

First century background of James

The hypothesis proposed in this article is that the epistle of James is the earliest of all the New Testament writings, written before the Gospels and that it was produced in response to the problems facing the church in its formative years. It was written by the apostle James the son of Zebedee and the brother of John before his martyrdom in AD 44. Evidence will be provided to demonstrate that the epistle was provoked by the crisis brought on by the murder of Stephen and the persecution of Saul and that this helped accelerate the church's separation from Judaism, establishing Christianity as an independent faith and not merely as a Jewish sect.

unique characteristics of the epistle

It has long been recognized by scholars that the lines of demarcation between Christianity and Judaism are not emphasized nor clearly drawn in the epistle of James. John Robinson comments:

“The author appears to be a Christian voice addressing Israel, like one of its own prophets or teachers, from within. Indeed it has been seriously, but not I think convincingly argued that he is writing for both Christians and Jews and is deliberately ambiguous in his choice of phrases. For he is still conscious of being of one body with his unbelieving compatriots. The local Christian gathering is spoken of as a ‘synagogue’ within Judaism. (2.2 cf. Acts 6.9)there is nothing that conflicts or goes beyond main stream Judaism....In Zahn’s words, ‘the believing Israel constituted the entire Church –and that was true only for a very limited period of Christian history’..... there is no suggestion throughout the epistle of a Gentile presence.”¹

These observations support a very early dating of the epistle. Robinson also notes the absence of concern for liturgy and ministry, which are signs of late development, neither does the Gentile mission or the delay of the *Parousia* feature in James, or the fall of Jerusalem all indicators of a later date. James also refers to the Sermon on the Mount² but he is not quoting from the Matthew tradition and therefore exhibits no literary dependency. In other words the writer of the epistle was someone who heard Jesus speak, not someone who appropriated the sayings from Matthew (which was therefore written later than James).³ We have then, if not the *ipsissima verba Jesu* (the exact words of Jesus), certainly the *ipsissima vox Jesu* (the 'kind of thing' he usually or typically said). Neither

¹ J.A.T. Robinson, *Redating The New Testament*, (1976 reprint 1993 XPRESS REPRINTS), pp 118-139. The whole chapter on the epistle of James merits careful consideration; this excellent work should be on every serious scholar's bookshelf.

² Ralph Martin lists many of the themes common to the two books. For example: rejoicing in trials (Mt. 5:12; Jas. 1:2); perfection (Mt. 5:48; Jas. 1:4); meekness (Mt. 5:3, 5, 9; Jas. 3:13, 17-18); anger (Mt. 5:22; Jas. 1:20); the poor (Mt. 5:3, 25:35; Jas. 2:5, 16) (see Martin, *James*. Word Biblical Commentary #48 [Waco: Word, 1988], pp. lxxv-lxxvi.

³ Preliminary stylistic analysis indicates similarity with the Synoptic Gospels suggesting James belongs to the earliest strata of the NT and the lack of dependence points to independent oral tradition or a first-hand audition. This does not necessarily rule out James the brother of Jesus but his siblings early hostile attitude towards his preaching makes it unlikely.

does the epistle of James display the high Christology of the Pauline epistles – for example, the resurrection is not even mentioned! In J.A.T. Robinsons words, “the influences – kerygmatic, apologetic, polemical, liturgical and the rest – which have rightly been seen as selecting and shaping the traditions about Jesus to the use of the church can scarcely be illustrated by any convincing examples from this epistle.”⁴ It has, however, gone unnoticed that the prologue to John’s Gospel can be found in James’ epistle:

James	Prologue to John
Father of lights (1:17) ⁵	In Him was life; and the life was the light of men... He was not that light...sent to bear witness of that light (1:2-9)
Of his own will He brought us forth by the word of truth (1:18)	As many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God...born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (1:12)
Jesus Christ the Lord of glory (2:1)	We beheld his glory (1:14)

This indicates that James was familiar with embryonic forms of Johannine tradition or perhaps the reverse is true, namely, that John drew his inspiration from his brother James.

