

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

(Background, Theology, Main Themes)

I. Historical Setting

A. Authorship

1:1 – "James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ"

Longstanding tradition that this is James, the "brother of the Lord" (see Gal. 1:19; Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18).

Reasons

(James and Acts 15, James' prominence in early church, allusions to teaching of Jesus, Jewishness of letter)

Current Scholarship (unqualified acceptance of tradition, "James" as a pseudonym, an edited work)

B. Date

Josephus (1st century Jewish historian) dates the death of James in AD 62. Some date James before, some after, depending upon conclusions regarding authorship.

C. Circumstances of the Readers

Greeting – "to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad"

Jewish Christians scattered abroad because of persecution (cf. Acts 11:19)

Content of the Letter

Church in the World (poverty, oppression, trial)

"World" in the Church (1:27, 4:4; double-minded, 1:5-8; preference to the rich, 2:1-4; factions in the community, 4:1-10, "wisdom from below," 3:14-16, arrogance, 4:13-17)

D. Characteristics of the Letter

Most Jewish in NT; similarity to the teaching of Jesus, perhaps oldest in NT, practical, authoritative, variety of topics.

II. Theological Character of James

A. God

Creator and Sustainer (Father of Lights, 1:17; made man in his image, 3:9)

Generous, Good, and Merciful (1:17, "every good gift from above"; 5:11, "full of mercy and compassion")

Unchangeable (1:17, "no variation or shadow of turning")

Jealous God (4:4, "friendship with the world is enmity against God")

One (2:19, "You believe that God is One"; 4:12, "There is One Lawgiver and Judge"; 2:10-11, the "whole law")

B. Christ

1:1 and 2:1; uses of the term "Lord"; "Judge" (see 4:12 & 5:9)

C. Eschatology

Throughout, James' message is shaped by an "eschatological" perspective.

Outcome of trials (1:2-4, 1:12)

Present Status (1:10-11)

Faithfulness in Poverty (2:5)

Deeds of Mercy (2:12-13)

Responsibility of Teachers (3:1)

Humility (4:10)

Judgment of the Ungodly Rich (5:1-6)

Speech (5:9, 5:12)

Reclamation of the "Wandering" Brother (5:19-20)

D. Christian Life

Wholehearted commitment to God (1:6, 4:8)

Obedience to the Word of God – emphasis on community (1:27, 2:8, 2:14-26, 4:11)

Prayer (1:6-8, 4:3, 5:16)

E. Wisdom

1:5 and 3:13-18; emphasis on manner of life

Wisdom is the ability to understand the will of God and to obey it. The wise person is defined by what he/she does.

F. Poverty/Piety Motif

- God has a particular concern for the poor, the downtrodden, the outcasts (Ps. 68:5; Dt. 10:18).
- God's people must manifest a similar concern for helpless people (Amos 2:6-7).
- There is a tendency to identify "the poor" with the pious (Psalm 10).
- Wealthy and powerful people tend to become identified with the wicked.

G. Faith, Works, and Justification (cf. 2:14-26)

LITERARY STRUCTURE OF JAMES

1) No Structure (Martin Dibelius)

Not "chaotic" or "incoherent," but no logical or thematic development. James consists of loosely connected units with little integration and no unifying train of thought. No definitive social setting can be discerned and there is no "theology" of James. James is a transmitter of traditions. There is no "contextual" interpretation of isolated units.

2) "Highly" Structured (Fred Francis, Peter Davids)

Davids moved in the opposite direction of Dibelius and discerned in James an organized letter built around three themes: testing, wisdom, wealth.

- I. Double Opening Statement 1:2-27
 - A. Testing, Wisdom, Wealth 1:2-11
 - B. Testing, Speech, Generosity 1:12-27 (thematic expansion)
- II. Body 2:1-5:6
 - A. Excellence of Poverty and Generosity 2:1-26 (wealth)
 - B. The Demand for Pure Speech 3:1-4:12 (wisdom)
 - C. Testing Through Wealth 4:13-5:6 (testing)
- III. Closing Statement 5:7-20

3) "Loosely" Structured (Douglas Moo, Richard Bauckham)

Moo sees "Spiritual Wholeness" as the controlling theme in the letter body.

