

James:
Faith at
Work

A COMMENTARY

By Daniel L. Segraves

James: Faith at Work

A Commentary on the Book of James

by Daniel L. Segraves

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I.

The Trial of Faith

(1:1-12)

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I.

The Trial of Faith (1:1-12)

A. Salutation (1:1)

(1) James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

Verse 1. As is typical for New Testament epistles, and indeed for general correspondence of the first century, the letter begins by identifying the writer. That this James expected to be identified by name only, without further description, argues strongly that the author is the half-brother of Jesus. (See “Author” in the Introduction.) This James had a high profile in the first-century church following his conversion as a consequence of a personal and private post-resurrection appearance of Jesus (I Corinthians 15:7). He was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:12; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18) and the chief spokesman at the first church council (Acts 15:13-21).

Even though James enjoyed a unique status among the writers of New Testament books—he actually had a natural family relationship with Jesus—he did not boast of that privilege in an attempt to gain credence. Like the writers of other epistles, he identified himself as a servant (Greek *doulos*, a slave).

That he confessed to be a slave both of God and of the

Lord Jesus Christ strongly implies of the deity of Christ. Devout Jews historically refused to acknowledge slave status, regardless of political realities. When Jesus declared to a Jewish audience that they would know the truth and the truth would free them, they protested, “We . . . were never in bondage to any man” (John 8:32-33). At that moment, the entire nation of Israel was under the domination of the Roman Empire. The reason for the Jewish reluctance to confess slave status was that the law of Moses forbade them to serve anyone other than the true God. (See Matthew 4:10; Deuteronomy 5:9; 6:13; 10:20.) To serve anyone other than God was idolatry. Thus James’s confession to be not only the servant of God but also of the Lord Jesus Christ was a claim to the deity of Christ. To the Jewish mind, if Jesus was in any way less than God, James’s statement would have been blasphemy. It was not acceptable to breathe the name of God in the same breath with the name of a man and to profess to serve both.

It is significant that James would identify his half-brother with God. Either Jesus is God, or James is guilty of the worst heresy, that of exalting a man to divine status. He used the full description of the Messiah as the Lord (Greek *kurios*, widely used in the New Testament as the equivalent of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton *YHWH* or Jehovah) Jesus (Greek *Iesous*, a name that means “YHWH [or Jehovah] Savior”) Christ (Greek *christos*, the equivalent of the Hebrew *Messiach* [Messiah], meaning “anointed one”).

To James, Jesus is God, as he also asserted in 2:1.

James addressed his epistle to a Jewish audience: the twelve tribes in the dispersion. It is perhaps to be expected

that the earliest New Testament book was written to a Jewish audience; the church in the earliest times was almost completely Jewish. Some have suggested we should take the term “twelve tribes” to refer to Gentile believers as well, under the rubric of Gentile identification with Jewish institutions and vocabulary due to Gentile entrance into a Jewish spiritual community, but the uncompromising Hebrew flavor of the book, the lack of any notice of a Jewish-Gentile problem, and the fact that James was pastor of a Jewish congregation in Jerusalem, all argue that we should take the term “twelve tribes” literally. Nowhere else does the New Testament use this Jewish terminology to describe Gentile believers.

James’s use of “twelve tribes” argues against any concept of “lost” tribes. Representatives of all the tribes were included in the number who returned to Jerusalem for the rebuilding of the city and temple under Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel,¹⁵ and in several places the New Testament identifies Jews by their tribe of origin. Anna was of the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36), Mary and Joseph of Judah (Matthew 1:3; Luke 3:33), and Paul of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5). Revelation 7 describes the sealing of 144,000 Jews during the Great Tribulation, 12,000 from each tribe. The term “the twelve tribes” refers to all of ethnic Israel.

The description of the twelve tribes as “scattered abroad” has precedent in Jewish history. The Greek *diaspora* was used to describe the Jews in captivity, “scattered” through the nations of the earth. It may be here that James used the term in a more restricted sense. He may have referred to those Jewish believers, formerly of Jerusalem, who had fled elsewhere in Palestine as a result of the persecution surrounding Stephen’s martyrdom.