 7:7 ff.)
- 1:20 Against anger (cf. Matthew 5:22)
- 1:22 Hearers and doers of the Word (cf. Matthew 7:24 ff.)
- 2:10 The whole law to be kept (cf. Matthew 5:19)
- 2:13 Blessings of mercifulness (cf. Matthew 5:7)
- 3:18 Blessings of peacemakers (cf. Matthew 5:9)
- 4:4 Friendship of the world as enmity against God (cf. Matthew 6:24)
- 4:10 Blessing of the humble (cf. Matthew 5:5)
- 4:11-12 Against judging others (cf. Matthew 7:1-5)
- 5:2ff. Moth and rust spoiling riches (cf. Matthew 6:19)
- 5:10 The prophets as examples (cf. Matthew 5:12)
- 5:12 Against oaths (cf. Matthew 5:33-37)

The parallels suggest that James is reproducing reminiscences of oral teaching which he had previously heard. The cumulative effect of this evidence must be favor of the presumption that the author was in close touch with the teaching of Jesus.

Agreements with the New Testament account of James

Our first introduction to James, the Lord's brother, is as an unbeliever in the claims of Jesus (cf. Mark 3:21; John 7:5). It was the resurrection which caused the change, for not only do we find that the Lord's brethren were mentioned among the disciples (Acts 1:14), but that James was specially singled out for a resurrection appearance (1 Corinthians 15:7). It is significant that Paul, in referring to him, implies that James was numbered among the apostles (Galatians 1:19); in fact he names him among the three pillars of the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9). When he presided at the all-important Jerusalem Council, there is no doubt that he held a commanding position in the local church, taking precedence even over Peter. The authority with which he addressed the church on that occasion (Acts 15:13 ff.) is in

full agreement with the tone of authority which the author of the epistle assumes in his salvation.

The conditions within the community. The community appears to belong to the period before the fall of Jerusalem. The oppressors are wealthy landowners, who, after the siege of Jerusalem, virtually ceased to exist in Judah, to which district the epistle is generally thought to have been sent.

The Addressees.

Not only does the epistle presuppose an author with a Jewish background, but also readers with the same background.

The meaning of Diaspora in 1:1. The addressees would be Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Empire. This interpretation would, of course, fit in well with authorship by James of Jerusalem, and is, in fact, the traditional interpretation. The regular meeting place of the addressees is styled a “synagogue” (2:2) and this at once suggests Jewish-Christian groups. It would seem from this epistle that the believers were mainly poor.

Date

If the epistle was by James, the Lord’s brother, it must have been before AD 62. Josephus dates his death at AD 62.

Purpose

The epistle is essentially practical and would appear to be designed to correct certain known tendencies in behavior. Such problems as the true attitude to wealth, the control of the tongue, the approach to oaths, Christian prayer and other practical themes are discussed. They appear to come out of the author’s own pastoral experience. But what light does the faith versus works passage (James 2) throw in the author’s purpose? Either James writes to counteract a misunderstanding of Paul on the part of some Christians or else he writes independently of Paul and happens to touch upon a matter of burning importance with which Paul had also had to deal.

Style. There has been some discussion as to whether James can in any sense be called a true epistle since it lacks the normal style of opening and the normal conclusion. But there are parallels to this kind of production which suggest that it should be regarded as epistolary from start to finish.

Canonicity

The Epistle of James encountered some difficulty in gaining canonical status. Several factors help to explain the hesitancy of the early church: (1) the brevity of the epistle, its dominantly practical rather than doctrinal nature, and the limitation of its address to Jewish Christians – all of which doubtless retarded wide circulation; (2) the fact James was not one of the twelve apostles; and (3) uncertainty about the identity of James in 1:1, for several men by that name appear in the New Testament. The mistaken impression that the doctrine of works in James contradicts Paul's doctrine of faith did not seriously disturb the early church so far as we can tell. When it came to be realized the author was almost surely James the Lord's brother, the final verdict was favorable toward the canonicity of the Epistle of James.

A SUMMARY OUTLINE OF JAMES

Theme: Christian conduct in everyday life.

Introduction: greeting to Jewish Christians of the Dispersion (1:1)

- I. Joy in trial (1:2-4)
- II. Prayer for wisdom (1:4-8)
- III. Disinterestedness in wealth (1:9-11)
- IV. Differentiation of trials and temptations (1:12-18)
- V. Obedience to the word (1:19-27)
- VI. Love without partiality to the rich (2:1-13)
- VII. Works as a demonstration of faith (2:14-26)
- VIII. Wisdom (3:1-4:10)
 - A. Wisdom in the control of the tongue (3:1-12)
 - B. The wisdom of meekness and unworldliness (3:13-4:10)
- IX. Avoidance of slander (4:11, 12)
- X. Overconfidence (4:13-17)
- XI. Patience (5:1-11)
- XII. Honesty (5:12)
- XIII. Communalism, including prayer for the sick and mutual confession of sins (5:13-18)
- XIV. Reclamation of erring fellow Christians (5:19, 20)