

## Adam Clarke Commentary James overview

**Adam Clarke:**

## Preface to the General Epistle of James

There have been more doubts, and more diversity of opinion, concerning the author of this epistle, and the time in which it was written, than about most other parts of the New Testament. To enter at large into a discussion of the opinions of ancient and modern writers on this subject would tend but little to the establishment of truth, or to the edification of the reader.

Lardner, Michaelis, and Macknight, have entered considerably into the controversy relative to the author, the time, and the canonical authority of this book; and to them the reader who wishes to see the difficulties with which the subject is pressed may have recourse.

This epistle, with those of Peter, John, and Jude, is termed catholic, ἡ ἐκκλησίᾳ καθολικῇ, from ἡ ἐκκλησία, , through, and ἀπὸ τοῦ ὅλου, , the whole; for the application of which term Ecumenius, in cap. i. Jacobi, gives the following reason: ἡ ἐκκλησία καθολικὴ ὁνομαζομένη διὰ τὸ εἶναι πανταχοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ πάντων, ἡ ἐκκλησία καθολικὴ ὁνομαζομένη διὰ τὸ εἶναι πανταχοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ πάντων, ἡ ἐκκλησία καθολικὴ ὁνομαζομένη διὰ τὸ εἶναι πανταχοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ πάντων. These epistles are called catholic, universal, or circular, because they were not written to one nation or city, but to believers everywhere.

Yet, as these epistles had some difficulty at first to get into general circulation, but at last were everywhere received, it is more likely that they obtained the term catholic from the circumstance of their being at last universally acknowledged as canonical; so that the word catholic is to be understood here in the same sense as canonical.

Who the writer of the epistle in question was, is difficult to say; all that we know certainly is, from his own words, that his name was James, and that he was a servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus. Two persons of this name are mentioned in the New Testament; James the son of Zebedee, called also James the elder; and James Ἰάκωβος ὁ ὀλίγος, the less or the little one, called the son of Alphaeus, and brother of our Lord: but whether one of these, or if one of them, which, or whether one of the same name different from both, are points that cannot be satisfactorily determined. Michaelis, who has examined the subject with his usual ability, leaves the matter in doubt; but leans to the opinion that James the son of Zebedee was the author, and that this epistle was written before any of those in the New Testament. Other great authorities ascribe it to James, called the brother of our Lord, who was president, or bishop, of the Church in Jerusalem. Even allowing this opinion to be correct, it is not agreed in what sense James is called our Lord's brother, there being four or five different opinions concerning the meaning of this term. From Matthew 13:55, Matthew 13:56, we learn that there were four persons called brethren of our Lord: — Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And his brethren James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Now, it is generally allowed that the James here is the author of this epistle, and the Jude or Judas, mentioned with him, the author of that which stands last in this collection. But with respect to the meaning of the term brother, as here used, it will be necessary to state the opinions of learned men: -

**1.It is supposed that these were children of Joseph, by a former marriage; this is a very ancient opinion; as there is nothing improbable in the supposition that Joseph was a widower when he married the blessed virgin.**

**2. They are supposed to have been children of Joseph and his wife Mary; all born after the birth of our Lord. This is an opinion extremely probable: see some reasons for it in the note on Matthew 13:55 (note); see also on Matthew 1:25 (note).**

3. That they were called our Lord's brethren, because children of Joseph by the wife of one of his brothers, who had died childless, and whose widow Joseph took, according to the Mosaic law, to raise up seed to his deceased brother. This is very unlikely, because, in this case, it would have been only requisite for Joseph to have had one male by his brother's wife: but here we find four, besides several sisters.

4. That Cleophas, called also Alpheus, married a sister of the blessed virgin, called also Mary, by whom he had the above issue; and that these were called brethren of our Lord, from the common custom among the Hebrews, to term all the more immediately cognate branches of the same family, brothersâ€™ and sistersâ€™ children, i.e. cousins-german, brethren. These, therefore, being auntâ€™s children of our Lord, are, according to this usage, called his brethren. The first and second of these opinions appear to me the most probable; though most modern writers are of the latter opinion.

That of the two Jameses, James the less was the author of this epistle, Dr. Macknight thinks, following Lardner and others, is incontestable: I shall quote his abridgment of Lardner's arguments; but the point in question is not, in my opinion, made out by any of these writers.

