

25.12

Authorship of James

Three views regarding the authorship of James have been expounded: (1) the letter was written by an unknown person named “James”; (2) the letter was written, as tradition holds, by James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus; (3) the letter was written pseudonymously by someone using the name of James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus.

James as the Work of an “Unknown James”

This suggestion that the author is an “unknown James” seizes on the fact that the author does not actually identify himself as “the brother of Jesus” or as the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Hypothetically, he could be anyone named “James” who considered himself to be a servant of Christ (1:1). Thus the letter could have been written by someone otherwise unknown to us. This view has had prominent supporters, including Martin Luther, but it is not widely held today.

The main attraction of this proposal is that it accounts for the problems scholars have with regarding James of Jerusalem as the author (see below) without alleging pseudonymity—an allegation that is offensive to those who regard the practice as deceptive or dishonest. Still, the author of this letter clearly expects his readers to know which James he is, and he seems to be writing to a broad audience, assuming that they will regard his words as authoritative.

Most scholars throughout history have concluded that the readers surely are expected to regard such words as the teaching of the only James who is ever called a pillar of the church (Gal. 2:9). Such a conclusion becomes even more likely if the letter is addressed to Christians living outside Palestine (James 1:1 [see EXPLORE 24.9]) by a church leader who presumably is within Palestine, where James of Jerusalem was in charge. Thus some modern scholars grant the possibility that the letter could have been written by an unknown Christian named James, but most consider this unlikely; the great majority thinks that the author must either be James of Jerusalem or someone using his name.

James as the Work of James, the Brother of Jesus

Interpreters who accept the traditional view that the letter really was written by James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus, emphasize points of continuity with traditions that would have been known by that individual. The author of this letter was familiar with Jewish wisdom literature, and James, leading the church in Jerusalem, could easily have become immersed in the wisdom tradition. The author of this letter also evinces knowledge of “Jesus sayings,” and obviously, the brother of Jesus would have had firsthand knowledge of things that Jesus taught and said. In addition, the letter’s sensitivity to the poor and its emphasis on economic equality (1:9–11; 2:1–7; 5:1–6) fit well with what is said elsewhere about James (Gal. 2:10) and the Jerusalem church (Acts 2:44–45; 4:34–37; 5:1–11; 6:1).

In a broader sense, many references in this letter are said to be suggestive of Palestinian conditions: the mention of early and late rain (James 5:7) is appropriate for the climate, the references to figs and olives and grapes (3:12) match the produce, and the descriptions of economic exploitation (2:5–7; 5:1–6) match what is known of inequities in the land during this time period. None of these points clinches the deal or proves that the letter is by James the brother of Jesus, but they do offer evidence that coheres with the letter's self-claim.

James as a Pseudepigraphical Composition

The possibility that the letter is pseudepigraphical is at least suggested by the fact that we have copies of four other writings from early Christianity attributed to James that clearly were not written by him: the *Protevangelium of James*, the *Apocryphon of James*, the *First Apocalypse of James*, and the *Second Apocalypse of James*. The first of these (written ca. 150) became a very popular book in Christian circles, being the first major writing to encourage the veneration of Mary and testifying to her perpetual virginity. The latter three writings are gnostic works found among the Nag Hammadi collection. Although none of these writings makes for a fair comparison with the first-century, Jewish-flavored letter attributed to James found in our New Testament, they do attest to how James was a popular choice for pseudonymous attribution.

Scholars who think that the New Testament Letter of James might be pseudepigraphical raise a number of objections to its ascription to James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus.

The Letter's Greek Flavor

The letter is written in elegant Greek, and when the author refers to the Scriptures, he appears to be reading from the Septuagint (a Greek translation) rather than from the original Hebrew (see, e.g., 4:6, citing Prov. 3:34). The letter also makes use of concepts and rhetoric derived from Greek philosophy (e.g., the diatribe). Many scholars question whether a Jewish peasant from Galilee would have been capable of writing such a letter. And, even if he were, why would he write it in Greek rather than in Aramaic or in Hebrew (especially if it were addressed to other Jewish believers)?

Supporters of the traditional view point out that Palestine was largely Hellenized at this time; the Greek language was widely used, and elements of Greek philosophy had worked their way into the culture. They also caution against writing James off as “an ignorant peasant,” since it is a historical fact that he led the church in Jerusalem for many years and was able to hold his own in conversations and conflicts with Paul (Gal. 1:18–2:12). Further, we might assume that someone of James’s stature would have been able to secure an amanuensis to produce a letter in keeping with his wishes and that such a scribe (a person with training in rhetoric and composition) would have taken responsibility for presenting the author’s thoughts

in a way that was considered to be effective and pleasing according to the standards of the day.