James the brother of John

If we examine the profile of James the son of Zebedee against the background of his epistle we can detect certain correspondences. Both James and his brother John were originally disciples of John the Baptist.⁶ James was beheaded by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1, 2) and John the Baptist by Herod Antipas (Mk 6:27). There was evidently no love lost between James and the party of the Herodians. The epistle of James has many connections with the life and teachings of John the Baptist as the following comparison shows:

⁴ J.A.T. Robinson, *Ibid*, p.125

⁵ Father of lights – the “lights” are mentioned in Genesis: And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. (Gen.1: 16). For James these two “lights” were John the Baptist and Jesus (cf. John 1:7-9) see the interesting observations by Peter J. Leithart, Creation Symbolism in the Epistle of James (Biblical Horizons Newsletter No. 41, 1992): <http://www.biblicalthorizons.com/biblical-horizons/no-41-creation-symbolism-in-the-epistle-of-james> Retrieved 24 April 2016 . (note click PDF button to create short PDF article)

⁶ According to Johannine tradition the first followers of Jesus were Andrew and another unnamed disciple (likely the apostle John). Andrew brought his brother Simon Peter to Jesus. (Peter, Andrew, James and John were business partners in the fishing industry).

Epistle of James	Life and Preaching of the Baptist
For if there come into your assembly (synagogue) a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile clothing.....hath not God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? (2:2-5)	But what went ye out to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. (Mtt.11:8) John had his raiment of camels hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins. (Mtt.3: 4)
Ye adulterers and adulteresses...(4:4) He that saith do not commit adultery, said also, do not kill. (2:11)	It is not lawful for thee (Herod) to have thy brothers wife...John beheaded. (Mk.6: 18-25)
If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled...(2:15,16)	He that hath two coats, let him part to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. (Lk.3:11)
The devils believe and tremble. (2:19)	Herod feared John. (Mk.6:20)
Faith without works is barren. (2:20)	Fruits worthy of repentance. (Lk.3:8)
Was not Abraham our father? (2:21)	We have Abraham to our father (Lk.3:8)
Abraham the friend of God (2:23)	John the friend of the bridegroom (Jhn.3: 29)

When James addresses his audience as adulterers and adulteresses (4:4), he is referring to the ruling elite, particularly the party of the Herodians who supported the Herod family. Herod became friends with Pilate at the crucifixion of Christ (Lk.23: 12) ‘whosoever is a **friend of the world is the enemy of God**’ (3:4).

James and the book of Acts

According to the scholars the epistle of James does not have a “high Christology” nor does it mention the Holy Spirit, which probably explains its neglect in certain circles. If James is a primitive first century document one would expect the impact of Pentecost to be reflected in the epistle. The problem is not with the absence of the Holy Spirit, but with the failure of the scholars to recognize Biblical idiom. Not only is the Holy Spirit present in the epistle, but also Luke appropriates and innovates James’ unique language when framing his account of the early church.

Prof. Dan G. McCartney has the following to say: “A quick glance at the margins of a Nestle-Aland text turns up more than **thirty cross-references to Jewish wisdom literature** of the Old Testament or intertestamental period, ten to the Pentateuch, eighteen to Prophets, and seventeen to Psalms (some of which are “wisdom” psalms). While Jewish wisdom literature clearly influenced scholars still debate the nature and extent of that influence. Almost all scholars who have studied agree that there is some kind of relevant background in Jewish wisdom literature.”⁷ However, scholarship fails to recognize that wisdom in James (the wisdom of God or the wisdom from God) is virtually synonymous with the “Holy Spirit”. Whereas, Luke (in Acts) speaks of the Holy Spirit James speaks of “wisdom” – in fact **wisdom** and the **Holy spirit** function as a hendiadys in Luke; “*full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*” (Acts 6: 3). It is particularly notable that it is used in relation to the **martyr Stephen**, for this also *forms the backdrop* to James’ epistle (as we shall shortly demonstrate). **We can only conclude that Luke was aware of the epistle and used it when writing his own account of early church history.**

James and Stephen

Luke repeatedly refers to wisdom in Acts 6 when he records the selection of **seven men** (including Stephen) to serve tables and minister to the Greek widows;

“It is not fit that we should leave the word of God, and **serve tables**, wherefore brethren, look ye out (*episkeptomai*) among you **seven men** of honest report, **full of the Holy Spirit and Wisdom**, whom we may appoint over this business” (Acts 6:2b, 3)⁸

For James this was the epitome of true religion, faith and works operating in unison;

