ANCIENT WRITINGS

ENGLISH EDITION

The Letter of James

To the twelve scattered tribes



Martin Schongauer, Saint James the Less, 1470–1491

Complete English translation

All five chapters of the letter

Reading guide

The English text, commentary and sources are brought together in the first part. Documentary reproductions appear at the end of the volume. Historical illustrations accompany the text.

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References to editions and manuscripts have been retained. Contents-page references and internal links point to the new pagination.

INTRODUCTION

Origins of the Letter of James

A letter to the twelve tribes

The Letter of James is one of the canonical epistles of the New Testament. Written in Greek, it addresses the scattered 'twelve tribes'. Its author introduces himself as 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ' (1:1). One tradition identifies him as James of Jerusalem, whom Paul calls 'the Lord's brother' (Galatians 1:19). The letter itself does not specify this relationship.

A disputed author and date

If James of Jerusalem wrote the letter, it must predate his death, around 62 CE. Other scholars see it as an exhortation later placed under his authority, often dated to the late first century, sometimes to the second. Where it was written remains uncertain.

Words and deeds

James observes where a poor person is seated, how words wound and what becomes of a reaper's wages. His five chapters ask how faith can be recognised in everyday actions. The French translation underlying this English edition follows Westcott and Hort's edition (1881), consulted in the Perseus transcription. The twelve passages comprise all five chapters of the letter.

Historical background · Yale Bible Study · New American Bible introduction (NABRE)

READING CONTENTS

The twelve passages

The page numbers link to the passages.

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THEMATIC GUIDE

What James condemns

Six scenes help locate his criticisms in the letter.

1:19–27 · Listening without acting The reader resembles someone who looks in a mirror and immediately forgets his own face. James links control of one's speech with caring for widows and orphans.

2:1–9 · Saving the best seat for the rich In the assembly, a seat is offered to a splendidly dressed man. The poor man must stand or sit on the floor. James condemns this favouritism.

2:14–17 · Leaving someone without necessities A brother or sister lacks clothing or food, and is wished warmth and a full stomach. What help do words alone provide?

3:7–12 · Blessing and cursing with the same mouth The mouth that blesses the Lord also curses human beings made in God's likeness.

4:11–17 · Slandering others and claiming tomorrow The letter links two ways of overstepping one's place: judging one's brother, then discussing future profits as though tomorrow were assured.

5:1–6 · Withholding workers' wages The reapers have finished their work. The wages kept back by the rich cry out, and the workers' cry reaches the Lord.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 1:1–11

Amid trials

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, sends
greetings to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

2 My brothers, count it unreserved joy to encounter trials of
every kind.
3 You know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

4 Let endurance complete its work, so that you may be mature
and whole, lacking nothing.
5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to
everyone freely and without reproach. It will be given to
him.
6 But let him ask in faith, without wavering. Whoever wavers
is like the swell of the sea, lifted and driven by the wind.
7 Such a man should not imagine that he will receive anything
from the Lord,
8 with his divided heart and his every step uncertain.

9 Let the brother of humble standing take pride in being
raised up,
10 and the rich man in being brought low, for he will pass away
like a flower in the fields.
11 The sun rises with its scorching heat and dries up the grass.
Its flower falls and all its beauty vanishes. So too will the rich
man wither, even in the midst of his undertakings.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 1:12–18

From desire to the gift of life

12 Blessed is the one who stands firm under trial. Once he has proved himself, he will receive the crown of life promised to those who love God.

13 Let no one faced with temptation say, ‘God is tempting me.’ Evil has no hold over God, and He Himself tempts no one.

14 Each person is tempted when his own desire draws him away and lures him.

15 Then desire conceives and gives birth to sin. Sin, in turn, when it reaches its full term, brings forth death.

16 Do not be mistaken about this, my beloved brothers.

17 Every good gift, every perfect present comes from above. It descends from the Father of lights, in whom there is neither variation nor shifting shadow.

18 Of His own will, He brought us forth through a word of truth, to make us a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 1:19–27

Listening and acting

19 Know this, my beloved brothers. Let everyone be quick to
listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.
20 Human anger does not fulfil God's righteousness.
21 Therefore rid yourselves of all defilement and all the
wickedness overflowing within you. Humbly receive the
word planted in you, which can save your lives.
22 Put the word into practice. If you merely listen to it, you
deceive yourselves.
23 Whoever listens to the word without practising it is like a
man who observes in a mirror the face he has had since
birth.
24 He looks at himself and goes away. At once he forgets
what he looked like.
25 But whoever peers into the perfect law, the law of
freedom, and holds to it, listens without forgetting and
acts. He will find happiness in what he does.
26 Whoever thinks himself religious but leaves his tongue
unbridled deceives himself; his religious practice is vain.
27 Religious practice that remains pure and undefiled in the
eyes of God the Father consists in caring for orphans and
widows in their distress, and keeping oneself free of the
world's defilement.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 2:1–13

A place for the poor

1 My brothers, can you truly have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ while showing partiality towards people?

