

*James* was possibly the first New Testament book written, probably penned in the very late 40's AD. It is generally accepted that the book was written by James, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, also known as James the brother of Jesus.

From the very first, some people objected to having *James* in the New Testament. Martin Luther pushed for its exclusion (as well as some other books) because he thought it crossed some Protestant doctrines. However, history shows that God intends for *James* to be included in sacred Scripture.

Perhaps some of the controversy around the book can be ended if people are willing to accept the book for what it is, and not try to force it to be something it is not. We get a quick look at what it is by looking at the first verse: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad."

James was the leader of the Jerusalem church, but was not one of the original apostles. His letter shows that he is a strong, experienced leader whose purpose is to guide Jewish Christians about how to live as Christians in various countries and cultures. He accomplishes his purpose.

Since James was writing to Jews, he did not need to review all of the laws of good behavior that they already knew from the Old Testament. They knew what sexual immorality was, and they knew not to engage in it. They knew how God wanted to be worshiped, and they knew not to engage in idol worship. They knew how people should generally relate to one another. However, they knew how to do this within the context of a closed Jewish society where non-Jews were excluded.

What James needed to do in this letter was show them how to live in cultures and societies with entirely different norms. How to live with non-Jews as their brothers and sisters in Christ. How to live within a political system that promoted the worship of the emperor. How to build local church communities.

How would local church community change when most of the members had no concept of good behavior as set forth in the Old Testament? Who would have authority, and knowledge, to lead each church? How would Christians co-exist with non-Christian Jews in a Roman society where Jews had special privileges from the government? How would local churches relate to other local churches?

This was certainly a time when all church leaders would have to rely on guidance from Holy Spirit. This was a social experiment that had never been tried before. Christian leaders were intent on building communities that crossed national boundaries, local religions, ethnic groups, and cultural borders.

From personal experience, James knew an essential element of building a church community was eliminating “respect barriers” based on economic factors. Poor people were equally valued as rich people in God’s eyes, and that same standard had to apply in local churches. Juxtaposed to that standard was the equally important fact that wealthier Christians needed to help poor people both inside and outside of the church. What a challenge! And, that was just the start.

Rather than proposing a large number of rules to follow, James extolls the importance of having Godly virtues. Humility, faith, generosity, wisdom, consistency.

One of the criticisms of *James* through the years has been the notion that James and Paul do not agree on certain concepts, such as being saved by grace through faith, not being saved through doing good deeds. Perhaps a point of view to consider is that the early Christian leaders were in perfect accord on all important matters. Differences that we perceive from two thousand years away may be the fault of our perception, interpretation, and lack of information.

*James* is not a theological treatise comparable to *Romans*. *James* is not a rulebook, but a guidebook. As such, the guidelines it sets forth are as applicable today as they were nearly two thousand years ago.