

James
June 20, 2021

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Introduction

James is viewed by many to be the earliest of the NT books written as early as the late 40's. Most NT books came in the 60's; the last, Revelation, around 100 A.D. Arguments for an early date for James include its distinct Jewish style even referring to the meeting of Christians with the word *synagogue* and thus reflecting the time when Christianity was predominately Jewish. Only a simple structure seems in place of elders and teachers. Church polity later grew more diversified having overseers, bishops, presbyters, teachers, preachers, evangelists, and other various helpers. And because James doesn't address the Gentile controversy over circumcision which threatened the first century Church, it points to a time before that. James presided over that first council (Acts 15).

The author is most certainly the half-brother of Jesus. He is the oldest as indicated by the list of Jesus' other siblings (Matthew 13:55). He can't be the James who is the brother of John and one of Jesus' first disciples, the Twelve. That James was martyred in 44 A.D. which is a time too early for this epistle. The other two James in the NT lacked the prominence that James, the brother of Jesus, had. Paul refers to him as a "pillar in the church" and sought James out after converting to Christianity (Galatians 1:19, 2:9) and again when he came to Jerusalem for the last time before going to Rome (Acts 12:17). Peter also sought out James after his release from prison (Acts 12:17). This was due to the fact that James was acting leader of the initial Church in Jerusalem. What is interesting about this is that he was not considered ever an apostle. James was martyred in 62 A.D.

James' theme regards a vital Christianity that is lived out in daily faith as evidenced by actions. Key to understanding James' epistle is knowing he assumes saving faith in those to whom he writes. His epistle, though certainly very Christological, deals really with sanctification. It is not a doctrinal treatise on justification. This is why James speaks of good works as he does. With its distinctive Jewish nature, James reads very much like the wisdom literature of the OT. Much like Proverbs, for instance, it has many imperatives; 54, in fact. James draws on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount where our Lord also speaks of the standard of righteous living. Faith must be characterized by faithfulness. True faith is a living faith. Or as Luther coined, "Faith alone saves but faith is never alone."

The Epistle of Straw

Martin Luther did not put a high emphasis on James once dismissing it as "an epistle of straw". He pointed out that it was of the antilegomena (books questioned) in the early years of discussing the canon. He did, though, say it was a helpful book in understanding the Law of God but in contrast to Paul and other NT books, James didn't do as good a job of presenting the Gospel.

No one denies that Luther is a skilled exegete and biblical scholar, but he doesn't have a full appreciation of the Jewish style of this epistle. James uses a more round-about way of getting to a point. Luther, reflecting more a Hellenized or Western view, likes a more direct, get-to-the-point polemic. This is true of James even though he does write in excellent Greek. James uses more subtle Hebraisms. Luther saw James as a collection of Hebrew moralism. But what James does is present the validity of the Gospel by showing how it changes a believer's life. Paul speaks about the baptismal change that comes by grace through faith. It is a matter of God's declaration in Pauline theology. Justification. In James, it is a matter of a living faith. Sanctification. It's no wonder Paul resonates with Luther as justification by grace through faith alone is the hallmark of his Reformation.

In truth, there is no contradiction. It is only a matter of emphasis. James says not that works save; only that faith without works is not true faith as faith would yield works if it were genuine. Actually, Luther came to a similar conclusion of his own saying, "Faith alone saves but faith is never alone."

For Our Discussion

1. Do you think Luther was too harsh with James from what you know of it?
2. Let's read James 2:14-26 and discuss this considering what we have learned above.
3. John uses a similar approach to the ideal of faith in 1 John 3:9, 10; 5:1-5 and Revelation 20:11-15. Let's look.