2 Suppose a man wearing a gold ring and splendid clothes enters your assembly. A poor man in dirty clothes enters too.

3 You have eyes only for the splendidly dressed man and tell him, ‘Sit here, in the good seat.’ To the poor man you say, ‘You, stand there, or sit down by my footstool.’

4 Have you not made distinctions among yourselves? Have you not made yourselves judges guided by evil motives?

5 Listen, my beloved brothers. Has God not chosen those who are poor in the world’s eyes to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom promised to those who love Him?

6 Yet you have humiliated the poor man. Who oppresses you and drags you before the courts, if not the rich?

7 Is it not from their mouths that insults come against the noble name invoked over you?

8 If you fulfil the royal law, according to the words of Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself,’ you do well.

9 But if you favour certain people, you commit a sin, and the law convicts you of transgression.

10 Whoever observes the whole law but stumbles at a single point must answer for the whole law.

11 For He who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not commit murder.’ If you avoid adultery but commit murder, you transgress the law.

12 Speak and act as people who will be judged by a law of freedom.

13 For judgement will be without pity for the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgement.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 2:14–26

Faith tested by deeds

14 My brothers, what use is it to say one has faith if deeds do not follow?
Can that faith save the person who claims it?
15 If a brother or sister lacks clothing and has nothing to eat that day,
16 and one of you says, 'Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,' without
giving them what their bodies need, what good is that?
17 So it is with faith. If deeds do not accompany it, it is dead, left on its own.
18 But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have deeds.' Show me your
faith apart from deeds. I will show you my faith through my deeds.
19 You believe there is one God? You do well. The demons believe it too,
and shudder.
20 Do you want to understand, you empty-headed person, that faith
without deeds has no effect?
21 Was not Abraham our father recognised as righteous through his deeds
when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?
22 You see that his faith worked together with his deeds, and that through
his deeds his faith reached fulfilment.
23 Thus Scripture was fulfilled: 'Abraham trusted God, and it was counted
to him as righteousness.' He was called God's friend.
24 You see that a human being is recognised as righteous through deeds, and
not through faith alone.
25 The same is true of Rahab the prostitute. Was she not recognised as
righteous through her deeds when she welcomed the messengers and sent
them away by another route?
26 Just as the body without breath is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

ICONOGRAPHY / JAMES 2:21–23

Abraham and Isaac

Rembrandt van Rijn · 1655



The Sacrifice of Abraham

The angel restrains Abraham's arms. Isaac remains on his knees, his head bowed. Recalling the trial recounted in Genesis (22:1–19), James shows how Abraham's faith took shape in his deeds.

Etching and drypoint · Cleveland Museum of Art, 2007.156.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 3:1–12

The power of the tongue

1 My brothers, let few of you become teachers. You know that we
who teach will be judged more severely.
2 For we all stumble in many ways. Whoever never stumbles in speech
is a mature person, able to bridle his whole body too.

3 When we put bits into horses' mouths to make them obey, we direct
their whole bodies.
4 Consider ships too. However large they are, even when driven by
fierce winds, a tiny rudder steers them wherever the pilot wishes.
5 Likewise, the tongue is a small member, yet what great things it
boasts of! See how small a fire sets so great a forest ablaze!
6 The tongue too is a fire. Among the members of our body it is a
whole world of injustice. It defiles the entire body, sets the wheel of
existence on fire, and is itself set alight by the blaze of Gehenna.
7 Wild beasts, birds, reptiles, sea creatures: every kind can be tamed,
and indeed humans have tamed them.
8 But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of
deadly venom.
9 With it we bless the Lord, our Father, and with it we curse human
beings who were made in God's likeness.

10 Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers, it
should not be so.
11 Does a spring pour out both fresh and bitter water from the same
opening?
12 My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a vine produce figs? No
more can salt water yield fresh water.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 3:13–18

Two kinds of wisdom

13 Who among you is wise and discerning? Let him show it
by his conduct, through deeds performed with the
gentleness that wisdom gives.
14 But if you harbour bitter jealousy and a spirit of rivalry in
your heart, stop boasting and lying in defiance of the
truth.
15 Such wisdom does not descend from above. It is earthly,
governed by instinct alone, demonic.
16 For where jealousy and rivalry reign, there is disorder and
every kind of evil deed.
17 The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable,
kind, open to persuasion, full of compassion and good
fruits, impartial and sincere.
18 The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who
make peace.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 4:1–10

Where do conflicts come from?

1 Where do wars and quarrels among you come from? Do they
not arise from your desires for pleasure, which wage war within
you, even in your limbs?
2 You covet and have nothing. You kill and are jealous, yet
cannot obtain what you want. You quarrel and wage war. If
you have nothing, it is because you ask for nothing.

3 And when you ask, you receive nothing, because you ask with
bad intentions, to spend it all on your pleasures.

4 Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is
enmity towards God? Whoever wishes to be a friend of the
world makes himself an enemy of God.
5 Or do you think Scripture speaks in vain when it says, ‘God
jealously desires the spirit He has made dwell in us’?

