



JAMES

1ST & 2ND PETER



James

Date of composition: A.D. 70-110

We do not know who wrote the Letter of James. However, we can say that the author respected James (the brother of the Lord) as the Christian authority most loyal to Judaism. In fact, the author is writing to Christians outside of Israel who also appreciated Judaism and its Law. However, while the letter echoes with traditional Jewish belief and piety, often the author agrees with Paul in declaring that the Gentiles do not have to follow the Mosaic Law (e.g., circumcision) when they come to belief in Christ.

Chapter 1

James spends little time on theological reflection. Instead, those Christians who strongly identified with their former Jewish heritage (i.e., the “Diaspora” or those Jews who settled outside of Israel after the Assyrian and Babylonian deportation). These were Christians who considered themselves the “new” Israel.

James urges the Christians to stand firm under persecution, telling them to pray for wisdom and encouraging them not to doubt that the Lord will answer their prayers. Christians cannot simply be hearers of the word of God; they must courageously manifest its practical application in their lives. Good works should flow from the power of the gospel that they have received. Anyone who remains faithful under persecution will receive their heavenly reward.

Notably in James there is no correction of vices that in the eyes of Jews were characteristically Gentile, such as idolatry or sexual impurity. And James warns against relying on riches for security, because riches can be lost as easily as petals off a flower. In addition, Christians must keep themselves undefiled by the world while they take care of needy widows and orphans.

Chapter 2

For James, love of neighbor sums up the law and the Ten Commandments; to offend one’s neighbor is to be guilty of breaking the whole Law. Here James is working out in practice Jesus’ warning that not everyone who says “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, non-believers will certainly judge Christians by the common sense standard of 2:26—that faith without works is dead.

James claims that **“a man is justified by works and not by faith alone”** (2:24). This is in keeping with Paul’s argument that the observance of ritual works prescribed by the Mosaic law, particularly circumcision, would not justify the Gentiles. Faith in what God has done in Christ was required – a faith that involves a commitment of one’s life. The author is thinking of people who are already Christian and who intellectually believe in Jesus (**“Even the demons believe and**

shudder.” 2:19), but who have not practiced that belief. James insists that their works (not ritual works prescribed by the Law) or behavior must correspond to their faith and reflect God’s love.

Chapter 3

James treats examples of sins and “**mistakes**” that are particularly threatening to the harmony required by the commandment to love one another (3:2). Like an Old Testament wisdom teacher, James eloquently describes the damage that can be done by a loose tongue, particularly on the part of teachers. For the tongue can be used both to bless God and to destroy human beings who are created in God’s image and likeness.

Chapter 4

James emphasizes how the wise should live, which leads to a condemnation of the various envies and desires that divide people and make them unhappy – desires that are the opposite of the spirit of the Beatitudes. “**God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble**” sums up his thought (4:6). Readers are further reminded that they are not masters of their own lives; and that judging one’s brother or sister is against the law of God Who is the supreme lawgiver and judge.

Chapter 5

The theme of the rich returns with a vengeance. The clearly negative attitude towards the rich brings James very close to the disposition of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5).

The anointing of the sick with oil in the name of the Lord is first in a sequence of what presbyters are called to do. “**Let that person call the presbyters of the church; and, having anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord, let them pray over him. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is ill; and the Lord will raise him up: if that man has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess sins to one another, and pray for one another that you might be healed**” (5:14-16).

The medicinal use of olive oil was very common in antiquity. Visiting those who were ill and praying for sick friends was encouraged in the Old Testament (Sirach 7:35; Leviticus 14:10-32). Praying to God for the healing of sickness often had a special tone because sin was seen as the root cause of sickness. For example, the friends who visited the suffering Job wanted him first to acknowledge his sin so that God would cure him (Job 11:1-20).

In the Gospels Jesus portrays himself as a physician (Mark 6:7; Matthew 9:12; Luke 4:23). Therefore the prayer of faith was to save the sick in a double way – raise them up from the sickbed and forgive their sins. Throughout the Letter of James there are echoes of Jesus healing and forgiving, so that the practice of anointing may have been seen as a continuation of something Jesus had once commanded.

1 Peter

Date of composition: A.D. 60-63, written to Gentile Christians in Turkey.

Author: possibly Peter using a secretary, but more likely a disciple continuing the legacy of Peter at Rome.

1st Peter is one of the most attractive and pastorally rich writings in the New Testament. Peter is portrayed as an especially active missionary among the Apostles, always eager to accept new groups into the Christian community (Acts 8:14-25). Also, Paul supports Peter because he considers Peter’s mission as one from which Paul can measure his own. Recall that Peter was a major figure at the Jerusalem “council” that decided on the acceptance of the Gentiles in A.D. 49 (Acts 15:1-21).

Chapter 1-2:10

Peter uses the term “**exiles of the Diaspora (Dispersion)**” to refer to Old Testament Jews living outside of Israel; but now he considers the recipients of his letter—Gentile Christians—to be the “chosen” of the Diaspora; that is, a people who, like the Old Testament Jews, are scattered among pagans and away from their heavenly home (1:1-2).

