

James

*(If pseudonymous, written between 70-110 AD after the death of James (ca. 62))*³⁹

Background

Authorship

Brown notes that when it comes to the name “James” one must first recognize that there are several in the NT.⁴⁰ Fortunately for the reader, the two members of “The Twelve” named James (i.e. the son of Zebedee and the son of Alphaeus) can be “dismissed as extremely unlikely candidates for authorship”⁴¹ according to Brown, and the “only truly plausible candidate” is James, the brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3).⁴² This particular James, though not being among the twelve and not having travelled with Jesus, nevertheless rose to prominence after the resurrected Jesus appeared to him (1 Cor 15:7). Before being martyred ca. 62 AD he became an apostle (Gal 1:19), a leader and spokesman for the church in Jerusalem (Gal 2:9), and was later (after his death) referred to by some as a “bishop of bishops.”⁴³ While the majority of scholars see the letter of James as pseudonymous, the heritage of James can yet be seen in that this letter reflects his “traditional Jewish belief and piety.” One reason in favor of pseudonymity is, once more, the skillful use of Greek in the letter. Similar to the cases of I and II Peter, the letter of James does not reflect the writing of a villager whose mother tongue was Semitic and not Greek. Another reason is the “advanced ecclesiology” or church structure evidenced in 3:1 and 5:14-15, which suggests a dating late in the first century after James’ death.⁴⁴

Audience and Circumstances

In terms of the specific audience some scholars, like Brown, think that there is not enough evidence to make a firm conclusion on the issue. Other scholars, like Douglas Moo, argue that “the letter reveals quite a lot about the people to whom it was written.”⁴⁵ Moo argues that the scholarly consensus is that James was addressed to Jewish Christians. This is evident, for example, in that the believers are meeting in synagogues (2:2) and monotheism is perceived as a foundational belief (2:19).⁴⁶ Less clear is the reference to the “Diaspora” and “the twelve tribes” (1:1) which some scholars interpret as a reference to Jewish believers while

³⁹ Brown, p.726.

⁴⁰ e.g. Matt 4:21; 10:3; 27:56; Luke 6:16.

⁴¹ Brown, p.725.

⁴² Brown, p.725-27.

⁴³ Brown, p.727.

⁴⁴ Brown, p.741-42. Brown also discusses the relation between James, the Jesus tradition, and the Pauline tradition which points to James being pseudonymous. For an extended treatment of James and the Jesus tradition (Especially the Sermon on the Mount) see Brown pp.734-36.

⁴⁵ Moo, *James*, p.23.

⁴⁶ Moo, *James*, p.23.

others see this as a reference to all Christians over a broad geographical spread.⁴⁷ The latter cannot be refuted in that Intertestamental Judaism referred to the true people of God in the last days as “the twelve tribes” which was initially brought to fulfillment, according to some scholars, with the choosing of the 12 apostles and is ultimately fulfilled with the gathering of all Christians Jew/Gentile into the kingdom of God (cf. Rev 7:5-8 and 21:9-14). The NT also refers to Gentile Christians as part of the “Diaspora” (e.g. 1 Pet 1:1), being away from home in the “kingdom sense” and not belonging to this world/age.⁴⁸ The use of Jewish imagery in James, moreover, can be explained by the fact that it was not uncommon for Gentiles to be loyal to and heavily influenced by Judaism after being evangelized by Jewish Christians.⁴⁹ In the end, one has a reason to question the consensus that is argued to exist by Moo; and this is why Brown guesses that the letter was addressed to both Jewish *and* Gentile communities originally evangelized by Christians from Jerusalem.⁵⁰

The situation being addressed in James is also a matter of dispute. Some argue that the churches are poor and oppressed, and therefore the purpose of the letter is to encourage the people of God to remain faithful in the midst of their trials and to remind them of the surety of God’s justice and judgment on their oppressors.⁵¹ The problem with this approach, for Moo, is that it does not capture the full spectrum of issues being addressed, nor the full spectrum of people being addressed. For example, rich Christians are arguably addressed in 1:10; and moreover, the main thrust of the letter, it appears, is for the church not to be corrupted by the world and to be genuine in their Christian profession through their lifestyle (cf. 1:27; 4:4).⁵² Moo argues that the socioeconomic situation of the churches may be understood better in relation to their spiritual condition; in other words, perhaps their poverty and hardship (cf. 1:2-4) and/or riches (cf. 1:10) brought to the surface some basic spiritual issues that the author wanted to address.⁵³

The Message of James

While some may disagree with approaches to James that posit an exclusively poor and oppressed audience, such an approach is worthy of our attention in that it captures (perhaps better than most) the strong critique of social oppression, the emphasis on God’s preference for those on the margins, and God’s word to the poor and socially ostracized.⁵⁴ Moreover,

⁴⁷ Moo, *James*, p.23.

⁴⁸ Moo, *James*, pp.23-4.

⁴⁹ Brown, pp.742-43.

⁵⁰ Brown, pp.742-43.

⁵¹ see Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James* (2002). This work treats James as the founding document of liberation theology and God’s preferential option for the poor.

⁵² Moo, *James*, pp.24-5.

⁵³ Moo, *James*, pp.24-5.

⁵⁴ Such is a natural result of reading scripture with what the lecturer calls “a Matthew 25 hermeneutical ethic,” in other words, intentionally reading scripture from the perspective of those on the margins and how the message of scripture relates to and affects such persons. This ethic takes seriously the words of Christ “what you do to the least of these you have done to me” (Matt 25) and seeks to apply that command to the practice of reading the bible – i.e. “what you do to the least of these [in interpreting Scripture] you have done to me.”

given the many socioeconomic privileges of the western church, reading James through the lens of the oppressed may prove to be an invaluable and much needed critique of and challenge to our own Christian living. Elsa Tamez is one scholar who takes such an approach to James, and we will briefly discuss her treatment here.