Introduction (1:1)

- I. The Pursuit of *Spiritual Wholeness*: The Opportunity Afforded by Trials (1:2-18)
- II. The Evidence of *Spiritual Wholeness*: Obedience to the Word (1:19-2:26)
- III. The Community Dimension of *Spiritual Wholeness*: Pure Speech and Peace, Part 1 (3:1-4:3)
- IV. A Summons to *Spiritual Wholeness* (4:4-10)
- V. The Community Dimension of *Spiritual Wholeness*: Pure Speech and Peace, Part 2 (4:11-12)
- VI. The Worldview of *Spiritual Wholeness*: Understanding Time and Eternity (4:13-5:11)

Conclusion (5:12-20)

4) Another "Thematic" Approach (Curtis Vaughan; see also John MacArthur and D. Edmond Hiebert)

Curtis Vaughan – "Real Christianity"

Introduction 1:1

- I. *Real Christians* Persevere Under Trial 1:2-18
 - II. *Real Christians* Respond Obediently to God's Word 1:19-27
 - III. *Real Christians* Practice the Royal Law of Love 2:1-13
 - IV. *Real Christians* Possess a Living Faith, a Faith Which Expresses Itself in Good Works 2:14-26
 - V. *Real Christians* Exercise Control Over the Tongue 3:1-12
 - VI. *Real Christians* Manifest Heavenly Wisdom 3:13-18
 - VII. *Real Christians* Renounce Worldly Wisdom and Its Manifestations 4:1-12
 - VIII. *Real Christians* Renounce Arrogance and its Various Manifestations in Life 4:11-5:6
- Conclusion: Appeals to believers in the various circumstances in life 5:7-20

IMPORTANT STRUCTURAL DYNAMICS

Thematic Discourse Indicators (*Inclusio* and Summary/Transitions)

USES of *Inclusio*

Inclusio is a device by which an author uses the same or similar words or phrases at the beginning and end (or near the end) of sections to mark those sections as constituting a distinct movement in the discourse. In James, there are four uses of *inclusio* that are significant discourse markers.

- **James 1 (1:2-4 // 1:12 // 1:25) [overlapping *inclusios*]**

<p>[1:2-4 joy (charan) endurance (hupomonē) trials (peirasmos) testing (dokimion) perfect work (ergon teleion)</p>	<p>[1:12] blessed (makarios) endures (hupomenō) trial (peirasmos) approved (dokimos)</p>	<p>1:25] blessed (makarios) remains (paramenō) perfect law, doer of work (teleion . . . ergon)</p>
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1:26-27 – Transition to the Letter Body (true "religion" in both words and deeds)

Comments:

The "blessed" person in Scripture is the one who stands in a favorable relationship to God. Consequently, the "blessed" person is described in terms of godly dispositions (cf. Mt. 5:1-13; Psalm 1 as examples). The "blessed" life stands in stark contrast to the value judgments of the world (counter-cultural).

Structurally, it appears that James is developing this "blessed person" theme in the opening chapter as he sets the stage for all that follows in the letter body. The overarching theme of *obedience* is developed in various ways from 1:2-1:21 building up to the explicit statement "be doers of the word" in the climactic section of the letter opening, 1:22-25. The transition to the letter body, 1:26-27, sums up chapter one by stating the practical manifestations of obedience and anticipates the themes that are developed in the subsequent essays (2:1-5:6).

- **Letter Body (2:12-13 // 4:11-12)**

2:12-13

speak (laleite)
do (poieite)
judgment by the law (nomou ... krinesthai)
"judgment" language (3X – both noun and verb forms)

4:11-12

speaking against (katalaleō; 3x)
doer of the law (poiētēs nomou)
judging the law (krinei nomon)
"judgment" language (6x – both noun and verb forms)

Comments:

This use of *inclusio* marks off the heart of the letter's body (2:1-5:6). The opening of the *inclusio* (2:12-13) summarizes and concludes the opening essay in the letter body (2:1-11), and the closing of the *inclusio* (4:11-12) forms a transition to the closing of the body of the letter (4:13-5:6). Thematically, both opening and closing essays concentrate specifically on issues of poverty and wealth. Thus, like the inclusions in chapter one, the *inclusio* embodied in 2:12-13 // 4:11-12 serves a unifying

function. The important thematic concepts include *law, judgment, speech, and action*. This sets up a strategic arrangement of the letter body with the important unit on *wisdom* at the center (3:13-18). (Cf. Outline and note the chiasmic arrangement)

- **Overlapping Inclusios (4:6 // 5:6)**

A fourth significant inclusio is built around the occurrence and reappearance of a rare term (*antitassō* – "to resist") in 4:6 and 5:6. This overlap of inclusios (2:12-13 / 4:11-12 and 4:6 / 5:6) creates a powerful knitting effect. This interlocking and weaving pattern serves the author's purpose by crafting a nuanced form of transition as he moves toward the book's concluding section.

