James on Faith and Righteousness in the Context of a Broader Jewish Exegetical Discourse

Serge Ruzer

Introduction

The authorship, addressees, and setting of the New Testament Epistle of James remain disputed. In church tradition, the dominant position is held by the attribution of the letter to James, Jesus’ brother (or cousin)—the person mentioned in Matt 13:55–57 and Mark 6:3–4 (absent from the Lukan parallel in 4:16–30); in both Matthew and Mark these occurrences are preceded with an indication of tension within the family.¹

In recent research, arguments both for and against the traditional attribution have been advanced, and the jury is still out on this point.² The setting of the Epistle constitutes a separate topic, distinct from that of any specific link to the historical person of James, or lack thereof. Yet here again the matter is far from settled. While some scholars believe that the letter originated in an early Jewish–Christian milieu in the Land of Israel,³ others speak in terms of a later Diaspora provenance.⁴ The addressees are


⁴ Cited as possible indications are: the late first explicit reference to the letter (by Origen; it is not mentioned by Tertullian and is absent from the Muratorian Fragment); the fact that canonicity remained disputed even in the course of the 4th century (though accepted,
clearly people of the Diaspora, but the makeup of the intended audience remains a debated issue, with suggestions ranging from entirely Gentile Christian, to a mixed community, to one composed only of Jewish Jesus-followers.

It is intriguing that the same data have been interpreted as pointing in opposite directions. The opening line’s appeal “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (Jas 1:1); the total lack of reference to the issue of Gentile membership or of the applicability to them of the ritual demands of the Torah (themes so prominent in Paul’s writings and in the foundational report in Acts 15); the lack of any references to the Temple or of any “distinctively Christian” concepts—all these features have been interpreted as either reflecting the earliest stage in the development of Christianity, characterized by a traditionally Jewish pattern of messianic belief (and perhaps politely including Gentile fellow travelers in the community); or, alternatively, as reflecting a much later stage, when the “hot” issues, including those pertaining to the Jewish–Gentile conundrum and that of Jesus’ status, have already been settled. The latter stage is seen as characterized by a full-blown “supersessionist” tendency that had by then won the day; so that, for example, the “twelve tribes” appellation might now incontrovertibly signify the Gentile Church.

The main message of the Epistle—namely, that faith should be expressed in deeds—has likewise been interpreted in various ways: either

with reservations, by Eusebius, it would be later doubted, for example, by Theodore of Mopsuestia); its reasonably good Greek style; the lack of references to the Temple; and indications of a knowledge of Paul’s writings from the late 50s. These features, however, are far from providing conclusive proof and are, moreover, open to alternative interpretations. See the discussion in Davids, “Palestinian Traditions”; J. Kloppenborg, “Diaspora Discourse: The Construction of Ethos in James,” NTS 53 (2007): 242–70.

5 As parallels in genre (i.e., epistles sent to the Diaspora from the Land of Israel), one may invoke 2 Maccabees, the Letter of Jeremiah and the letter at the end of the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch. See Davids, “Palestinian Traditions.”


7 For an overview of existing opinions, see Myllykoski, “James the Just in History and Tradition”; Bartlett, “The Epistle of James.”