â€œIn the catalogue of the apostles, Matthew 10:2; Mark 3:17; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13; we find two persons of the name of James; the first was the son of Zebedee, Matthew 10:2; the second in all the catalogues is called the

son of Alpheus: one of these apostles is called, Galatians 1:19, the Lord's brother. Wherefore, as there were only twelve apostles, and as James the son of Zebedee, so far as we know, was in no respect related to our Lord, the apostle called James, the Lord's brother, must have been James the son of Alpheus, called also James the less or younger, whose relation to Christ will appear by comparing Mark 15:40, with John 19:25. In the former passage, Mark, speaking of the women who were present at the crucifixion, says: "There were also women looking on afar off, among whom were Mary Magdalen, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome." In the latter passage, John, speaking of the same women, says: "There stood by the cross of Jesus, his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalen:" wherefore, our Lord's mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, mentioned by John, is in all probability the person whom Mark calls Mary the mother of James the less, and of Joses; consequently, her sons, James and Joses, were our Lord's cousins-german by his mother. And as the Hebrews called all near relations brethren, it is more than probable that James the son of Alpheus, who was our Lord's cousin-german, is James the Lord's brother, mentioned Galatians 1:19. Three circumstances confirm this opinion:

1. James and Joses, the sons of Mary, our Lord's mother's sister, are expressly called the brethren of Jesus, Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3.

2. James, the son of our Lord's mother's sister, being distinguished from another James by the appellation of the less, Mark 15:40, there is good reason to suppose that he is the James whom Mark, in his catalogue, distinguishes from James the son of Zebedee, by the appellation of the son of Alpheus. It is true, Mary the mother of James and of Joses, is called the wife of Cleophas, John 19:25: but Cleophas and Alpheus are the same name differently pronounced; the one according to the Hebrew, and the other according to the Greek, orthography.

3. Of the persons called the brethren of Jesus, Matthew 13:55, there are three mentioned in the catalogue as Apostles: James, and Simon, and Judas. They, I suppose, are the brethren of the Lord, who are said, as apostles, to have had a right to lead about a sister or a wife, etc.; 1 Corinthians 9:5.

Jerome likewise thought James the Lord's brother was so called because he was the son of Mary, our Lord's mother's sister; Art. Jacobus. Lardner, Canon., vol. iii. p. 63, says: "Jerome seems to have been the first who said our Lord's brethren were the sons of his mother's sister; and this opinion was at length embraced by Augustine, and has prevailed very much of late, being the opinion of the Romanists in general, and of Lightfoot, Witsius, Lampe, and many of the Protestants. On the other hand, Origen, Epiphanius, and other ancient writers, both Greeks and Latins, were of opinion that James, the Lord's brother, was not the son of the virgin's sister, but of Joseph, our Lord's reputed father, by a former wife, who died before he espoused the virgin. Of the same opinion were Vossius, Basnage, and Cave, among the Protestants; and Valesius among the Romanists. Epiphanius and Theophylact supposed that Joseph's first wife was the widow of Alpheus, who, being Joseph's brother, Joseph married her to raise up seed to him; and therefore James, the issue of that marriage, was fitly called the son of Alpheus, and brother of our Lord." But these suppositions might have been spared, if the ancients and moderns had recollected that near relations were called brethren by the Hebrews, and that Alpheus and Cleophas are the same names differently written; James the less, the son of Alpheus, being not only the Lord's near relation, but an apostle, whom, as is generally supposed, he honored in a particular manner, by appearing to him alone, after his resurrection; 1 Corinthians 15:7. These circumstances, together with his own personal merit, rendered him of such note among the apostles that they appointed him to reside at Jerusalem, and to superintend the Church there. This appointment, Lardner says, was made soon after the martyrdom of Stephen; and, in support of this opinion, observes, "that Peter always speaks first, as president among the apostles, until after the choice of the seven deacons. Every thing said of St. James, after that, implies his presiding in the Church at Jerusalem." Canon., vol. iii. p. 28. For example, when the apostles and elders at Jerusalem came together to consider whether it was needful to circumcise the Gentiles, after there had been much disputing, Peter spake, Acts 15:7, then Barnabas and Paul, Acts 15:12. And when they had ended, James summed up the whole, and proposed the terms on which the Gentiles were to be received into the Church, Acts 15:19-21; to which the whole assembly agreed, and wrote letters to the Gentiles, conformably to the opinion of James, Acts 15:22-29. From this it is inferred, that James presided in the council of Jerusalem, because he was president of the Church in that city.

