

**James the Just, the brother of Jesus
- a misunderstood New Testament figure?
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It is a common historical truism to say that history is written by the winners. The protagonists in the ideological struggle about what it means to be a Christian that led to the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, were those on the one hand who believed that Christians should obey the Mosaic Law, and Paul and his followers on the other who saw no such necessity, and particularly not for the Gentiles whom they were actively evangelising. Had the legalists prevailed, Christianity would have remained limited to being a sect within traditional Judaism with little or no evangelical fervour. The Jesus cult would have probably become extinguished in the conflict with Rome that scattered the Jews, in common with similar Jewish sects of the period. The Roman suppression of Judaism, and the aggressive evangelisation of Gentiles was to see Christianity become an increasingly Gentile religious movement. One consequence is that most of what we know from New Testament sources about the very early Church period comes from the representatives (Paul, Luke) of the party that eventually prevailed. Because of that, the New Testament documents that reflect the views of the more Jewishly orientated Christians tend to be interpreted against the background of the dominant Pauline paradigm.

This – largely unconscious - interpretation bias explains why many commentators on the New Testament have puzzled over why James, the Lord's brother became so prominent in Jerusalem, and why he pronounced judgement at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, when that might appear more appropriate for an apostle, and more especially Peter, to whom Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom.

Apart from a brief mention in Acts 12, James does not appear in scripture until Acts 15. Paul tells us that James is one of the people to whom Jesus had appeared after the resurrection, but neither fact seems sufficient to explain why James took such a prominent role, nor why it was that his judgement seems to have been accepted by the council, and more importantly, though with some reservations, by the warring parties to the dispute. This suggests that James must have already taken actions that put him in a special relationship to the parties to the dispute, in a way that also gave him the authority within the church to act as he did¹.

¹ James appears in Acts once more (Acts 21:18), when he is surrounded by the Jerusalem elders, who were collectively responsible for the Godless proposals (v20-24) presented to Paul and which he went along with, to his imprisonment. They clearly believed that Jews

Within the New Testament documents the material that seems relevant is the Epistle of James, which is usually taken to have been written by him. Because of the bias mentioned above, this letter is commonly interpreted as a polemic by James against Paul's epistle to the Galatians. That is, however a superficial reading based on cherry picking a few verses (James 2:17-24) rather than understanding the thrust of the letter taken as a whole. Taken as a whole the purpose of the book is seeking to resolve disputes between parties who dislike each other and are in conflict with words (James 3) and worse (James 4:1-2).

For James to have the authority he had in Acts 15. it therefore seems almost certain that James wrote this letter before the event in Acts 15, as the content of the book deals with the same issues as Acts 15. At the very least by the time of Acts 15 he must have been widely known for having the views expressed within it.

An outline of the Epistle of James

The book is initially addressed to "*the twelve tribes in the dispersion*", which is to say, to Jews irrespective of where they live, but James 2:1 shows he is actually writing to those who "*hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ*", and not to Jews generally.

The believers being addressed are facing trials (1:2-4) for which they need divine wisdom (1:5) which they must be careful to acquire (1:6-8), irrespective of their social or financial position (and hence their feeling of strength) (1:9-11). The believers face temptations (1:12) which stem from their own desires (1:14), which will destroy them (1:15). There is a risk of deception (1:16) - the good comes from the unchanging God (1:17) - and we are to be God's firstfruits (1:18).

James then states three principles, to be: a) swift to hear b) slow to speak c) slow to wrath (1:19), because wrath does not produce the righteousness of God (1:20). These are the core principles for dealing with people with whom we are in **conflict**.

James also makes clear each person has to be in the right place with God, avoiding evil, listening to God (1:21), doing God's will (1:23-24), and living in the **law of liberty** (1:25) and so being blessed in what he does. A man is

had to obey the law of Moses, even though they still accepted the exemptions for Gentiles (v25). By this time James was too compromised even to suggest caution about the impact of the proposals on the Gentiles to whom Paul ministered. For more on Paul's captivity see paulcap3_The cause_of_Pauls_captivity_stubbornness_RH_Johnston.pdf

deceived about religion if he cannot control his tongue (1:26), and the proof of the genuine is in a man's conduct (1:27) (rather than his words).