⁷ Dan G. McCartney, The Wisdom of James the Just, (Publisher: sbts.edu, Southern Baptist Journal of Theology) p.52, http://www.academia.edu/733058/The_Wisdom_of_James_the_Just Retrieved 24 April 2016

⁸ *Episkeptomai* is also used by **James the brother** of the Lord in Acts 15:14 for God’s ‘visiting’ the Gentiles. The 230 word circular letter issued by the apostolic council in Acts 15 has many points of contact with the Epistle and many scholars accept this as evidence that “James the Just” is the author of the Epistle. See James: Introduction, Outline, and Argument The style is consistent with this, but it is impossible to regard it as proved, since the Epistle of James uses words common to others in similar circumstances, and we lack almost totally comparable evidence either way for any possible competitors. Furthermore, Paul had gone to Jerusalem to clarify the position regarding the Gentiles and the Mosaic Law, not because he required apostolic authority, but because the added apostolic support would counteract the inroads made by the Judaizers. This element in the church was using the Epistle of James (the earliest apostolic Epistle) to bolster their arguments regarding the keeping of the Law (the necessity of ‘works’). It was never James’ (the brother of John) intention to become an advocate of “Law keeping,” after all he speaks of the “perfect law of liberty.” It is certainly possible then that the “other James” (James the brother of Christ) and John (the other son of Zebedee) had the Epistle in mind when they framed their circular – and either deliberately or subconsciously peppered it with references to the Epistle – which was being abused by Paul’s opponents. Daniel B. Wallace, Th.M., Ph.D, James: Introduction, Outline, and Argument (Published June 28th 2004 on Bible.org) <https://bible.org/seriespage/20-james-introduction-outline-and-argument> Retrieved 24 April 2016.

“Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to **visit** (*episkeptomai* the same word used Acts 6:3 translated **look ye out**) the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27).

Luke follows James’ lead in understanding Stephen to be the perfect example (like his Lord) of well balanced Christian practice and his account is based on the table that is **presented by wisdom in Proverbs 9:**

¹Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her **seven pillars**: ²She hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath also **furnished her table**. ³She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city, ⁴Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, ⁵Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled. ⁶Forsake the foolish, and live; and go in the way of understanding. ⁷ He that reproveth a scorner getteth to himself shame: and he that rebuketh a wicked man getteth himself a blot. (Prov.9:1-6).

Stephen, “*one of the seven pillars of wisdom*”, furnished the table and “*got himself a Blot*” for reproving the hypocrisy of his fellow countrymen. James compares the “wisdom” that Stephen received with the “wisdom” of Stephen’s opponents:

“Who is a **wise man** and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have **bitter envying and strife** in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This **wisdom** descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the **wisdom** that is **from above** is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy” (James 3:17).

Stephen was full of the “wisdom from above” and this provoked envy in certain circles.

“And they were not able to resist **the wisdom and the spirit** by which he [Stephen] spake.” (Acts 6:10)

James remarks that; “*every good gift and every perfect boon is from above*” (1:17)⁹ but the spirit of Stephen’s opponents was one of envy. This is the same “spirit” that dwells in us and is in opposition to God; “The spirit that dwelleth

⁹ Compare John 3: 27; “A man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven.”

in us **lusteth to envy**" (James 4:5). James draws the attention of his audience to the incident in Numbers 11 because this passage displays a parallel with the first century circumstances:

²⁴And Moses went out, and told the people the words of the LORD, and gathered the **seventy** men of the elders of the people, and set them round about the tabernacle.²⁵And the LORD came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took of the **spirit** that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders: and it came to pass, that, when the **spirit rested upon them**, they prophesied, and did not cease. ²⁶But there remained two of the men in the camp, the name of the one was **Eldad**, and the name of the other **Medad**: and the spirit rested upon them; and they were of them that were written, but went not out unto the tabernacle: and they prophesied in the camp.²⁷And there ran a young man, and told Moses, and said, Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp. ²⁸And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of Moses, one of his young men, answered and said, My lord Moses, forbid them. ²⁹And Moses said unto him, **Enviest thou for my sake?** would God that all the LORD'S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them! (Num.11:24-29).

