

THE BOOK OF JAMES

ORIENTING DATA FOR JAMES

- **Content:** a treatise composed of short moral essays, emphasizing endurance in hardship and responsible Christian living, with special concern that believers practice what they preach and live together in harmony
- **Author:** James, brother of our Lord (Gal 1:19), who led the church in Jerusalem for many years (Acts 15; Gal 2:1–13)—although questioned by many
- **Date:** unknown; dated anywhere from the mid–40s A.D. to the 90s, depending on authorship; probably earlier than later
- **Recipients:** believers in Christ among the Jewish Diaspora
- **Occasion:** unknown, but the treatise shows concern for real conditions in the churches, including severe trials, dissensions caused by angry and judgmental words, and abuse of the poor by the wealthy
- **Emphases:** practical faith on the part of believers; joy and patience in the midst of trials; the nature of true (Christian) wisdom; attitudes of the rich toward the poor; abuse and proper use of the tongue

OVERVIEW OF JAMES

Traditionally James has been read as a more or less random collection of ethical instructions for believers in general. But there is probably more order to it than first meets the eye. The main concerns are mapped out in 1:2–18, which basically takes the form of consolation to believers in exile: Trials may serve to test for the good (vv. 2–4, 12) or tempt toward evil (vv. 13–15); wisdom is God’s good gift for enduring and profiting from trials (vv. 5–8, 16–18); in God’s eyes the low and high position of poor and rich are reversed (vv. 9–11).

The next section (1:19–2:26) is in three parts, held together by James’s concern that his hearers put their faith into practice—at the very practical level of one’s speech and of caring for the poor. He begins by denouncing community dissension, insisting that people actually do what the word says, not just talk about it (1:19–25). This is applied specifically to the tongue and to caring for the poor (vv. 26–27) and then to wrong attitudes toward the rich and the poor (2:1–13). He concludes the section where he began, by insisting that faith must be accompanied by deeds appropriate to faith (vv. 14–26).

The next section (3:1–4:12) returns to the matter of dissension within the believing communities. He starts with the perennial problem child—the tongue (3:1–12; cf. 1:26), which in this case is aimed at their teachers in particular. Returning to the theme of true wisdom, which leads to peace (3:13–18; cf. 1:5–8), James then attacks their quarrels head-on (4:1–12).

Related to the way that the first mention of wisdom (1:5–8) is followed by a blessing of the poor and warnings to the rich, here in reverse order there is a twofold word to the rich (4:13–17; 5:1–6) and a call to patience on the part of the suffering poor (5:7–11). The letter concludes with a warning against oaths (v. 12), a call to prayer—especially prayer for the sick (vv. 13–18)—and correction of the wayward (vv. 19–20).

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING JAMES

James is admittedly difficult to read through, because of its many starts and stops, twists and turns. But along with seeing the threads that hold things together, which we noted above, several other matters should help you to read this letter with better understanding.

First, in terms of content, you will find the letter to have a variety of kinds of material in it, all of it directed specifically at Christian behavior, rather than propounding Christian doctrine. Included are a goodly number of sayings or aphorisms that look like Old Testament wisdom on the one hand and the teachings of Jesus on the other. That is, much as the Synoptic Gospels often present the teaching of Jesus in the form of sayings—which at times ring with echoes of Jewish wisdom—so with James. This is found both in his emphasis on wisdom as such and in the frequent aphoristic nature of so much that he says. In this vein you should also look for his frequent echoes of the teachings of Jesus (e.g., 1:5–6; 2:8; 5:9, 12). As with all Jewish wisdom (see the introduction to the Old Testament Writings, p. 120), the concern is not doctrinal or logical, but practical; the test of its truthfulness has to do with how it works out in the reality of everyday life.

Second, in terms of form, you will find a kind of sermonic quality to James. As you read, note the various rhetorical devices he employs, especially some that reflect the Greco-Roman diatribe (see “Specific Advice for Reading Romans,” p. 319)—direct address (“my [dear] brothers and sisters” 14x), rhetorical questions (e.g., Jas 2:3–7, 14, 21; 3:11–12, 13; 4:1, 5), and the use of an imagined interlocutor (2:18–20; 4:12, 13, 15). Thus James’s use of the Wisdom tradition is not proverbial but sermonic; he hopes to persuade and thus to facilitate change in the way God’s people live in community with one another.

Third, don’t fall into the habit, which is easy in this case, of reading James as though it were addressed to individual believers about their one-on-one relationship with God and others. Nothing could be further from James’s own concerns. From the outset his passion is with life within the believing community. While it is true that each must assume his or her individual responsibility to make the community healthy, the concern is not with personal piety as much as it is with healthy communities. To miss this point will cause you to miss what drives this letter from beginning to end.

Finally, you need to read the sections about the rich and poor with care (1:9–11, 27; 2:1–13; 4:13–5:6), since it is not easy to tell whether both groups are members of the believing community. In any case, James is decidedly—as is the whole of Scripture—on the side of the poor. The rich are consistently censured and judged, not because of their wealth per se, but

because it has caused them to live without taking God into account and thus to abuse the lowly ones for whom God cares.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 397–399.