James then turns to particular issues that are giving rise to conflict. Christians are not to hold the faith, with **partiality** (James 2:1) - that is, "*giving attention to people's position, rank, popularity or circumstances, instead of their intrinsic condition*" (Vine NT Words). James 2:2-9 expands on this in connection with attitudes to the poor. Showing partiality is sinful (2:9), and James emphasises that failure to keep one part of the law is guilty of all (2:10-12). If the letter was addressed to the conflict of Acts 15, then it seems that **the party that was emphasising law keeping was guilty of partiality against the poor**². (This party clearly also judged people by their race.) Note the law under which judgement will be made is the **law of liberty** (2:12), not the law of Moses. The principle of the judgement under the law of liberty is that of **mercy, only those who show mercy, receive mercy** (2:13).

James then uses a **similar example against those who would rely on faith, without works**. (2:14-26). The proof of faith is the works that result from it, as with Abraham and Rahab. Belief in one God is insufficient, even demons have that (2:19).

So in Chapter 2 James has addressed the failings of both sides to the Acts 15 dispute by pointing out to both of them that their law keeping or belief is insufficient, and their faith must be expressed in practical action in their practical attitudes to the poor.

James now turns his attention to the teachers, all of them (and he includes himself), whose leadership has given rise to the issues. They will receive stricter judgement (James 3:1). James describes in graphic terms the dangers of uncontrolled speech, how difficult to control it is, and how much destruction it can cause (3:2-8). The parties have been using their tongues to bless God and curse men (3:9-10, compare Galatians 1:9), which should not be happening, and is fundamentally wrong - and contrary to nature (3:10-12).

Instead, the wise should reveal the quality of their faith by conduct and works

² Thus James' epistle provides some insight into unhealthy attitudes of the church in Jerusalem, which show similarities with Ezekiel 16:49-50 – the sin of Sodom – and may explain why Jerusalem was the first church to lose its lampstand, in the Jewish rebellion (AD 66-70). Thus Paul's enthusiastic collecting for the poor of Jerusalem may have sought to highlight these issues. It may also be that the poverty was the outcome of the ill-advised communistic experiment of Acts 4:32-5:11, during which productive assets (houses and lands) were disposed of to meet short term current consumption, leaving some Jerusalem church members permanently poor in the longer term.

done "*in the meekness of wisdom*" (3:13). James identifies the role of the teachers in the conflict as arising from envy and self-seeking, which, however heavenly wise it may seem, is actually earthly, sensual and demonic (3:14-15), and causes confusion and evil. (3:16).

The true wisdom, which the teachers should be imparting, is "*pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy*". The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (3:17-18). This is what James sees himself as seeking to do. He sees both the legalisers and the faith only groups as seeking to promote themselves, their views and have thereby created division.

In Chapter 4 James now turns to consider why this has happened, and why the groups are in conflict. His main target is probably still the teachers, since they are most likely to manifest the sins identified. James 4:1-2 suggests the conflict was far from gentlemanly disagreement – there were "*wars and fights*", "*murder and coveting*". James points firmly to the sins of self-centredness, covetousness and people wanting things for themselves. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (4:6). They must submit to God and resist the devil (4:7). They must seek God for cleansing, and become humble.(4:8-10). Speaking evil of brothers is to judge the law, but that is not our place (4:11-12). It is arrogance, boasting of power we do not possess, and is evil. (4:13-16).

In Chapter 5 James turns to consider the attitude of the true believers who are faced with dealing with the consequences.

Knowing what should be done, and not doing it is sin (4:17). The rich have grown rich at the expense of the poor (5:1-5). The rich have also murdered the righteous (5:6). It seems there really were people like this within the church.

The brethren are to strengthen their hearts, be patient and establish their hearts, (in the face of the conflicts and adversities James has been discussing) (5:7-8).

They must not grumble against each other, as that will lead to condemnation (5:9). They should take the prophets such as Job as their example of perseverance and endurance (in a time of suffering and conflict). They should not use oaths (people only use them in order to make lies convincing) (5:12).