"Chrysostom, in his Homily on Acts 15, says: "James was bishop of Jerusalem, and therefore spoke last:" In the time of this council, Paul communicated the Gospel which he preached among the Gentiles to three of the apostles, whom he calls pillars; and tells us that, when they perceived the inspiration and miraculous powers which he possessed, they gave him the right hand of fellowship, mentioning James first, Galatians 2:9: "And knowing the grace that was bestowed on me, James, Cephas, and John, who were pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship." This implies that James, whom, in the first chapter, he had called the Lord's brother, was not only an apostle, but the presiding apostle in the Church at Jerusalem.

In the same chapter, Paul, giving an account of what happened after the council, says, Galatians 2:11: "When Peter was come to Antioch, before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles; but when they were come he withdrew, and separated himself, fearing them who were of the circumcision." This shows that James resided at Jerusalem, and presided in the Church there, and was greatly respected by the Jewish believers. The same circumstance appears from Acts 21:17, where, giving an account of Paul's journey to Jerusalem, with the collections from the saints in Judea, Luke says, Acts 21:18: "Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present." Farther, the respect in which James was held by the apostles appears from two facts recorded by Luke: the first is, when Paul came to Jerusalem, three years after his conversion, Barnabas took him, and brought him Peter and James, as the chief apostles. Compare Acts 9:27 with Galatians 1:19. The second fact is, after Peter was miraculously delivered out of prison, about the time of the passover, in the year 44, "he came to the house of Mary - where many were gathered together praying; (Acts 12:12); and when he had declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison, he said, Go, show these things to James, and to the brethren;" Acts 12:17. These particulars are mentioned by Lardner, and before him by Whitby and Cave, to show that James, the Lord's brother, was really an apostle, in the strict acceptation of the word; consequently, that Eusebius was mistaken when he placed him among the seventy disciples; E. H., lib. vii. c. 12.

That the Epistle of James was early esteemed an inspired writing, is evident from the following fact: that while the Second Epistle of Peter, the second and third of John, the Epistle of Jude, and the Revelation, are omitted in the first Syriac translation of the New Testament, (the Peshito), which was made in the beginning of the second century for the use of the converted Jews; the Epistle of James has found a place in it, equally with the books which were never called in question. This is an argument of great weight; for certainly the Jewish believers, to whom that epistle was addressed and delivered, were much better judges of its authenticity than the converted Gentiles, to whom it was not sent, and who perhaps had no opportunity of being acquainted with it till long after it was written. Wherefore its being received by the Jewish believers is an undeniable proof that they knew it to be written by James the apostle; whereas the ignorance of the Gentile believers, concerning this epistle, is not even a presumption against its authenticity.

That the converted Gentiles had little knowledge of the Epistle of James in the first ages, may have been owing to various causes; such as, that it was addressed to the Jews, and that the matters contained in it were personal to the Jews. For on these accounts the Jewish believers may have thought it not necessary to communicate it to the Gentiles. And when it was made known to them, they may have scrupled to receive it as an inspired writing for the following reasons:

1. The writer does not, in the inscription, take the title of an apostle, but calls himself simply James, a servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Many of the ancients, by calling the writer of this epistle James the Just, have rendered his apostleship doubtful.

3. As they have done, likewise, by speaking of him commonly as bishop of Jerusalem, and not as an apostle of Christ.

It is little wonder, therefore, that this epistle was not received generally by the converted Gentiles; consequently that it was not often quoted by them in their writings. But afterwards, when it was considered that this epistle was from the beginning received by the Jewish believers, and that it was translated into the Syriac language for their use; and that Paul, though an apostle, sometimes contented himself with the appellation of a servant of Christ, Philemon 1:1; and sometimes took no appellation but his own name; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; and that the apostle John did not, in any of his epistles, call himself an apostle; the title which the author of the Epistle of James had to be an apostle was no longer doubted, but he was generally acknowledged to be James, the son of Alphaeus, and the Lord's brother; and his epistle, after an accurate examination, was received as an inspired writing. So Estius tells us, who affirms that after the fourth century no Church nor ecclesiastical writer is found who ever doubted of the authority of this epistle; but, on the contrary; all the catalogues of the books of Scripture published, whether by general or provincial councils, or by Roman bishops, or other orthodox writers, since the fourth century, constantly number it among the canonical Scriptures.

