



From Atheist to Theist (Part 30)

Challenging the General Epistles

By

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What would move a strong atheist to become a strong theist?

In my case the answer was evidence for theism, specifically for Christian theism.

I have spent years detailing evidence for the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, and the reality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The reason is to answer a prevailing question I've received from atheists since becoming a Christian 55 years ago – WHY?

[Just a reminder that I'm only revealing the evidence available in early 1971 as I was investigating theism and Christianity. A future series will look at evidence that has been discovered since that time.]

I recently began looking at evidence for the reliability of the New Testament writings. It's important to remember that the New Testament is not a 'single' writing. It's a 'library' of 27 individual writings by apostles who knew Jesus Christ personally or worked with apostles who knew Jesus (e.g. Mark, Luke). That's also true of the Old Testament. The Bible is a library of 66 different 'writings' that are often called 'Books' of the Bible.

The Old Testament was written during a period of about one-thousand years by 30 or more authors. The New Testament was written during a much shorter period of time (about 50-55 years) by nine or ten authors.

The last New Testament author we looked at was the most prolific. The Apostle Paul wrote almost half of all of the writings in the New Testament. They are known as the Pauline Epistles. They primarily focused on Paul's apostolic guidance to Gentile churches he had started or influenced.

We saw that the majority of scholars have agreed through the years that Paul wrote at least half of the epistles that include his name as author: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon and 1 Thessalonians. Scholars are divided about Paul's authorship of the other epistles with his name [though I now believe there is ample evidence for Pauline authorship for all the epistles attributed to him].

The General Epistles

So what about the other epistles in the New Testament? They are often called the General Epistles –

1. James
2. 1 & 2 Peter
3. 1, 2 & 3 John
4. Jude

What evidence was available to me when I looked at these writings as an atheist? Do scholars come to any agreement about whether they are authentic? We will use a similar format to our investigation into the authenticity of Paul's writings.



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James

Several men in the New Testament are referred to as ‘James’

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1. The brother of John, son of Zebedee, and one of the Twelve Apostles – “He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.” Matthew 4:21-22

2. The son of Alphaeus and one of the Twelve Apostles (Matthew 10:3)
3. The brother of Jesus according to the flesh – “Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas?”
Matthew 13:55
4. The father of Judas (not Iscariot) – Luke 6:16

How do we know which “James” wrote the Book of James?

Determining Ancient Authorship

As we saw in our previous study about Paul, scholars determine the authorship of ancient writings through a specific process –

- Internal evidence – what we find in the letter itself .. claim of authorship, historical information, geographical information, biographical information.
- Language and style – comparing writing style of other letters believed to have been written by same author (e.g. vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, idioms).
- Content – comparing the content with other letters believed to have been written by same author (e.g. theology, historical data).
- External evidence – ancient writers supporting claim of authorship, ancient writers quoting from writings in question.

Internal Evidence

“James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings.” James 1:1

The author identifies himself as ‘James’ and as a ‘bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.’ The author addressed his letter to ‘the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.’ From those clues we can determine his name, relationship to God, and his audience.

Dating for the Book/Letter of James is about 48 AD. If that’s true, it would be too late for the Apostle James, brother of the Apostle John and son of Zebedee, because he was killed years earlier (Acts 12:2). James son of Alphaeus is a possible candidate since he was also an apostle of Christ. James, the half-brother of Jesus, became a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church and is also a candidate for writing the Book of James.

The author of James wrote as someone with authority to address Jewish followers of Jesus Christ living in various parts of the Roman Empire. James son of Alphaeus would have had that authority as an apostle, but do we have any external evidence that he ever took that type of position in the early Church? The same question can be asked about James the half-brother of Jesus.

The author of the Book of James did not make any personal references that would share more internal evidence about his identity, but he was knowledgeable of what Jesus said while He was on earth. James also wrote highly about wisdom, morals and ethics, favorite topics of Jesus Christ. James wrote from a Jewish perspective that depended heavily on the teachings of Christ and the Old Testament.

Language and Style

Some scholars find it difficult to believe that James son of Alphaeus or James the half-brother of Jesus could have written the Book of James because of the language and style. The Koine Greek used in James is a high quality, which some scholars don't believe would be probable given that both James' were not highly educated. However, many Jews of the 1st century AD spoke and wrote Greek well as a second language. It's also possible that the author of James used a secretary (amanuensis) to write for him.

Content

We can't compare the writings of the Book of James to another writing by James because there is only one on record. However, we may find some comparisons elsewhere in the New Testament.

External Evidence

The external evidence for the authorship of James is strong. Many of the Apostolic and Church Fathers quoted from James' letters, but let's begin with other writings in the New Testament that might give us some indication about the identify of the author of James.

James son of Alphaeus is mentioned by name several times in the New Testament –

“Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananite, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.” Matthew 10:2-4

“Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons: Simon, to whom He gave the name Peter; James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, to whom He gave the name Boanerges, that is, ‘Sons of Thunder’; Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Cananite; and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.” Mark 3:14-19

“Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles: Simon, whom He also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot; Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot who also became a traitor.” Luke 6:12-16

“And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James.” Acts 1:13

It’s interesting to note that James son of Alphaeus is mentioned by name only in lists of Jesus’ apostles and always in the ninth position on those lists.