SUMMARY TRANSITION STATEMENTS OF PROVERBIAL CHARACTER

In addition to the use of *inclusio* the author of James also employs several key expressions or units of proverbial character that function beyond their immediate context to link units at the broader discourse level. These expressions are generally of independent character. Commentators disagree concerning their exact function. Should they be taken with what precedes or follows? The answer is *both!* These "isolated" units serve two important transitional functions in the letter: 1) making smooth transitions from one unit to the next and 2) riveting the reader's attention on key themes.

- 1:12 (unifies chapter 1 as the centerpiece of the double *inclusio*)
- 1:26-27 (summarizes the opening chapter's emphasis on obedience and sets the agenda for the rest of the letter, concentrating attention on right speaking and right doing)
- 2:12-13 (summarizes the theme of mercy prominent in 2:1-11 and anticipates the topics found in 2:14-26 and 3:1-12)
- 3:13-18 (a central transition, marking a major turning point in the body of the letter, highlighting the nature of God's wisdom vs. the world's wisdom)
- 4:11-12 (mirrors 2:12-13 with key terms: *speech, law, judgment, doing*)
- 5:9 (reiterates themes of *speech* and *judgment*)
- 5:12 (stands as a bridge between 5:7-11 and 5:13-20, also focusing upon *speech* and *judgment* themes)

Note the strategic placement of these proverbial transition statements in the discourse. Also note that some of them have dual functions as transitions and as one end of an *inclusio*.

Double Introduction	1:1-11 [1:12] 1:13-25 [1:26-27]
Body Opening	2:1-11
Body Proper	[2:12-13] 2:14-3:12 [3:13-18] 4:1-10 [4:11-12]
Body Closing	4:13-5:6
Conclusion	5:7- [9] 11 [5:12] 5:13-20

THE IMPACT OF STRUCTURE ON “READING” JAMES

The Blessed Person Awaits God's Reward for Faithfulness (1:12)

Rounds off the topic of "trials" and employs the term "blessed" for the first time. Describes the joy of victory and the happiness of the one who endures.

Cf. Romans 8:18

The Blessed Person Understands Temptation's True Nature (1:13-16)

Shift from "trial" to "temptation" although the same Greek word is used (peirasmos).

Strong connection between 1:12 and 1:13-15

James addresses important questions: Is God to blame for our failure in the test? Is a God who allows trials a "good" God?

What is the true nature of temptation?

God is "untemptable" (only time in NT the word is used).

Temptation comes from within man. There is something flawed in our character, not in God.

The Blessed Person Understands God's True Nature (1:17-19a)

God's character is constant (unchanging), and God is the source of all that is good (creation story). But, more specifically, God's goodness is manifested in the fact that "he brought us forth by the word of truth."

Contrast between "death" (1:15) and "life" (1:18) by the use of a rare term translated "brought forth" or "give birth to" (only here in NT).

The Blessed Person Shuns Wickedness and Receives God's Word (1:19b-21)

How then should we respond in light of our tendency to sin and in light of God's goodness through the word of truth?

1:19 – be swift to hear ...

1:21 – lay aside all wickedness and receive the implanted Word

This is done "in humility."

The result – "the salvation of your souls."

The Blessed Person Obeys the Word (1:22-25)

The culmination of the chapter, an explicit call to obedience.

The image of the mirror and the shift in terminology from "word of truth" to "law of liberty."

Summary and Transition (1:26-27)

Specific manifestations of obedience: control of tongue (right speaking) compassion for those in need & keeping oneself unspotted from the "world" (right living).

THE GOD-CENTERED LIFE

James 4:6-5:6

In James 1:26-27 the author specifies three marks of genuine religion: control of the tongue, compassion and concern for the helpless, and separation from the "world." In the letter body (2:1-5:6) the author elaborates and develops these themes in various ways. In this lesson we will explore the theme of "keeping oneself unspotted from the world."