It is enlightening to take note of how various Jewish sources interpret this Numbers passage:

These prophesied what would take place on the following day, announcing the appearance of the quails, but Eldad and Medad prophesied what was still veiled in the distant future. The elders prophesied only on this one day, but Eldad and Medad retained the gift for life. The elders died in the desert, whereas Eldad and Medad were the leaders of the people after the death of Joshua. The elders are not mentioned by name in the Scriptures, whereas these two are called by name. The elders, furthermore, had received the prophetic gift from Moses, whereas Eldad and Medad **received it directly from God.** ¹⁰

Eldad and Medad, appearing out of nowhere (they even prophesy within the camp, whereas the other elders must leave the camp before they are granted prophecy), **undermine the authority of the existing administration.** Even if their prophecy is genuine, Joshua reacts with "My lord Moses, imprison them," because of the danger they pose. To preserve the people and their government and general organization, he is prepared to lock up a genuine prophet. ¹¹

¹⁰ Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews in four volumes, 1909, (Vol. 3): original pagination 481.

¹¹ Hillel Neumann, Department of Jewish History [Bar-Ilan University] Retrieved on 24 April 2016. <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/behaalot/Neumann.html>

Although the text itself does not specify, most Jewish commentators believe that Eldad and Medad were prophesying the death of Moses in the desert prior to the entry of the Jews into Canaan. This interpretation not only suggests why Joshua urges their imprisonment, but also concurs with the historical definition of the phenomenon of prophecy as generally relating to politics. As the German sociologist Max Weber once put it, the biblical prophets were the earliest known political pamphleteers. Their ecstatic appearance struck many as odd, but the content of their monologues usually demonstrated great political acuity.

As for Joshua, the text understands his recommendation of imprisonment for Eldad and Medad as emanating from his immaturity (11:28). He appears suspicious of "instant prophets." The Talmud is somewhat more charitable in ascribing his motivations by suggesting that Joshua was advocating merely that Moses impose the restraints of public office upon the two prophets.

Yet Moses rejects even this more generous recommendation ascribed to Joshua claiming that he would rather be the leader of an entire people of prophets. Moses upholds the independence of prophets as a check upon state power. He does not believe that prophets should be restrained by public authority. In effect, Moses champions the meaning of prophecy as less the capacity to predict the future, the popular definition of prophecy, than **the ability to challenge the status quo** and speak truth to power. The subsequent role of the court prophets in biblical history would not be to tell the monarchy what it wished to hear so much as to serve as the conscience for the king -- **even at the risk of personal danger.** ¹²

The Sanhedrin (seventy) traced their legitimacy back to Moses when they received the Spirit as the seal of their authority. James's polemical argument is that even then there were two in the camp who had received the Spirit apart from the seventy. This situation caused envy amongst the seventy. These two are Eldad (Friend of God *cf.* 2:23) and Medad (more than a friend); ¹³which contrasts with James' pronouncement that, *Friendship with the world*

¹² Steven Bayme, National Director, Contemporary Jewish Life Department, The American Jewish Committee <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=7oJILSPwFfJSG&b=8449821&ct=12486117&printmode=1> Retrieved 24 April 2016 (right click link <open in new window rather than print)

¹³ According to most commentaries Eldad in the Hebrew means 'God loves', and Medad means 'object of love'. The Westminster Bible Dictionary [1944, p.386] renders Medad as [beloved or friend] this is close to 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' of John's Gospel. H.A. Whittaker suggests "friend of God" (Eldad) and "more than a friend" (Medad), 7 Short Epistles, (North West Print, Biblia), p110

is enmity with God.' (4:4) The conclusion that James wishes them to draw is that these “two” were **John the Baptist and Stephen**, who were both filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:5; Lk.1: 15) and who were both murdered because of envy and because of their challenge to the religious authorities. The inference is that the Pharisees and the party of the Herodians were responsible for the death of the Baptist and Stephen, James himself would eventually also be beheaded by a Herod. The challenge of Eldad and Medad was not like that of Korah who sought a power base through rebellion and ruthlessly promoted his own pre-eminence –rather it was the fulfillment of God’s intention for Israel –that the whole nation would become priests and prophets ministering to the needs of the Gentiles (like Stephen to the Greek widows). Moses realized this; *“would God that all the LORD’S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!”* Moses knew that he would die and that Joshua would lead the people into the promised land- what a pity that the nation did not have the same insight as this meek man.