No Relationship Claimed

The author does not make any reference to the personal life of Jesus or even bother to identify himself as the brother of Jesus. Wouldn't he want to cite his relationship with Jesus to give his teaching more authority?

Interpreters who support the traditional ascription claim that the author did not have to do this (his readers knew who he was), and he probably avoided flaunting his credentials as "the Lord's brother" (cf. Gal. 1:19) because it would be considered unseemly to do so (cf. Jude 1:1). Notably, James is never explicitly referred to as the brother of Jesus in Acts either. Indeed, this point may be turned on its head: Wouldn't a pseudonymous author, trying to capitalize on James's authority and notoriety, have been careful to spell out who he was (i.e., who he was claiming to be), and to milk that for all it was worth? Wouldn't a pseudonymous author claim the letter was by James the "brother of Jesus" rather than by James "a servant of Jesus" (cf. 1:1)?

No Concern for Torah

The letter does not display the same concern for Jewish Christians to abide by Torah and to keep ritual laws (including dietary regulations) that we would expect to find in a writing from James, given that such insistence is what precipitated the conflict with Paul at Antioch (Gal. 2:11–14). When the author of this letter refers to the

love commandment as “the law of liberty” (1:25; 2:12), he seems to endorse the position taken by Paul with regard to that controversy: Christians fulfill the whole law when they keep the love command, and thus they are freed from other laws (Gal. 5:13–14). This is often regarded as the strongest argument against this letter actually being written by James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus.

Supporters of the traditional view point out that the argument is based entirely on silence. The author could very well have thought that Jewish Christians should observe dietary and other regulations of Torah but did not address those matters in this particular missive because they did not happen to be concerns at that moment.

When Was Letter Written?

The section of the letter that maintains that justification comes by works, not by faith alone (2:14–26), is usually thought to have been written in response to a misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching on the topic of justification by faith (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16). Thus, scholars claim, the Letter of James must have been written later than Paul, and probably several years later to allow time for Paul’s views to have circulated and become widely known. By this reasoning, the letter must be written later than 62, when James the brother of Jesus was killed.

Other interpreters claim that a misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching actually suggests an early date. James may have heard garbled reports of what Paul was saying and written this letter to counter ideas that probably would have been understood more clearly a few

years later. The letter could have been written during the time of Paul's active ministry, around the same time as Galatians and Romans, or even before those letters, which spell out Paul's teaching on justification in a way distinct from the caricature that the Letter of James appears to be addressing.

Not Approved Early On

The Letter of James was one of the last books admitted to the Christian canon. Some scholars say that if the early church had been confident that this book was written by Jesus's own brother, there would have been unanimous approval of it from the start; the slow and halting acceptance of the book is a sure sign that there was uncertainty regarding its author.

Other scholars suggest that authorship was not the primary issue with regard to the book's being accepted as Scripture: even teachers of the church who accepted this book as written by James the brother of Jesus were wary of it because it was favored by legalistic sects and movements that lay outside the mainstream of developing orthodoxy (e.g., the Ebionites in the second century and the Pelagians in the fourth century).

The Mention of Offices

The letter is sometimes thought to assume a developed church structure that would not have been in place during the lifetime of James. The roles of "teacher" (3:1) and "elder" (5:14–15) apparently have been elevated to the status of recognized church offices.

Supporters of the traditional view maintain that we have no sure information regarding when such offices developed in the church. Paul refers to bishops and deacons (Phil. 1:1; cf. Rom. 16:1) and other authorities (1 Cor. 12:28; 1 Thess. 5:12) in letters written during the lifetime of James.

Conclusion

Most scholars grant that there is no decisive reason why James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus, could not be the author of this letter, as the ascription in 1:1 is almost certainly meant to imply. Still, others believe that the cumulative weight of all the different considerations mentioned above make it more likely that the letter was written pseudonymously by someone who revered James and wanted to pass along teaching coherent with the image of pious Jewish Christianity with which James had come to be associated.

Ultimately, the decision on this question may be determined by the attitude that one takes toward tradition and toward pseudepigraphy in general.

- Scholars who tend to respect the reliability of ancient church traditions and who think that pseudepigraphy typically was regarded as a spurious practice usually conclude that the Letter of James can be attributed with some confidence to the actual brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church.

- Scholars who tend to be suspicious of church traditions, or who think that pseudepigraphy was a common and accepted practice, usually conclude that James is a pseudepigraphical work, produced with the best of intentions as a tribute to the great church leader.

In neither case is James regarded as a deceitful forgery; the content of the letter evinces high moral values and it is hard to imagine what a dishonest person would hope to gain by producing such a work fraudulently.

