



WISDOM FROM HEAVEN

The Message of the Letter of James for Today

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Introducing James







The letter of James is among the most suspect books of the New Testament. It was by no means clear that it would be included in the list of authoritative books of the Christian church which we call the canon of the Bible, until very late in the day. Although guided by the Holy Spirit the process by which books were included was an informal one with several lists being drawn up at various times and in various places until a consensus picture began to emerge. The books that were eventually included in the definitive list were believed to be apostolic in origin, orthodox in content, universal in value and to have the ability to guide, nurture and sustain the church.¹

James was often absent from the earliest lists. It is not difficult to understand why. Reading it quickly you would not find too much specifically 'Christian' content in it. If you take out the two references to Jesus Christ (1:1, 2:1) it could be purely a Jewish letter, typical of the group of writings known as 'wisdom literature'. That leads to a number of questions. How essential, people asked, were those references to Jesus? Were they not just cosmetic, perhaps added later to make the letter look more Christian? Is it primarily addressed to Jewish Christians or does it have a value for Gentile Christians as well? By comparison with some of the other New Testament writings it appears to have little theology in it. Superficially it appears to be good advice about the general problems of living. So, does it really add anything or say anything which we couldn't already find, say, in the Book of Proverbs? What makes it fit for inclusion in the New Testament? Many especially feel that it does not come off well in comparison with the letters Paul wrote. They are three-dimensional presentations of Christian truth. James is one-dimensional. They contain meat. James is little but milk. A particular issue between Paul and James is the discussion of the meaning of faith and the place of works in the Christian life. In that contest Paul is often declared the winner.

The cloud which hovered over James' inclusion in the canon has continued to hang over the letter down the centuries, sometimes more menacingly than at other times. Most famously Martin Luther, with his bias to Paul, declared James 'an epistle of straw'. He wrote somewhat dismissively of it, 'I will not have him in my Bible to be numbered among the true chief books, though I would not thereby





prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him.²

Closer examination of the letter, however, shows that none of these charges stand up. Though soaked in the mindset of Jewish wisdom literature it is a thoroughly Christian work. Time and time again we find that James is only putting into his own words the teaching of the 'glorious Lord Jesus Christ'. The echoes of the Master's words reverberate throughout the book. Its value extends far beyond the Jewish Christian community. Gentiles, as well as Jews, need to learn to live wisely in this complex and fallen world we inhabit, as well as in a less than perfect church to which we belong. James and Paul, far from being in conflict, walk in agreement with each other on so many issues. The particular debate about faith and works is not nearly the problem people have made it out to be.

James did make it into the canon. And rightly so. As part, therefore, of inspired scripture it is worth studying and is profitable, as Paul would say, 'for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness'.³ Two reasons make it particularly apt for the church today. We have access to more knowledge than any previous generation in history. Clever, intelligent people abound. Yet the world is dying for lack of wisdom. Knowledge and intelligence have not led to a better world. It is not more peaceful, more secure, more at ease with itself than it was. Rather, the reverse seems to be true. The greater the knowledge we possess, the less we seem to know what to do with it. The greater the intelligence we boast, the greater the folly we demonstrate. Wisdom is needed as never before. And, what is true of the world is true of the church. Resources have never been greater. Techniques and strategies abound. Theological knowledge is available in shovelfuls. Activism has reached new heights. Yet the church is frequently dying for a lack of wisdom. It seems so often to be failing because it ignores the basics. The issues in which James wished to instruct the early church – issues such as suffering, money, the tongue, ambition, an uncertain future and what sort of religion is acceptable to God – are still with us today.





Who was James?

Just who was James and what authority did he have to write? He describes himself as ‘a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:1). Since we can identify five different people called James in the New Testament, any one of whom could have introduced themselves with words like these, his introduction doesn’t give much away. Or, does it? There was James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, and James the son of Alphaeus who are both listed as among the apostles. There was James the younger, whose mother Mary attended the crucifixion. Some believe ‘the Younger’ is just another label for James, the son of Alphaeus, rather than pointing to a different person. There is also a mention of James the father of Judas (not Iscariot), another of the disciples, but we know nothing else about him at all. We cannot even be sure whether he was a believer himself, so perhaps he is the exception to the claim that any of them could have identified themselves as servants of Christ.