With respect to what is remarked by Eusebius, that there are not many ancient writers who have quoted the Epistle of James, learned men have observed that Clement of Rome has quoted it four several times; and so does Ignatius in his genuine Epistle to the Ephesians, sec. 10, 12, 17, 30; and Origen in his thirteenth Homily on Genesis, sec. 5. That it was not more generally quoted by the ancients, besides the things already mentioned, may have been owing to the following reasons:

1. Being written to the whole Jewish nation to correct the errors and vices which prevailed among them, the

Gentiles may have thought themselves little concerned with it, and may have been at no pains to procure copies of it; by which means it was not so generally known among them as some other books of Scripture.

2. The seeming opposition of the doctrine of this epistle to the doctrine of Paul, concerning justification by faith without the works of the law, may have occasioned it to be less regarded by the most ancient writers; just as it was in later times, on the same account, rejected by Luther, who, to show his contempt of it, called it (*epistola straminea*) a strawy or chaffy epistle.

To conclude, the authority of the Epistle of James, as an inspired writing, is abundantly established, in Mill's opinion, by the Apostles Paul and Peter, who have in their writings many sentiments and expressions similar to those contained in this epistle; for example: -

d 1 Peter 1:3: Who hath begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. James 1:18: Having willed it, he hath begotten us by the word.

d

d Romans 5:3, Romans 5:4: Knowing that affliction worketh out patience; and patience experience. James 1:3: Knowing that the proving of your faith worketh out patience.

d

d Romans 2:13: That the hearers of the law are not just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. James 1:22: And be ye doers of the law, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves by false reasoning.

d

d Romans 7:23: I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind.

1 Peter 2:11: Lusts which war against the soul. James 4:1: Come they not hence, even from your lusts, which war in your members?

d

d 1 Peter 5:8, 1 Peter 5:9: Your adversary the devil; whom resist, steadfast in the faith. James 4:7: Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

d

d 1 Peter 5:6: Be humbled under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you. James 4:10: Be humbled in the presence of God, and he will lift you up.

d

d Romans 14:4: Who art thou that condemnest another man's household servant? James 4:12: Thou, who art thou that condemnest another?

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d 1 Peter 4:8: Love covereth a multitude of sins. James 5:20: Will cover a multitude of sins.

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See Macknight's preface.

That James the less may have been our Lord's cousin-german, or even our Lord's brother by a former wife of Joseph, or even by the virgin, is perfectly possible; and that he was an apostle, and an eminent man among both Jews and Christians, may be readily credited; and that he was author of this epistle, is also possible: but I must still assert that we have neither decisive nor satisfactory evidence on this subject; and that it is arguing in a circle to deduce the evidence of its authenticity from the apostleship of James the less, because this person is not proved to be its author. The chief and proper evidence of its being canonical must be taken from the fact that it was universally received by the Church of Christ, and without scruple incorporated with those writings, which were, on all hands, allowed to have been given by the inspiration of God.

Before I conclude, I shall mention the opinion of Michaelis relative to the author of this epistle. All things considered, says he, I see no ground for the assertion that James, the son of Zebedee, was not the author of this epistle. One circumstance affords, at least, a presumptive argument in favor of the opinion that it was really written by the elder James, and at a time when the Gospel had not been propagated among the Gentiles; namely, that it contains no exhortations to harmony between the Jewish and Gentile converts, which, after the time that the Gentiles were admitted into the Church, became absolutely necessary. Had it been written after the apostolic council of Jerusalem, mentioned Acts 15, and by the younger James, we might have expected that, at least, some allusion would be made in it to the decree of that council, which was propounded by the younger James in favor of the Gentile converts; and that the epistle would contain an admonition to the Jewish converts, to consider the Gentile converts as their brethren. - Introduction to the New Testament.

The epistle itself is entirely different in its complexion from all those in the sacred canon; the style and manner are more that of a Jewish prophet than a Christian apostle. It scarcely touches on any subject purely Christian. Our blessed Lord is only mentioned twice in it, James 1:1; James 2:1; but it has nothing of his miracles or teaching, of his death or resurrection, nor of any redemption by him. It begins without any apostolical

salutation, and ends without any apostolical benediction. In short, had it not been for the two slight notices of our blessed Lord, we had not known it was the work of any Christian writer. It may be considered a sort of connecting link between Judaism and Christianity, as the ministry of John Baptist was between the old covenant and the new. There is neither plan nor arrangement in it; but it contains many invaluable lessons which no serious person can read without profit.

James the less was martyred at Jerusalem about a.d. 62: and the epistle is supposed to have been written a short time before his death. Though I believe it to be the work of an unknown author, not long after the ascension of our Lord, I shall follow the usual chronology, and date it in the year 61; not because I think that to be the true date, but because it is what is generally adopted.