The Epistle of James to the Twelve Tribes of the Diaspora

If I were responsible for naming this letter, I would name it, “To the Twelve Tribes of the Diaspora” with the subtitle: “a Letter from James the Lord’s Brother.” The reason for this title is to set the tone of the letter. The understanding of the letter comes with understanding the audience. On a slightly less important note, but only slightly, is the author James.

The only thing we know about their location is that James calls them the “diaspora.” This means that they are living out of Israel. They are living among the Gentiles in Gentile regions. These areas include the Aegean Islands, Greece, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Italy, and Egypt. One can look back at the history of these regions during the 1st century BC through the 1st century AD and easily see the problems of their day.

As we compare the problems within these regions and the problems in this letter, let us take note that they were not involved in idolatry, adultery and corruption, which are all obvious overt sins to all people not just believers. Their problems were hidden under a cloak of external justification, participating in their synagogue, following the law (local and Jewish), acting the part but with no love for their brothers.

Along with the audience, the date of the letter is of vital importance. This letter was probably written between 40-45 AD. There was most likely a written testimony of Jesus Christ at this time. There is no indication of this from the book other than many of the references can be compared to the Gospel of Matthew. This is not to say that the audience had a copy of Matthew’s account, but there is no doubt that there are many comparisons between James and the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Let us assume they have some written account of the life of Jesus. If it is compiled and written by someone commissioned by Jesus, we will assume it is Inspired Word of God even if we do not have a copy of it. Therefore, to have a presumption that they had Matthew’s account, or one similar is a good starting place. The contents of Matthew 5-7 (the Sermon on the Mount) are either alluded to or the concept is shared by James 15 to 18 times.

This would mean that the audience only had available to them: the Hebrew Scriptures, an account of Jesus, and this letter from James. Along with the Holy Spirit, and the early ministry of the Holy Spirit until a complete Scripture was compiled.

Since this was all they had, they were not aware of the church age dispensation: the administration of God being handed over to believers regardless of nationality. They were also not aware of the eschatology of the rapture of the church. The Second Coming of Jesus was simply understood as Jesus coming to establish His Kingdom, Restore the Nation of Israel according to the New Covenant, and preserve those who are living righteously to enter into the Millennial Kingdom as humans.

This is a key concept in understanding the letter of James. The letter to the 12 Tribes is not a letter to ensure spiritual redemption, or reconciliation between God and man, but a cry to adherence to Godly principles so that they would not subject themselves to destruction at the coming of the Lord. This is a letter of disciple for Jewish Believers in Jesus that are in full revolt against the will of God.
James does not make the letter about him, but we do see his character. As we saw in our introduction:

“James, the Lord's brother, succeeds to the government of the Church, in conjunction with the apostles. He has been universally called the Just... He drank no wine or other intoxicating liquor, nor did he eat flesh; no razor came upon his head; he did not anoint himself with oil, nor make use of the (public) bath. He used to be found kneeling on his knees, begging forgiveness for the people-so that the skin of his knees became horny like that of a camel's, by reason of his constantly bending the knee in adoration to God, and begging forgiveness for the people. Therefore, in consequence of his pre-eminent justice, he was called the Just, and Oblias, which signifies in Greek Defense of the People, and Justice.”

When we evaluate the character of James, we also see the passion of James in his letter. His intensity is noticeable immediately (James 1:5-8) and permeates the letter (James 2:8-13; 3:13-15; 4:9-10; 5:8-10).

Why is this important?

When we review this letter we need to consider how a Jewish Believer, who is under discipline, would understand its content when received from someone who is revered like that of James the Just.

We also need to understand that James is not speaking to novice believers. These are Jews, steeped in Hebrew Scriptures, believers in Jesus, reconciled to God and well taught in the Word of God. In short, the audience is a group of well-versed, well-trained, “mature” believers. Their problem is not being spiritually sanctified but living by the Word and not just believing it.

We also need to keep in mind that there may be phrases or illustrations that will seem very foreign to us, because the letter is a Hebraic Epistle and concerns Synagogue life.

The purpose of the letter is to act in humble self-sacrifice; rather than, falling into the temptation of acting in personal self-interest. The letter perpetually addresses all of the failed opportunities of these believers. The audience, if they are being honest with themselves, will find out that they have fallen into temptation. This is why it is so important to remember the opening statement from James:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you fall into various temptations, knowing that the positive outcome from the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be whole and complete, lacking in nothing.

James is not about practical Christianity. This phase implies that James is a how-to manual on how to live the Christian life. Indeed, most of us will also be challenged by the admonishment of the letter. However, the content of this letter is an observation of James (or by word of mouth) of the missed opportunities that the believing Jews had.
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The instructions in this letter are written because they had become calloused to the simple truth of how a believer should live their life. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might; and love your neighbor as yourself.” The failings of these believers demonstrate that they gave into the pressures of this world and forgot or ignored this simple truth.

This letter is about the opportunity to respond appropriately to various pressures to sin. The book is primarily about the common failings of the early Jewish Believers. Some of the admonishments, warnings, and consequences may not apply to church age believers. Therefore, we must be careful with what we take as instruction and what we take as principle.

We tackled many difficulties. The main section of difficulty is of course James 2:13-26. Instead of going over this section again let me give you a summary.

First a quick outline:
1. James states plainly that Biblical doctrine that is believed is profitless without subsequent action.
2. James gives four examples to believers to make his case
   a. Logic – If someone is in need and you don’t help, what benefit is there to saying be warmed and filled.
   b. Witness lost – if our good works are not seen by others they will disregard the message of the Gospel.
   c. The lesson of Abraham the Father.
   d. The lesson of Rahab the Canaanite Prostitute.
3. James concludes by repeating the premise, Biblical doctrine that is believed is profitless without subsequent action.

***Remember, this is not about who is going to heaven or going to hell. This is about the believer using the Biblical Doctrine that he has believed in application when opportunity arises.

***Faith does not produce works, James is demanding that works be added to their faith.

How does the believer read and use this letter?

1. Understand the character and nature of God
   a. The Lord is generous and gives graciously to all who ask (1:5)
   b. The Lord rewards a life of faithful endurance (1:12)
   c. God does not lead people to sin but only gives good things (1:13-18)
   d. God honors self-sacrifice for the benefit of those in need (1:26-27)
   e. God greatly desires us and does not want us to split our affections (4:4-5)
   f. In spite of sin God has provided greater grace to those who are in Christ Jesus (4:6)
   g. The coming of the Lord with His eternal promises are imminent (5:7-9)
2. Understand the character of the believer that God desires
   a. Perpetually endure temptation (1:2-4; 12)
   b. Be ones who ask for wisdom (1:5)
   c. Be ones who are not controlled by passions, but be doers of the Word (1:19-27)
   d. Be ones who love others as you love yourself, do not act out of self-interest (2:8-26)
   e. Be patient with one another, endure evil from a brother, and be willing to help even when previously wronged (5:7-20)

The warning passages may not apply to church age believers. However, the character of God is not dependent upon the dispensation, and the character that God desires has been honored since the beginning of time.