The fifth James was James, the brother of Jesus.⁴ He is the first of Jesus’ four brothers to be named, almost certainly because he was the next oldest child in the family. The Gospels tell us that he was not in sympathy with Jesus during his lifetime⁵ but at some time he was converted. How and when is a matter of speculation. We know that Jesus appeared to him after his resurrection.⁶ That, however, was not likely to have been the decisive event in his conversion since he rose to prominence in the leadership of the Jerusalem church very quickly after that. Paul met with James three years after his conversion.⁷ Peter sent word to him when he escaped from prison.⁸ He presided over the council at Jerusalem and was evidently much respected for his wisdom.⁹ And when Paul last visited Jerusalem it was James who received him.¹⁰ His leadership in Jerusalem would have undoubtedly given him influence well beyond the confines of that local church.

Tradition tells us that James lived a life of extraordinary piety and holiness. He remained a keen practitioner of the Jewish law as well as a devoted follower of Jesus. He was nicknamed ‘the Just’. In every way he was a model disciple. Josephus, a major Jewish historian, tells us that James was stoned to death on the orders of Ananus, the High Priest, about 62 AD during an interregnum between Roman





governors.¹¹ Ananus was a member of the aristocratic Sadducean party of Israel. Josephus also tells us that his execution provoked such an outcry, even among non-Christian Jews because of the respect in which James was held, that Ananus was deprived of his office. Although Josephus does not specifically say he was martyred for his Christian faith later information confirms that it was his testimony to Jesus that caused his death.

It is almost certainly this James who wrote the letter we have in our New Testament. Not only does the letter have all the hallmarks one would expect of a letter written by James the Just but, as many scholars agree, ‘only one James was so uniquely prominent in the early Christian movement that he could be identified purely by the phrase, “James, a servant...”’¹² Any other James would have needed to describe himself further. For this James, the name alone would have been sufficient.

His self-description is astonishing. The phrase ‘a servant ... of the Lord Jesus Christ’ witnesses to an extraordinary transformation which had taken place in James’ life. From opposing his brother he had come to serve his brother. He had not come merely to an uneasy peace with his brother; nor to accept that Jesus might have been right; nor to follow him at a distance. He had come to bow the knee and voluntarily submit to his brother’s mastery over his life. He had set his life at the disposal of Jesus, his brother and his Lord. Writing this letter was part of the service he rendered to his Lord.

Who was he writing to?

The letter is addressed to ‘the twelve tribes scattered among the nations’. While some take that to mean he is writing for Jews who had been dispersed and were living outside of Palestine, it makes more sense to understand the phrase as a symbolic reference to Christian believers, albeit perhaps Jewish Christian believers, who were scattered around the Roman world.¹³ Galatians 6:16 speaks of the church as the ‘Israel of God’. So we know that labels which had once applied to Israel as an ethnic group were later applied to Christians. Revelation 7:5-8 and 21:12 certainly use the phrase ‘the twelve tribes of Israel’ of the believers who form the new people of God, living in the last days. They were the true Israel who had come to believe Jesus was the Messiah. Many of them had to flee Jerusalem





following the martyrdom of Stephen and persecution mentioned in Acts 8:1-2. Others would have travelled and settled elsewhere because they were involved in trade or for other reasons. It would be natural for the senior pastor of the church in Jerusalem to seek to continue his care of them and his teaching ministry among them through the medium of a letter.

Why was he writing?

Scholars have attempted to identify a specific reason for the letter. It is obvious that most of Paul's letters were written in response to a particular situation in the churches he addresses or in response to particular needs in the lives of the individuals to whom he writes. What, if anything, can we make of the occasion of James' letter?

Various suggestions have been offered as people have pieced together the clues which he trails through the book in an attempt to make a coherent picture out of them. Let me give some examples. Whilst tentative in his conclusions, Peter Davids says the letter appears to be addressed to people living in Palestine before AD 70 because the details fit what we know of the social, economic and political context there at that time.¹⁴ The preoccupation of the letter with the abuse experienced by the poorer members of the community at the hands of the rich landowners and merchants certainly lends support to this view. Similarly, and with equal diffidence, Robert Wall says it fits Palestine before the Roman War of AD 70 where the great majority of the population was 'confined to working-class ghettos, living a hand-to-mouth existence without any hope of an improved life'. In such a situation people would either react with anger and the fires of political rebellion would be stoked, or they would compensate for their poverty by investing in religious piety and future hope.¹⁵ But it is not the only possible conclusion that can be reached.

