

Who is the Audience for the Book of James?

James 1:1 - “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations”

- This indicates Jewish Christians – the church was predominantly Jewish at this time
- Some were probably scattered after the stoning of Stephen – see Acts 7:54-8:3
- Others were scattered after Herod Agrippa I killed the apostle James in 44 A.D. and harasses the Church – Acts 12:1-3

What is the Purpose of the Book of James?

James was written as a sermon for public reading in the gathering of the mainly Jewish Christians around the area of Jerusalem. It was written to exhort early believers to Christian maturity and holiness of life, toward a faith that is demonstrated in their lives. Consider James 1:22: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” The epistle deals with every area of life –what we are, what we do, what we say, what we feel, and what we have.

The main point of James is how Biblical faith becomes manifest in our lives. Faith, when it is real faith, moves beyond our inner contemplations. Prayer, and worship into our public lives. This means not only our Sunday lives but also our Monday through Saturday lives. This is often where our faith becomes costly, because when we are engaged in the world, we are participating in non-Christian institutions often governed by non-Christian customs and practices. The challenge is discerning where a Christian may make an impact of love, service, and respect for individuals in a world living out of greed, self-interest, and pushing people around. James writes about making a Christian witness out there in the sordid world. When non-Christians see love and integrity demonstrated—often at personal cost—they will be drawn to the faith and want to become part of something which fulfills needs more deeply than the world of commerce can fill.

James and the Idea of Christian Discipleship

As we study the book of James, we will focus on what James wrote about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple is one who follows another. As Christians, we follow Jesus. The word “follow” implies that the ideas, teachings, behavior, and outlook of the one being followed are all accepted and believed and they shape our own commitments and actions. The disciples of Jesus were first called Christians in the very early church at Antioch (see Acts 11:26).

Being a disciple entails:

- Putting Jesus first (Matthew 10:32-39, Mark 8:34-38, Luke 14:26-27, John 21:15-19)
- Following Jesus’ teachings (John 8:31-32)
- Showing fruit (John 15:5-8)
- Loving others (John 13:34-35, I John 3:23)

The Bible clearly teaches how people are saved. Once saved, then discipleship begins. James is a book that teaches how we can live to walk with God. This is how we can be known as disciples of Jesus.

When was the Book of James Written?

James 1:1 refers to a time when Christian Jews were scattered among the nations. Some date the letter to the early 60’s A.D. – before James is martyred in 62 A.D. More probably, however, it was written before 50 A.D. based on the following evidence:

- 1) The distinctively Jewish nature of the book, including Hebrew symbolism. For example, Abraham is referred to as “our father” in James 2:21, and God is given the Old Testament name of “the Lord of the Sabbath” in James 5:4.
- 2) Simple church order – James 3:1; 5:14
- 3) No reference to the Gentiles – not admitted before 45-49 A.D. – the church was still predominantly Jewish

- 4) The Greek term used for “meeting” or “assembly” in James 2:2 is the origin of the English word “synagogue,” which is a different word than was used for “church” in the Greek.
- 5) No mention of the Council of Jerusalem which met in 49 A.D.

What is the Style of Writing in the Book of James?

Unlike much of the New Testament letters that were written to a specific church or individual, James wrote for a wider audience. Unlike much of the Apostle Paul’s writings which are often theological in focus, James wrote about how Christians should live as Christ’s disciples. Some have compared the book of James to the Old Testament book of Proverbs, with its compilation of wisdom about human behavior. The book includes more than 40 references to the Old Testament.

What is the Historical Context of the Book of James?

For all in 45-49 A.D., Jews, Christians and Gentiles, all remain under Roman rule. In Judea, the regional ruler was Herod Agrippa II, the great grandson of Herod the Great, who was king when Jesus was born in Bethlehem (see Matthew 2 and Luke 1:5). Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, had John the Baptist beheaded. Later he was instrumental in Jesus trial. This helped him in his relationship with Pontius Pilate (see Matthew 14, Luke 13:31ff, Luke 23:7-12, Acts 4:27).

Herod Agrippa I was the nephew of Herod Antipas (see Acts 12). He was very tactful with the Jews. He took sides with the Jews against the Christians, resulting in him killing the apostle James and harassing the church. This resulted in the Jewish Christians leaving Jerusalem for other cities. His son, Herod Agrippa II, became king in 48 A.D., 4 years after his father had died. The Roman emperor at this time was Claudius. The book of James was probably written between the reign of Herod Agrippa I and Herod Agrippa II.

In the meantime, after Christ’s resurrection and ascension, the church in Jerusalem had been growing. Because of Herod Agrippa’s support of the Jews and harassment of the Christians, Jewish Christians had left Jerusalem. James had become the recognized leader and head of the church in Jerusalem, and thus responsible for the growth and nurture of the Jewish Christians.

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