Stephen - man of faith and works

For James, Stephen was a perfect example of faith in action, James stresses that the *wisdom from above is without partiality or hypocrisy*. What does James mean? An example of first century hypocrisy is Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5, Michael Vogelsang comments:

“Among the first Christians were a couple who felt they would like the same honour as Barnabas and so they pretended to give all they had but they kept something back, the motive for their action was not faith (Acts 5:1-11). In their case the motive was to obtain a good name. Good works are not necessarily something that proves the faith of the worker and the example that James gives is not something that most people would consider a good work, he gives the example of Abraham who ‘murdered’ his son, so to say, in the eyes of people and he then gives the example of Rahab the harlot who worked with the enemy of her country, a traitor, so to speak.”¹⁴

This is the kind of hypocritical faith (inspired by human ‘wisdom’) that James condemns in his epistle – and he refers to this very incident: the husband-wife team that conspired to conceive a lie (their ‘child’) and as a consequence ended up dead;

“But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished (full-grown), bringeth forth death” (James 1:14,15).

¹⁴ Michael Vogelsang, Faith And Works in the Epistle of James <http://biblecentre.org/content.php?mode=7&item=410>
Retrieved 24 April 2016

James warns not to let faith waver; for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed around by the wind (James 1:6) –James is speaking from personal experience, for they all nearly drowned during the storm and were upbraided by Jesus for their lack of faith. James certainly had Stephen (**Stephanos**) in mind when he said, “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown (**stephanos**) of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him” (James 1:12). The promise he is referring to is the message to Smyrna: ¹⁵

“I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and [I know] the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but [are] the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast [some] of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have **tribulation ten days**: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown (**stephanos**) of life.”
(Rev.2: 8-10)

The correspondences between James and Acts can be tabulated as follows:

James	Acts
The twelve tribes which are scattered abroad. (1:1)	They were all scattered abroad.(8:1)
If any of you lack wisdom let him ask God. (1:5)	And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he (Stephen) spake.(6:10)
For when he is tried, he shall receive the crown (<i>stephanos</i>) of life.(1:12)	Stephen name means crown- see Acts 6:5.
Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God.(1:13)	How is it that you have agreed to tempt the spirit of the Lord? (5:9)
When lust hath conceived it bringeth forth sin.(1:15)	Why hast thou conceived this in your heart? (5:4)
When it is full grown bringeth forth death.(1:15)	Ananias...fell down and gave up the spirit.(5:5)

¹⁵ This has implications for the dating of Revelation. The letter to the seven churches was probably in circulation very early before the main body of Revelation was received. Although the message is addressed to the church at Smyrna it reflects the collective experience of the Diaspora Jews who had fled the persecution of Saul. The “ten days” tribulation is taken from Daniel, where the faithful refused the king's meat but ate pulses instead: “And at the end of ten days **their countenances appeared fairer** and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.....God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and **wisdom**: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.” (Dan.1: 15,17) This is obviously all with reference to Stephen: “And they were not able to resist the **wisdom and the spirit** by which he spake..... And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw **his face as it had been the face of an angel**” (Acts 6:10,15). Note also the servant (Eunuch for the kingdom's sake) in danger of decapitation for supporting Daniel and his friends (Dan.1: 10) – John the Baptist?

The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.(1:20)	Saul yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter (9:1)
Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit [<i>ěpiskětomai</i>] the fatherless and widows in their affliction. (1:27)	Their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations- Stephen chosen to serve tables....Look ye out [<i>ěpiskětomai</i>] among you seven men...(6:3)
Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? (2:6)	They brought him (Stephen) to the council (6:12) And Saul was consenting unto his death.(8:1)
The prayer of faith shall save the sick... if he have committed sins they shall be forgiven him.(5:15)	Stephens' prayer: Lord, lay this sin not to their charge.(7:60) Saul healed and forgiven.(9:10-19)

The prayer for the sick mentioned in James 5:14,15 is similar to the experience of the apostle Paul in Acts 9:10-19:

“Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and **if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.**”

“And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest **receive thy sight**, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.” (Acts 9:17, 18)

Faith and the “Epistle of Straw”

Some scholars propose that this epistle was written in response to an overzealous interpretation of Paul’s teaching that was never intended. This extreme view, called antinomianism, held that through faith in Christ one is completely free from all Old Testament law, all legalism, all secular law, and all the morality of a society. One of the conclusions that can be drawn from this investigation is that the faith-works debate presented by James pre-dates the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith and must therefore influence the way Paul is interpreted (this is the reverse of the orthodox approach). It also demolishes the argument that James (the brother of the Lord) and Paul were at loggerheads, for we have substantiated that supporters of this view have attributed the epistle to the wrong James. The cause of friction in the early church was not the introduction of a different gospel by Paul, but the inclusion of the Gentiles. Paul’s’ opponents were not the apostles but Judaist elements in the church who sought to force ritualistic observance of the law onto his new converts.

