

THE LETTER OF JAMES

AN INTRODUCTION

James 1:1 opens with a simple, authoritative greeting: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The New Testament names several men called James, and identifying the epistle’s author requires careful attention to early Christian tradition and context.

1. James the Author

The author opens the letter by naming himself “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” a title that signals both humility and authority. The New Testament mentions several men named James, but early Christian tradition helps clarify which one authored the epistle.

There are at least six men bearing the name “James” in the New Testament:

- **James, son of Zebedee**, called “the Greater” – an apostle (Matt 10:2; Luke 8:51; Acts 1:13; 12:2)
- **James, son of Alphaeus**, called “the Less” – an apostle (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13)
- **James, the brother of the Lord** (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3)
- **James, bishop of Jerusalem** (Acts 12:17; Gal 1:19)
- **James, the eyewitness to the Resurrection** (1Cor 15:7)
- **James, author of the Epistle** (Jas 1:1)

Among the six figures named James, three are widely understood to be the same person: James the brother of the Lord, James the bishop of Jerusalem, and James the Resurrection eyewitness. This James is a central leader of the early Church, alongside Peter and Paul. He presided over the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) and delivered the decisive judgment welcoming Gentiles into the Christian community. This James is a central leader of the early Church, alongside Peter and Paul. He presided over the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) and delivered the decisive judgment welcoming Gentiles into the Christian community.

There is less agreement about whether this same person is James, son of Alphaeus; he is certainly not James, son of Zebedee.

The epistle’s tone—pastoral, authoritative, steeped in wisdom—matches what we know of James the Just, Jesus’ brother and Jerusalem’s bishop. The title “servant of God” echoes figures like Abraham, Moses, and David, underscoring his role in guiding the Gospel’s expansion. From the contents of the epistle we can conclude that the author is well known to the early Christian community, bears a great deal of authority, and has wisdom held in high regard.

The strongest historical and theological evidence points to James the brother of the Lord, bishop of Jerusalem, and eyewitness to the Resurrection as the author of the Epistle. His authority, prominence, and pastoral voice align seamlessly with the letter's content and its reception in the early Church.

2. Date

James likely composed the epistle sometime before 62 AD, the year in which he was martyred. According to Josephus in *Antiquities* 20.9.200–203, James the bishop of Jerusalem—the same figure widely recognized as James the brother of the Lord and the Resurrection eyewitness—was executed by stoning in Jerusalem. His death underlines both his prominence and the tensions surrounding early Christian leadership in the city.

3. Audience

James addresses his epistle “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” a phrase that signals both continuity with Israel's story and the widening horizon of the Gospel. The twelve tribes refers to Israel as a whole, while the Dispersion designates Jews living outside Palestine—communities scattered across the Mediterranean world since the exiles of the eighth and sixth centuries BCE.

Given this, it is reasonable to understand James as writing to the remnant of Israel living beyond Jerusalem and Judea who were now entering the New Covenant through faith in Jesus the Messiah. His audience is both historically rooted and spiritually expanding: Jewish followers of Jesus whose identity is being reshaped by the fulfillment of God's promises.

James's reference to the twelve tribes evokes three central themes of the New Covenant—each crucial for interpreting the letter:

- **Restoration of Israel** — the reunification of Israel and Judah, including the lost northern tribes and those dispersed throughout the world.
- **Union with the Gentiles** — the prophetic vision of Israel joined with the nations in a single redeemed people.
- **The Davidic Messiah** — the fulfillment of God's promise through the Son of David, Jesus Christ.

By addressing the “twelve tribes,” James signals that the Gospel is not a break from Israel's story but its long-awaited fulfillment. His audience stands at the intersection of ancient identity and new creation, called to live out the covenant's restoration, unity, and messianic hope.

4. Genre, Purpose, & Structure

James is best understood as a letter of exhortation, even though it lacks the formal structure typical of Paul's correspondence. Its style draws on the rhetorical diatribe—a teaching method using sharp address, imagined dialogue, and moral challenge. The social setting is intentionally broad rather than local, allowing the message to speak to the whole dispersed community of believers.

At its core, James is a protreptic diatribe, a form of writing meant to persuade readers to adopt a particular way of life. Its central conviction is the stark incompatibility between friendship with the world and friendship with God. These two “friendships” represent rival visions of reality—one shaped by self-interest and instability, the other by wholehearted devotion to God. James urges his readers to choose the latter, offering practical wisdom for living faithfully within a world that pulls in the opposite direction.

James reinterprets the symbolic world of Israel's Scriptures—law, prophets, and wisdom—through the confession of Jesus as Messiah and Lord. What makes the letter distinctive is how fully it engages all three dimensions, weaving them into guidance for daily life: speech, justice, humility, endurance, and communal integrity. Above all, James is a practical letter, aimed at shaping behavior in the real circumstances of its audience.

The epistle also displays clear literary coherence. Themes introduced in 1:2–27 become fully developed in a series of tightly argued sections. The structure can be traced through the flow of James's exhortation:

- **Part 1 — James 1:2–27** — Introduction: The epitome of exhortation
- **Part 2 — James 2:1–26** — Faith and deeds
- **Part 3 — James 3:1–12** — Speech: its power and peril
- **Part 4 — James 3:13–4:10** — Conversion and the reordering of life
- **Part 5 — James 4:11–5:20** — Arrogance, patience, and faithful speech