The first section of 1st Peter stresses the dignity of Christian believers. Like the Hebrews at the first Passover just before their liberation from Egypt—who were to gird their loins—the addressees are to gird up their minds and “**be holy because I am holy**” (1:16). There are even echoes of the Golden Calf incident, with the reminder that the Gentile Christians were ransomed from sin and death not with silver and gold but with the precious blood of Christ, the unblemished lamb.

Overall the writer is using the language of traditional Scripture passages that would have been heard by those who were converted by missionaries, and who had a deep attachment to Israel. Indeed, a key section is the reference to Christ as the stone selected by God but rejected by the Chosen People of Israel. Now all is centered on the Christian community—the new people of God.

Given the dignity of the new Christian people, there was a standard of conduct that was to be followed as an example for the surrounding pagan nations in order to counteract their low estimation of Christians. Christians must be subject to the emperor and his governors. Spouses are to have a reciprocal relationship with one another. Slaves must be subject to their masters. In fact, Peter talks about the duty of slaves toward their masters but not vice versa. Slaves are even expected to be patient when they are beaten unjustly, for the sinless Christ left an example of patiently accepting insults and suffering.

Chapter 3, 4, 5

At that time Gentile Christians were being reviled and abused by the non-believing Gentiles who could not understand the strange turn that the gospel had produced in the lives of converts. But Christians have the example of Christ, the Righteous One Who suffered for the unrighteous. Indeed, the Christians are alienated because they cannot live the way of their pagan neighbors with their wicked pagan feasts. As for the present, Peter admits that despite the hostility of their neighbors, they can survive if they love, support, and serve one another. Christians should also not be surprised if greater sufferings come their way.

In closing, the author gives a set of admonitions. Obedience must be shown to those in authority. All must be watchful for “**your adversary the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour**” (5:8). Finally the author gives a pledge that in their suffering Christ will confirm, strengthen, and establish the Christians.

2 Peter

Date of composition: approximately A.D.130, and thus the last book to be included in the Bible; written to Gentile Christians in Turkey.

Author: someone presenting a final message with advice from Peter.

The author wants his listeners to remember that the truths proclaimed about Christ were not “**cleverly devised myths**” but eyewitness testimony to God’s own revelation at the Transfiguration: that Jesus is the beloved divine Son (1:16).

But why does Peter use the example of the Transfiguration and not appeal to the appearances of the risen Christ (Luke 24:34)? Is the authority of the Transfiguration “safer” than that of a

Resurrection appearance? That is, was the author trying to be careful to reject the myths of Gnostic visionaries who frequently used the risen Christ to buttress their arguments?

***Gnosticism** was a loosely organized religious and philosophical movement that denigrated the material world in favor of the spiritual, and which flourished in the first and second centuries after Christ. Rather than seeing the Resurrection as an actual *bodily* event, many Gnostics interpreted it as merely spiritual; that is, their focus was on an inner spiritual awakening or “gnosis” (knowledge) rather than on the physical Resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, Gnostics alleged that after his Resurrection, Jesus gave secret teachings to select disciples; that is, the totality of divine truths or *pleroma* over against the “illusions” of the material world. As a result, these false teachers sought to undermine the authority of the Church’s apostolic leadership by claiming that Jesus gave hidden truths to a spiritual elite.

“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (1:20-21). This most famous passage from 2nd Peter challenges the right of private interpretation of Scripture, and defends the divine inspiration of all Scripture. Remember, the author’s primary intent was to support the veracity of the expected Second Coming or *parousia* of Christ.

2nd Peter stresses several times a particular aspect of the wickedness of these false prophets, who believe they have escaped from the pollutions of the world, but who now have become entangled again, so that their final state is worse than the first. To illustrate, the author cites a typical proverb about a dog returning to its vomit, or a pig wallowing in the mire.

Such false teachers are denying the promise of the Lord’s return on the grounds that the “fathers” of the first Christian generation have died and **“all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation”** (3:4). To refute this, the author wraps himself in the mantle of Peter the Apostle who in 1st Peter exhibited the correct understanding. The author also makes clear that the object of that understanding, which supports the Second Coming, consists of predictions by the prophets and the Apostles. The author dismisses the delay of the Second Coming as due to the inscrutability of the divine “time” which is not our time. In the eyes of the Lord a thousand years are as one day. If there is a delay, it is because the Lord is forbearing and wants to allow time for repentance—a view that explains why 2nd Peter refers to Noah and Lot of the Old Testament who were spared divine punishment in their day. Eventually the Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, like a thief. Therefore, listeners should live lives of holiness in order to be found without spot or blemish.

In conclusion, the author issues a warning to be on guard against the deceit of the lawless who will try to cause instability among the faithful. Then he returns to his initial wish, that they make progress, not only in grace but also in the knowledge of **“our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”** (3:18).