Luther held the epistle to be “*neither apostolic nor prophetic*” and (in) famously referred to it as an “*Epistle of straw*”,¹⁶ probably because the (supposed) faith-works dilemma presented by James did not fit Luther’s dogma of justification by faith (alone). Luther’s theology was a reaction to indulgences and penitence one of (the many of) the false doctrine(s) of the Catholic Church. Indulgences were gained by doing some pious or charitable act. The money associated with the “sale of indulgences” was in almsgiving. This obviously shaped Luther’s rejection of anything associated with “works” and therefore shaped his derogatory opinion on the epistle of James (and other N.T. books). The Catholic Church on the other hand deems itself as infallible and therefore the divinely appointed guardian and authentic interpreter of the Bible. Both Luther and the Catholic Church are wrong. Only God and his Son are infallible – and the reformation was not the root and branch repentance that God demands –Protestantism retained much of the false doctrines of its mother Church.

Faith and Works

The epistle of James constructs the faith-works debate around a dialogue between a “faith only man” and a “works only man”. In adopting this artificial methodology, the epistle highlights the absurdity and deficiency of both standpoints, James then demonstrates the harmonious operation of faith and works by citing the example of Abraham.

James 2	Genesis
Even so, faith, if it hath not works, is dead in itself. Yea a man will say, “Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith....	Yahweh-Jireh Mount Moriah Yah will shew (22:2,14) ¹⁷
Faith without works is barren	Sarah barren (16:1)
Abraham justified by works	Isaac offered (2:12)
By works faith made perfect	I am El-Shaddai; walk before me, and be thou perfect, and I will make my covenant between me and thee (17:1-2).
And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned (imputed) unto him for righteousness.	The sacrifice and “resurrection” of Isaac in Genesis 22.

¹⁶ This quote only appears in Luther’s original 1522 *Preface to the New Testament*. After 1522, all the editions of Luther’s Bible dropped the “epistle of straw” comment.

¹⁷ The theme of “showing” or revealing is integral to the Abrahamic Genesis narrative

<p>As the body without the Spirit is dead So faith without works is dead.</p> <p>James is drawing the following parallel: Works = Spirit Body = Faith</p>	<p>Sarah's womb dead (Gen.18:11). Abraham stricken with age (Gen.18:11).</p>
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James' argument is very subtle, faith that is unaccompanied by works is as barren as Sarah's womb. But it was God who accomplished the miracle of Sarah's pregnancy (she was post-menopausal –Gen.18: 11). Therefore, it was Abraham who demonstrated faith, and God who provided the “work.” Without this initial “work of God” it would have been impossible for Abraham to shew, “his faith”, moreover the sacrifice of Isaac demonstrated not just the faith of Abraham, but also divine faithfulness, for in turn Yahweh “showed his sacrifice” to Abraham (he saw my day and was glad).

In his closing argument the author equates the body with faith and the Spirit with works. Although this is the opposite of what we would expect it makes perfect sense, for, just as the Spirit animates the body, so works animates faith. These are not, however, “works of the law” **but works of the Spirit**. The bodies of Abraham and Sarah were “dead” until *Yahweh rejuvenated them*; therefore, Abraham's faith was made alive by God's wondrous “work”.

Many commentators draw the conclusion that Paul was at loggerheads with James (whose exegesis he was aware of) at first glance they seem to have a case:

James	Galatians 3 and Romans 4
Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe and tremble.	God is one (Gal.3: 20)
Faith without works is barren.	The deadness of Sarah's womb (Rom.4: 19).
Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?	For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory (Rom.4: 2).
Seest thou how faith wrought with his works and by works was made perfect.	Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace but of debt (Rom.4: 6).