James son of Alphaeus was also known as James the Less. That name is mentioned here –

“There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem.” Mark 15:40-41

James the brother of Jesus is mentioned by name many times in the New Testament –

“When He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, ‘Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?’” Matthew 13:54-56

“Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.’ And he departed and went to another place.” Acts 12:16-17

[Peter’s being supernaturally freed from prison followed the murder of James son of Zebedee, so the James Peter mentioned could be the son of Alphaeus or the brother of Jesus.]

“Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, ‘Men and brethren, listen to me.’”
Acts 15:12-13

“And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.” Acts 21:17-19

“After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.” 1 Corinthians 15:6-8

“Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord’s brother.” Galatians 1:18-19

“... and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.” Galatians 2:9

“Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.” Galatians 2:11-12

“Jude, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James ...” Jude 1:1

Notice that the Apostle Paul identified the James he visited in Jerusalem three years after his conversion as ‘the Lord’s brother.’ That would seem to rule out James son of Alphaeus. Paul mentioned James several verses later in Galatians 2:9 as one of the ‘pillars’ in the Jerusalem church, along with Peter and John. Given the proximity of the sentences in Paul’s letter, it would seem that the James in Jerusalem was the same in both of Paul’s visits – ‘the Lord’s brother.’ It would seem that Paul would have mentioned if the James of Galatians 2 was different from the James of Galatians 1.

Something of interest to us as we look at which James wrote the Book of James is that James at the Acts 15 council both spoke and wrote. First, what James said as the obvious spokesperson for the council –

“James answered, saying, ‘Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: ‘After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen

down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the Lord who does all these things.’ ‘Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.’ Acts 15:13-21

Following James’ speech at the council, the apostles, elders and others from the Jerusalem church wrote a letter to the Gentiles in Antioch. Though we don’t know if James was a primary author of the letter, his being a chief spokesperson might indicate that he played a strong role in writing the letter.

“Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and keep the law’—to whom we gave no such commandment— it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual

immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” Acts 15:22-29

Apostolic and Church Fathers

An Apostolic Father was a Christian leader who knew one or more of Christ's Apostles personally. They were alive in the 1st century. An early Church Father is a Christian leader who knew an Apostolic Father. They were alive in the 2nd century. Other Church Fathers were Christian leaders who lived during the 2nd and 3rd centuries and may have known early Church Fathers or those who knew early Church Fathers.

Most of the early Church Fathers did not mention the letter from James in their writings (e.g. Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Tertullian), though some scholars believe Irenaeus may have alluded to James in *Adversus Haereses* (4.16.2 and 5.1.1). Other possible allusions to James were from Clement of Rome in his *Epistle to the Corinthians* and Polycarp in his *Epistle to the Philippians*.

One of the first Church Fathers to mention the letter of James is Origen (writing in the early 3rd century). However, he mentioned the letter as ‘the Epistle of James that is in circulation’, which may have meant he had some doubt about it. However, Origen did quote from the letter of James in other places without commenting on the authenticity of authorship.

Church historian Eusebius, writing in the early 4th century AD, referred to the letter of James as a ‘disputed writing’ –

“Among the disputed writings, which are nevertheless recognized by many, are extant the so-called epistle of James and that of Jude, also the second epistle of Peter, and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist or to another person of the same name.” Church History, Chapter XXV, 3

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, also writing in the 4th century –

“Continuing, I must without hesitation mention the scriptures of the New Testament; they are the following: the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, after them the Acts of the Apostles and the seven so-called catholic epistles of the apostles — namely, one of James, two of Peter, then three of John and after these one of Jude. In addition there are fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul written in the following order: the first to the Romans, then two to the Corinthians and then after these the one to the Galatians, following it the one to the Ephesians, thereafter the one to the Philippians and the one to the Colossians and two to the Thessalonians and the epistle to the Hebrews and then immediately two to Timothy , one to Titus and lastly the one to Philemon. Yet further the Revelation of John.” 39th Festal Letter, 367 AD

Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, both compiled in the 4th century AD, include the Epistle of James as part of the New Testament.

Augustine wrote Jerome in the early part of the 5th century and quoted from James. He called James ‘the apostle’ –

“... but the question which I now submit to you from the writings of the Apostle James is intimately connected with the course of conduct in which we live, and in which, with a view to life eternal, we endeavour to please God.”

Atheist's Conclusion

My conclusion as an atheist at the time of my investigation was that the Book of James might not be authentic, even though it was included in Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. The lack of mentioning or quoting from James by many early Church Fathers, Origen's cautious mentioning of the letter, and Eusebius' reference to the letter of James as a 'disputed writing' led me to look at the letter of James with some caution.

[I do not have that caution now as a Christian, but am reporting my conclusion as an atheist 55 years ago.]

Next Time

In the next part of our report we will look at the evidence for the authenticity of letters written by the Apostle Peter.

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