Throughout the letter, James is particularly concerned with a Christian "worldview," i.e. that his readers view life and live life from God's point of view.

Key Background Text: James 4:4

Key Background Concepts: "World" and "Friendship"

1) World – used in a moral sense, a measure or standard that is different from God's measure or standard; not measured by profession, but by actual attitudes and actions. (For a related text see 1 John 2:15-17)

2) Friendship – refers to the most highly esteemed relationships; intense intimacy; "soul-mate" – to see things the same way. (see James 2:23 – Abraham, a "friend of God.")

Structure of James 4:6-5:6

The author introduces a text (Prov. 3:34, God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble), then gives an exposition in reverse order.

Grace to the humble (4:7-10)

God resists the proud (4:11-5:6)

This suggests that the very essence of "worldliness" is pride/arrogance. It is a life that is totally self-centered rather than God-centered.

Critical, Condemning Speech (4:11-12; cf. Mt. 7:1-5)

Cf. James 3:9; 4:1-3

Only God can accurately judge another (4:12).

A specific "law"? – allusions to Lev. 19 (cf. 2:8) – "Love your neighbor as yourself"

Disregard for the Will of God (4:13-17)

Note the arrogance with regard to future plans – a practical atheism, living like there is no God.

This is foolish for two reasons.

1) Uncertainty of tomorrow 4:14 (cf. Prov. 27:1)

2) The Nature of Life 4:15 (see Job 7:7, 16; Psalm 39:5; 90:10)

Correction: Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills ..."

Misuse of Wealth (5:1-6)

Language reminiscent of the OT prophets – the Day of the LORD (cf. Isaiah 13:6)

Sinful attitudes and actions are condemned, not wealth in and of itself.

Specific reasons for judgment are stated.

1) selfish hoarding of wealth

2) manner of acquisition

3) pursuit of "luxury and pleasure"

4) oppression of the poor

OUTLINE OF JAMES

- 1:1 Letter Opening
- 1:2-27 Double Introduction: Living by Righteous Wisdom
 - 1:2-11 Handling Trials with Righteous Wisdom
 - 1:2-4 The Spiritual Benefit of Trials
 - 1:5-8 The Need for Righteous Wisdom
 - 1:9-11 Wise Attitudes for Rich and Poor
 - 1:12 *Overlapping Transition: Blessings for Those Who Persevere Under Trial*
 - 1:13-27 The Perils of Self-Deception
 - 1:13-16 Temptation's True Nature: Do Not Be Deceived
 - 1: 17-19a God's True Nature: He Gives the Word
 - 1:19b-21 Righteous Living Through the Word
 - 1:22-25 Do Not Be Deceived: Be Doers of the Word, (the Law of Liberty)
 - 1:26-27 *Transition: Self-Deception Regarding Speaking and Acting*
- 2:1-5:6 The Letter Body: Living the "Law of Liberty"
 - A 2:1-11 Body Opening: Violating the Royal Law through Wrong Speaking and Acting Inappropriately Towards the Poor
 - B 2:12-13 So Speak and So Act as One Being Judged by the Law of Liberty**
 - C 2:14-3:12 Wrong Acting and Speaking in Community
 - c1 2:14-26 Wrong Actions Toward the Poor
 - c2 3:1-12 Wrong Speaking
 - D 3:13-18 RIGHTEOUS VS. WORLDLY WISDOM**
 - C' 4:1-10 Prophetic Rebuke: A Call to Humility and Repentance
 - c'1 4:1-5 Rebuke of the Community's Words and Deeds
 - c'2 4:6-10 A Call to Repentance
 - B' 4:11-12 Do the Law, Do Not Judge It**
 - A' 4:13-5:6 Body Closing: Twin Calls to the Arrogant Rich (Presumption & Oppression)
 - a'1 4:13-17 A Rebuke of Arrogant Presumption
 - a'2 5:1-6 Judgment on the Arrogant Rich
 - 5:7-20 Conclusion: Enduring in Righteous Living in Community
 - 5:7-11 The Need for Patient Endurance
 - 5:12 *Transition: An Exhortation against Oath-Taking*
 - 5:13-20 The Need for Righteous Words in Community