And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed (reckoned) to him for righteousness: and he was called the friend of God.	Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness (Rom.4: 3;Gal.3:6).
Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only	So then they which be of the faith are blessed with faithful Abraham (Rom.4: 23-24;Gal.3: 9)
For as the body without the Spirit is dead, even so faith without works is dead.	He considered not his own body as good as dead (Rom.4: 19)

It is clear that Paul is aware of the James tradition, for he frames his argument around the same premise, a superficial reading has Paul arguing the opposite case to James, but this supposed contradiction is caused by a failure to recognize the specific Pauline use of the term “works.” Paul uses the term “works” to denote works of the law - “Received ye the Spirit by the **works of the law**, or by the hearing of faith?” (Gal.3: 2). Just as Abraham and Sarah had been animated by the Spirit (God’s work) so too the Galatians.

“He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the **works of the law**, or by the hearing of faith?” (Gal.3: 5)

Abraham was not under the law, moreover he received the promise before he was circumcised, (Gen.17) and therefore his “works” **were not works of the law**. In Romans chapter 4 the apostle develops a similar argument. The Jewish claim rested on two points:

(1) The Flesh argument

God had chosen Abraham for his merit, and his goodness of character (righteousness) was reckoned to him (and therefore his descendants). Therefore, the Jewish race had a natural advantage over the nations.

(2) The Works argument

God had favored Israel in having been given rituals (circumcision) and law, so that they might be a holy nation. By keeping these the Jews thought they had a right to be justified before God.

Jesus admonished the Jews who kept the “works of the law” **for not doing the works of Abraham:**

“I speak the things that I **have seen (Yahweh-Jireh)** with my Father: and ye do that which ye have seen with your father. They answered him Abraham is our father. Jesus

said unto them, if ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the **works of Abraham.**"
(John 8:38-39)

"For the Father loveth the son (thine only son, whom thou lovest Gen.22:2), and **sheweth** him (**Yahweh-Jireh**) all things that himself doeth: and he will **shew** him **greater works** than these that ye may marvel." (John 5:20)

Both Abraham and Jesus **saw** things that the Father **showed them**. They saw with the eye of faith, for faith is the evidence of things not seen (Heb.11: 1). The "works" of Abraham were the outward expression of his faith in God not a ritualized system for gaining merit. Abraham was obedient to the call of self-sacrifice and "*showed*" his faith, becoming the "*friend of God*" (2 Chron.20:7), in reciprocation *Yahweh* revealed his sacrifice. In like manner faithful Jews and Gentiles become *Jesus' friends* (John 15:14-15) if they obey his command to self-sacrifice, and **show his death till he come** (1 Cor.11: 26).

Abraham believed in "one God" and rejected the pluralism of his ancestors – he was the father of "monotheism." The Jews also believed in the one God as witnessed by the "Shema" (Deut.6: 4), but James says that this is not enough. Doctrine alone can never be a substitute for faith, or a claim to superiority. Paul also uses the "oneness of God" to further his argument. The law was given by the angels, required the mediation of Moses, and had to be kept by the people (could not be kept by the people). In juxtaposition to this, the promise was a one sided transaction by God – who passed between the pieces by himself. The Jew could not therefore boast in the law, nor press the argument of a unique understanding of God to prove his superiority. The oneness of *Yahweh* spoke to Paul of his unity, both within himself and with his followers whether they were Jew or Gentile. ¹⁸The promise to Abraham was for people of all nations and rested solely on God's righteousness not on the works of the law.

Paul's major theological concern is not the justification of individuals by their faith but the justification of his apostleship to and gospel for the Gentiles. He describes his commissioning as a revelation of Christ "*in order that I may preach him among the Gentiles*" (Gal.1: 16), he calls himself the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom.1:5;11:13;15:16,18), speaks of "*my gospel*" (Gal.1:8,11; Rom.2:14;16:25; II Cor.4:3;11:4; I Thes.1:5), "*the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles*" (Gal.1:16; 2:2), "*the gospel to the uncircumcised*" (Gal.2:7). The content of that Gospel is described as the righteousness of God, i.e. "*the power of God for salvation, for the Jew of course but also for the Greek*" (Rom.1: 16), or concretely, "*that God would justify the Gentiles from faithfulness*" (Gal.3:8). If Paul was concerned to find his gospel of salvation for Gentiles prefigured in the Torah, there is no other figure to whom he could turn but Abraham.

