

James in the Christian Canon

The letter of James was one of the last books of the New Testament admitted to the Christian canon. It was not listed in the Muratorian Canon of scripture for the Western church (ca. 170–210). More than a hundred years later (ca. 311), Eusebius reported that it was still one of the disputed books, though he thought that it should be accepted because it was recognized by many, evinced an “apostolic style,” and was orthodox in its teaching. Although no one rejected the book outright, many authorities were hesitant to allow it full canonical status until Athanasius included it in a definitive list developed around 367. Under the influence of Athanasius and Augustine, Jerome included James in his early fifth-century translation of the Bible, the Latin Vulgate (which secured the letter’s place in the canon of the Western church). Jerome noted, however, that the book had only come to be accepted “little by little” (*De viris illustribus* 2). The letter of James has been found in Christian Bibles ever since, but Martin Luther moved it to the back of his 1522 German Bible in order to distinguish it from what he regarded as the more “true and certain” books of the New Testament.

The reasons why James was slow to be accepted into the canon are not clear, but several factors are possible: there was uncertainty about authorship; the book was popular among groups deemed to be heretical; its contents may have seemed practical and generic rather than theological and specifically Christian; parts of James (2:21–24) appeared to conflict with Paul (cf. Rom. 4:3–25; Gal. 3:6–14); and the book has a very Jewish flavor, which probably did not help its reception in an increasingly Gentile (and often anti-Jewish) church.