*Tamez's Analysis of James*⁵⁵

For Tamez, the overarching goal of James is to give advice to immigrant Christian communities that will help them to “live a genuine faith as they face difficulties and the temptations that surround them”⁵⁶ which included economic deprivation, religious persecution, and seduction by Greco-Roman societal practices. Tamez divides James into two major themes: advice to the church in relation to life in Greco-Roman society, and advice to the church in relation to their own communal living. The former theme is key in that if the church lives among the outside culture in the way that it should, then its own life as a church community will naturally flourish (or at least it should).

Tamez observes that the author of James firstly invites the church to see their suffering from a different perspective; this is done through “sayings about the [positive] future of the poor (1:9-10), the [positive] outcome for those who endure the test (1:2-4, 12), and the [special place of the] poor as God’s elect (2:5).”⁵⁷ This not only elevates the purview of an oppressed people to see beyond their present condition, but it reminds them that their suffering does not denigrate their value as human beings but rather prepares and qualifies them for glory. Moreover, the author severely criticizes those who oppress the poor by withholding wages and announces their impending destruction (5:1-6).⁵⁸ From this perspective one begins to see that the God of James is the God of the poor and oppressed, and therefore if one has “saving faith” in this God it should manifest itself in a similar concern and care for the marginalized – lip service isn’t good enough (2:14-16).

James’ ethic of placing the poor at the center of one’s worldview can also be seen in other ways; for example, the author admonishes the church not to accommodate or conform to the values of Greco-Roman society which promoted social inequality and materialism. The honor-shame culture of the Greco-Roman world prohibited the equal treatment of rich and poor as the rich deserved greater honor,⁵⁹ and therefore the author of James warns the church not to replicate such behavior in treating the rich preferentially in worship gatherings (2:1-13). In regards to materialism, the church is warned against being caught up with wealth and prestige at the expense of one’s commitment to the poor and to a life of love (3:13-4:17). Such behavior is categorized as spiritual adultery (4:4), for to deny the poor and oppressed in favor of one’s own selfish interests is to deny God.⁶⁰ It is no surprise, then, that the author defines true religion from the outset as having two fundamental aspects: solidarity with the

⁵⁵ The following is based primarily on the article by Tamez, “James: a Circular Letter for Immigrants”, pp.369-80.

⁵⁶ Tamez, “James”, pp.369-72.

⁵⁷ Tamez, “James”, pp.372-73.

⁵⁸ Tamez, “James”, pp.373.

⁵⁹ Tamez, “James”, pp.373.

⁶⁰ Tamez, “James”, pp.377.

defenseless, the poor, and the oppressed; and nonconformity to the world (1:27).⁶¹ This kind of religion would naturally *do* the word rather than simply listen to it (1:19-26); it would naturally speak life rather than curses against one's brother or sister (3:1-12); it would stand in solidarity with those who wait patiently for the coming Judgment (5:7-12); it would pray fervently for all who suffer, rejoice with those who rejoice, and would seek to restore all who wander from the truth (5:13-20).

Discussion: How does the message of James coincide and/or differ from the message of 1 Peter in terms of how the early Christians were to live wisely in a pagan world?

Critical and Theological Issues

Faith and Works in James vs. Paul – a contradiction?

Brown notes that one may struggle with making sense of what appears to be contradictory messages from James and Paul in relation to faith and works.⁶² For Paul says “a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law” (Rom 3:28) while James says that “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (Jas 2:24); and *both* writers appeal to Abraham to prove their point. At first glance it seems as if the author of James is correcting Paul's teaching; however, as Brown points out, what is being corrected is a perversion and distortion (or misunderstanding) of Paul's teaching, which was that abstract belief was all that mattered. The author of James wants to emphasize to his audience that faith without works is meaningless, and this is precisely the teaching of Paul; for Paul also said that faith works through love (Gal 5:6) and that if one has faith but does not have love he is nothing (1 Cor 13:2). Therefore Brown is correct to say that while Paul was against the idea of circumcision and ritualistic practices justifying the sinner, he preached that faith in what God had done in Christ was “a faith that involved a commitment of life.”⁶³ Put differently, according to Paul *and* James, faith is not only accepting Christ's sacrifice for one's sin but also embracing the wider purpose of that sacrifice which is to renew one's entire life before God.

⁶¹ Tamez, “James”, pp.377.

⁶² Brown, pp.732-34.

⁶³ Brown, p.733.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brown, R.E., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (1997).

Donelson, L.R., *I & II Peter and Jude: a Commentary* (The New Testament Library; 2010).

Ehrman, B.D., *The New Testament: a Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings, 4th ed.* (2008).

Gonzalez, C.G., *1&2 Peter and Jude* (Belief: a Theological Commentary on the Bible; 2010).

Harink, D., *1&2 Peter* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; 2009).

Moo, D.J., *The Letter of James* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; 2000).

Moo, J., "Continuity, Discontinuity, and Hope: the Contribution of New Testament Eschatology to a Distinctively Christian Environmental Ethos", *Tyndale Bulletin* 61.1 (2010) pp.21-44.

Tamez, E., "James: a Circular Letter for Immigrants", *Review and Expositor* 108 (2011) pp.369-380.