Romans chapter 4 is not about Christian faith, but differing from Galatians it does speak of Abraham's faithfulness. One cannot really say that the promise to Abraham came *through* the righteousness of his faith (vs13), or that the inheritance depends on faith (vs16). *Pistis* is parallel to "promise" in vs 14 and to "grace" in

¹⁸ "That they all may be one; as thou Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us." (John 17:21)

vs16 and must refer to God's faithfulness to his promise. The chapter is not about faith but about grace, expressed in the constantly recurring phrase that God "counts righteousness" to Abraham's heirs (vss 5,6,9,11,23,24), and that "according to grace" (vs4). Paul does not object to the Torah as such (he kept it himself, made a vow and had Timothy circumcised), but to the "law" as a vehicle for Jewish superiority, for if kept in that spirit it could only condemn. The promise to Abraham was to the Jews first, but also to the Gentiles.

There is then no contradiction between the words of Jesus, James, Paul, or any of the apostles. Abraham and Rahab are used in Hebrews as an example of justification by faith and in James both are used as an example of justification by works. The separation of works and faith is artificial. The apostle James was combating an attitude in the early church that could on the one hand believe that Christ was the Messiah, and on the other hand ignored the plight of the destitute (James 2:14-16, Acts 6:1-2). One supposes that opponents of Paul used the words of James in order to bring the new Gentile converts back to the "works of the law". This was a blatant misreading of James' intentions; Abraham was not an example of works of the law, but of *faith in the promised Messiah demonstrated in actions*. It seems that subversive elements choose James as their champion, and it was against this background that Paul framed his argument, necessitating him to stress faith, rather than "works of the law." It was through this faith that the promise was extended to the Gentiles, in the same manner Gentiles who shared the same faith in the Christ as Abraham, could not earn grace by works of Torah.

Peter J. Leithart comments, "Many commentators believe this (the works-faith contrast) implies that Paul had been teaching for some time when James wrote his letter. Two comments can be made. First, it is not certain that James is responding to Pauline teaching at all. Perhaps he is responding to distortions of the teaching of Peter, another of the Twelve, or even Jesus. Even if James is addressing issues raised by Paul, this is not decisive evidence of a late date. Moo¹⁹ points out that James is responding to a distorted understanding of Paul 's teaching. Far from providing evidence of a late date for James, Moo asks, "Could it not be that the perverted form of Paul 's teaching contested in James 2 is very early and that James is not yet aware of Paul 's true intent because they have not yet met?" (p. 28). Moo goes on to note that Paul began teaching soon after his conversion (Acts 9:19-22), and we find evidence in Paul 's letters that his teaching on justification was misunderstood (Rom. 6). Between the initial scattering of the church in ad 30 and the writing of James, we need only assume enough time for Paul 's teaching to have been circulated and distorted. Given the human propensity for error and the violence of early Jewish opposition to Paul (Acts 9:23-25), this need not have been very long. Thus, James 2 does not refute the hypothesis that James was written in the early 30s".²⁰

Conclusion

The consensus of opinion among scholarship is weighted towards an early date for the Epistle, but not on apostolic authorship. This article has demonstrated James' close familiarity with John the Baptist, Jesus and Stephen. The Epistle of James is a collection of homilies and speeches given during the persecution by Saul and

¹⁹ Douglas Moo, James: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985)

²⁰ Peter J. Leithart, James: Author and Setting, Biblical Horizons, No. 71 March, 1995.

the resulting early diaspora that it caused. Certain sections may even have formed part of the funeral oratory at the burial of Stephen, when, “*devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him*” (Acts 8:4). This would explain why the document lacks the structure of an epistle (greetings etc.) or the biographic/historic approach of Acts. James was especially hated by the Herodian party as was his first teacher John the Baptist. James the son of Zebedee was Jesus’ cousin and he was replaced by James the (half) brother of Jesus thus leaving the same triumvirate (James, Peter, John) as “pillars” of the church. It seems to me that this sign of continuity was a deliberate choice and most probably the death of the first James was a powerful motivator for the second James who whole heartedly inherited the vacated role and through his familial likeness and temperament was the ideal substitute. The Epistle of James is therefore probably the earliest NT document that we have (in the 30’s) and reflects the situation before the Jewish and Christian “churches” split.