James finishes with his understanding of the way believers should live and what they should seek to be doing, particularly in the context of people who have gone into error, as both parties in the conflict he is considering have done.(5:13-20), prayer like Elijah's being the example to follow.

In conclusion, the letter is mostly about the resolution of a conflict between legalists and those who believe in faith only. Both parties, because of their commitment to dogmas, are missing the point that beliefs must result in practical action, particularly to address the problems of the poor, and Christians should not judge others on the basis of their personal background or circumstances, but on what they are intrinsically. The conflict is largely a result of the influence teachers who are self-seeking. When dealing with the results of the conflict, other Christians need to strengthen themselves, not grumble or be tempted to join in, but seek to turn back those who have strayed, largely through effective fervent and hence powerful prayer.

James' letter fits the circumstances in the run up to the Council at Jerusalem well. He is addressing everyone involved in a conflict, and telling them not to fight each other. The conflict concerns differences of view concerning the role of faith and works. The letter should be understood as James' round robin to everyone before the Council took place. It lays out the issues, and firmly insists the matters have to be dealt with without conflict, and through repentance. He sees provision for the poor as of great importance. He refers to the **law of liberty**, in which showing mercy is the standard for assessing conduct.

James is highly critical of both parties. Unfortunately little (other than what is revealed here) survives to tell us what the conduct of the legalists was like, which is why the letter superficially appears to be an attack on Paul's stance in his letter to Galatians. Had we the same level of information about the legalists the letter would doubtless appear just as critical of them.

James can therefore be seen as a tough, no compromise mediator between the warring parties, a figure who has the respect of both. This is very apparent in Acts 15. After everyone has had their say, he lays out a resolution of the issues, which is acceptable to the Jerusalem church and apparently accepted by the parties to the dispute, at least at the time. (In 1 Corinthians 6:5 Paul tells Christians not to go to law before unbelievers but to find a wise man within the Christian community to resolve conflicts. This is what James was doing.)

James was perhaps particularly well suited to the task. He had had a post-resurrection experience of Jesus Christ. Moreover, as a half-brother of Jesus, he would have had many opportunities to see and understand the humanity of Jesus, and his general way of dealing with people. True, along with his mother and brothers, he had sought to save Jesus from what they viewed as extremism, but this arose from their - misplaced - loving concern. James should perhaps be seen as more fully reflecting the mind and character of Christ than any of the other principal parties – legalists and Peter and co. on the one hand, and Paul and co. on the other.

The implications

This understanding of James and of the timing and purpose of his letter has far reaching implications. James has often been seen as the leader of the Judaisers (suggested by his role in Acts 21), and hence part of an unhelpful legalistic extreme, which places Paul as the guardian of truth at the centre of the gospel. That must be firmly questioned, as James's letter and the Council at Jerusalem presents Paul as being a leader of a faction at one end of a spectrum of opinion, with James more central, and legalists at the other end. James is not a compromiser - rather he is indicating what is important about faith – the actions it leads to - and a desire for Christians to focus on faith in action, and avoid ideological conflicts and the tendency to judge people by irrelevant criteria.

From this perspective, much of Paul's writing then appears controlling, intolerant, self-preoccupied and egocentric. The tenor of Galatians presents a man who regards himself as above human correction as regards his teachings (Galatians 1), and who takes his stand on a supernatural revelation of Jesus Christ, a position that he condemned in others (Colossians 2:18). It seems that Paul never met Jesus in the flesh, unlike his apostles, and James. Paul's teaching owes much to his background as a Pharisee, he seeks to corral and control the faith of those who have come under his influence, unlike Jesus who taught and moved on, leaving his hearers to make of his teaching what they would, and allowing outsiders to use his name. A record of a meeting between Jesus during his earthly ministry and post-conversion Paul would have been very enlightening. James' letter may be the nearest we get to this, as James is much nearer the style of Jesus, who valued works of righteousness, condemned hypocrisy and self-seeking, cared about the poor and condemned the rich for their callousness, and was free of ideology.

These notes are intended to stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author: <mailto:johnstonrh@amen.org.uk> (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk). (12.4.2014; 4.9.2018)

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