6 But the grace He gives is greater still. That is why Scripture says,
‘God opposes the proud, but grants His grace to the humble.’

7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Stand against the devil, and he
will flee from you.
8 Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Sinners, wash
your hands. You whose hearts are divided, purify them.
9 Feel your misery, mourn and weep. Let your laughter turn to
mourning, and your joy to dejection.
10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will raise you
up.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 4:11–17

Judging one's brother, claiming tomorrow

11 My brothers, do not speak ill of one another. Whoever
speaks ill of his brother or judges him speaks ill of the Law
and judges the Law. If you judge the Law, you make
yourself its judge instead of putting it into practice.
12 One alone gives the Law and passes judgement. He alone
can save or destroy. But you, who are you to judge your
neighbour?
13 Now to you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will leave
for such-and-such a city. We will spend a year there, trade
and make money.'

14 You do not even know what your life will be tomorrow!
You are a mist that appears for a moment and then
disperses.
15 You would do better to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live
and do this or that.'
16 Instead, you take pride in your pretensions. All such
boasting is evil.
17 So whoever knows the good he ought to do and refrains
from doing it commits sin.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 5:1–6

The reapers' cry

1 Now to you, the rich. Weep and cry out at the miseries
coming upon you.
2 Your wealth has rotted. Moths have eaten your clothes.

3 Your gold and silver have corroded. Their rust will testify
against you and eat away your flesh. What you have
hoarded in these last days is like fire.
4 Listen to the wages of the workers who reaped your fields.
You withheld them, and they cry out! The reapers' cries
have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

5 On earth you have lived in luxury and pleasure. You have
gorged yourselves on the day of slaughter.
6 You condemned the righteous man and put him to death.
Does he not resist you?

ICONOGRAPHY / JAMES 5:1–6

At harvest time

Pieter Bruegel the Elder · 1565



The Harvesters

On the left, men cut the wheat. Beneath the tree, other workers eat their meal. James invites us to look beyond the landscape to the wages the workers have been denied. In the Lord's ears, those very wages cry out.

Oil on oak panel · The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 19.164.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 5:7–12

Waiting patiently

7 Be patient, then, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.
Consider the farmer. He awaits the precious fruit of the
earth, patiently waiting for the rains at the beginning and
end of the season.

8 Be patient yourselves. Strengthen your hearts, for the
coming of the Lord is near.

9 Brothers, stop grumbling against one another, lest you be
judged. Look, the judge stands at the door.

10 Brothers, to learn how to suffer and be patient, take as
your example the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name.

11 We call those who stood firm blessed. You have heard of
Job's endurance and seen the outcome the Lord gave him.
The Lord is full of tenderness and compassion.

12 Above all, my brothers, do not swear by heaven or earth,
or take any other oath. Let your yes be yes and your no be
no, so that you do not fall under judgement.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION / 5:13–20

Prayer and care for others

13 Is anyone among you undergoing a trial? Let him pray. Is anyone joyful at heart? Let him sing praises.

14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call the elders of the community. Let them anoint him with oil in the Lord's name and pray over him.

15 The prayer offered in faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. Even if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.

16 Therefore acknowledge your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. A righteous person's prayer has great power.

17 Elijah was a man of the same nature as us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and no rain fell on the earth for three years and six months.

18 Then he prayed again. Heaven gave rain and the earth produced its fruit.

19 My brothers, if one of you strays from the truth and someone brings him back,

20 know that whoever brings a sinner back from the path on which he strayed will save his life from death and cover a multitude of sins.

EDITORIAL NOTE

Sources and credits

Reference text

B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, The New Testament in the Original Greek (1881). This edition is the basis of the French translation rendered into English in this book.

View the source ↗

Digital source and licence

Perseus Digital Library, Tufts University, Harper printings, 1882–1892. The transcription consulted is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

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Translation and divisions

The French translation was prepared for this book and is the source of this English version. The twelve reading titles are editorial. Chapter and verse divisions allow readers to locate the same passage across editions.

The author and date

Yale Bible Study, The Epistle of James. The introduction to the Letter of James in the New American Bible, Revised Edition, also discusses proposed dates.

Yale Bible Study historical background ↗

New American Bible introduction ↗

ICONOGRAPHY

The artworks reproduced

Three European views of biblical tradition

Martin Schongauer · Cover

Saint James the Less, 1470–1491. Engraving. Several men in the New Testament are named James. This print shows the face tradition has given to James the Less. The letter's authorship remains disputed. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, George Khuner Collection, Bequest of Marianne Khuner, 1984 (1984.1201.45).

View the source ↗

Rembrandt van Rijn · Page 11

The Sacrifice of Abraham, 1655. Etching and drypoint on laid paper. Cleveland Museum of Art, Andrew R. and Martha Holden Jennings Fund (2007.156).

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Pieter Bruegel the Elder · Page 17

The Harvesters, 1565. Oil on oak panel. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1919 (19.164).

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