Ralph Martin, noting the emphasis on rejecting violence, anger and killing and the advice to leave one's future in the hands of God, suggests the letter was a call to Jews who had been influenced by the fanatical Zealot movement, who advocated violent opposition to the rule of Rome and engaged in acts of terrorism, to reject their approach to life in favour of a more Christian one.¹⁶ Martin actually advocates a two-stage approach to the composition of the letter whereby James' earlier work – his original sermons and material – were skilfully edited





into letter form and made to address a later situation. This, he claims, makes more sense of the linguistic features and polished style of the letter, which would most probably have been beyond James' abilities, than if he himself had written it in the form we have it.¹⁷

Yet others, like Sophie Laws, argue that it was written at a much later date in Rome. The chief reason for doing so lies in the similarity between the writing of James and the writing of other documents, like the *Shepherd of Hermas* and *I Clement*, which we know to be from a period after James' death and which were set in Rome.¹⁸

No certainty is possible in answering this question. Nor is it necessary for, as Douglas Moo has recently written, 'while the social and historical situation of the readers may help us understand the problems they are dealing with, those problems are ultimately both more general and more basic than the immediate situation.'¹⁹

In recent days, Richard Bauckham has helpfully developed that position further. He argues, I think convincingly, that the letter is 'an official letter or encyclical which James as head of the Jerusalem church addresses to all his compatriots and fellow-believers in the Jewish Diaspora'.²⁰ If this is so then it is unnecessary to seek to discover the particular situation which lay behind the letter. Indeed, detailed particulars which relate only to specific situations would be set aside in favour of dealing with what were typical situations. James didn't need to know precisely what was going on in individual churches. As a wise pastor he knew enough to write intelligently and perceptively with spiritual advice which would prove of value wherever it was read. The text, he says, has 'the necessary character of an encyclical'.²¹ The situations he describes are the sort of situations which could be found in many places in the Diaspora. The people he refers to and the argumentative questioners he engages with in his discussions are hypothetical. Nonetheless, James is hitting the mark. The letter is a real letter, full of encouragement and challenge. It could be read and applied in a whole variety of particular church contexts and its message would retain its relevance for many, right down, in fact, to our own day. So here is 'a resource for the churches to draw on regularly and whenever necessary. It is wisdom for them to appropriate and live by'.²²





What sort of letter did James write?

Again, Richard Bauckham's recent work has proved most helpful.²³ He shows how James, adopting the style and approach of other wisdom writers, would have set about writing his letter. Wisdom differs in content and style from other forms of literature, such as the law and the prophets. It was about practical insight and instruction for living. Here is theology in working men's clothes. It is composed on the basis of the teacher's own observations of life. It is their reflections and insights which form its foundation. Its authority lies both in the authority of the experience of the writers and in the sense they make of life. The authority these writings carry is implicit and depends on whether people recognise their insights as a true reflection on life or not. They don't seek to justify their insights by complex argument so much as by allusion and analogy from everyday life.

James stands very much in that tradition but he does so distinctly as a 'teacher in the style of Jesus'.²⁴ The closeness of thought between the teaching of Jesus and James is astonishing. Yet, equally astonishing, nowhere does James quote Jesus. Isn't that a serious weakness? Should he not quote him and then expound him? Or, should we not expect him to do so? Here we need an understanding of how wisdom writers would operate. Their approach would not be to quote their teachers. Rather they would immerse themselves in the wisdom of their teachers and then creatively and freely develop it rather than slavishly repeat it. That is exactly what James does.

To achieve his objective he calls a whole arsenal of literary weapons into play. He regularly resorts to one sort of aphorism or another, that is, a short pithy saying or general maxim. Bauckham identifies beatitudes (1:12); 'whoever' sayings (2:10, 4:4); conditional sayings (1:5, 26); couplets (4:8); paradoxical statements (1:9-10) and a multitude of strong contrasts; admonitions (1:19-20; 4:8; 5:9, 12, 16); general declarative statements (1:3-4; 2:5, 26; 3:16); reciprocal sayings (2:13, 3:6); and debating points (1:13). More fully developed are the parables and sayings which draw attention to the likeness between things, such as, 1:6, 10-11, 23; 2:26; 3:3-6, 11-12; 4:14; 5:7-8. James resorts to holding up Old Testament examples on five occasions – Abraham, Rahab, the prophets, Job and Elijah (2:21-25; 5:10-11, 17-18). He can also resort to judgement oracles which would be worthy of any Old





Testament prophet (5:1-6) and exhort people through using sharp dialogue, as he does, for example, in 2:18-23.

The variety of his literary technique, densely packed as it is into such a short letter, explains something of the apparently disorganised, fast-moving nature of the letter. The truth is that it is much more organised than, say, the Book of Proverbs, where sayings on totally diverse topics seem thrown together almost at random. After roughly setting out his agenda to begin with, James does, in fact, largely work through the agenda developing each item on it more fully, though on occasions he returns to an item more than once. Hopefully, what follows in the book will provide ample demonstration of this.

James, then, might chiefly be said to be a teacher of the wisdom of Jesus, functioning in a manner typical of the wisdom tradition of Israel. Even his discussion of law, especially his exposition of the love commandment of Leviticus 19, which we have not so far mentioned, should not be separated from his teaching as a sage. He expounds the law not as a typical rabbi, concerned to reduce it to specific rules and fragment it into a multitude of regulations, but as a typical teacher of wisdom. Wisdom and law had a close association in the Jewish tradition.²⁵

Yet to describe James as a typical exponent of Jewish wisdom would be to make a fundamental mistake. All his wise insights are filtered through the teaching of Jesus. He is a Christian wisdom teacher *par excellence*, a sage of the risen Christ. In a very real sense it is not the wisdom of James which one encounters in this letter, but the wisdom of Jesus.

Is there doctrine in James?

As mentioned earlier, the letter of James is often considered to be of secondary importance in the New Testament because it is thought to lack theological depth. It is true that the uppermost concern of the letter is practical and ethical, as it seeks to address the moral behaviour of the churches. But what is often not noticed is that this concern is built on a strong foundation of doctrine.

In a robust defence of James' theological acumen, Luke Johnson has outlined the essential features of his doctrine.²⁶ To paraphrase him: the book's focus is theocentric, and shows little concern for





identifying the separate persons or work of members of the Trinity. Its picture of God is incredibly rich. He is: one (2:19); demons tremble before him (2:19); the Lord of hosts (5:4); in whom there is no change (1:17). He is not tempted by evil (1:13), nor does he participate in human anger (1:20). He is ‘the father of lights’ (1:17), who characteristically gives birth (1:18), and creates people in his own image (3:9). He reveals himself and his will (2:8-11), and will one day encounter men and women as their judge (2:12; 4:12). Even so, he is compassionate and full of mercy (5:11), and promises to reward those who love him (1:12; 2:5). His compassion leads him to hear the cry of the oppressed (5:4), to heal the sick (5:15), to hear prayers offered in faith (1:5-6; 5:15), and to forgive sin (5:15). This is the God who longs to enter into friendship with human beings (4:4-10).

This God is also the hope of the future for, in spite of all that is wrong with the present world in its state of enmity with him, there is a new age to come which will see misery inflicted on those who currently perpetrate evil (5:1) but will save those who are merciful (2:13; 4:12). This God demands righteous living now. His coming is near (5:8). ‘The Judge is standing at the door’ (5:9).

James is obviously no lightweight when it comes to theology. Perhaps our penchant for right doctrine is sometimes a cover-up for our desire not to confront the issues of right living. James will not permit such escapism.

A personal afterword

It has been my privilege to expound James in several congregational settings over the years and, most recently, to the Belgrave Heights Convention in Melbourne at the turn of the millennium. They wanted some wise words for the new millennium. There are none wiser than those of James. I am grateful to the people there for the warmth of their hospitality, if not for the warmth of their weather. In what was supposed to be the middle of their Australian summer I had to borrow an overcoat to keep warm. As always, a number of people have contributed to the writing of this book but I would particularly like to thank Simon Johnston for reading the manuscript and correcting a number of errors. I have tried to indicate the source of quotes and ideas in the endnotes. If I failed to do so I apologise. I have also





included a number of biblical references in the endnotes so as not to interrupt the text itself too much. Placing them there does not indicate they are unimportant and the reader is encouraged to consult them. The NIV Inclusive Language Version has been used throughout. In order for you to read the relevant biblical passage from the Letter of James, the text of his letter is found on pages 219 to 224.

May the wisdom of James help us to live wisely in the midst of some very foolish times so that we can further enhance the splendour of 'our glorious Lord Jesus Christ'.

