

## THE LETTER OF SAINT JAMES

### **Introduction:**

The letter of James is often referred to as one of the 'catholic' epistles because it is not addressed to a particular church but to the whole church. It is addressed to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. In Old Testament terminology, the twelve tribes designate the people of Israel and the 'dispersion' or referred to as the 'diaspora' referred to the non-Palestinian Jews who had settled in the Graeco-Roman world (7:35). But since Christians were referred to as the new Israel, the expression, the twelve tribes of the dispersion is understood in a figurative manner to refer to the Christians spread throughout the Graeco-Roman world.

### **Authorship:**

This letter is so markedly Jewish in character though written in excellent Greek. Who could have written it? It can scarcely be ascribed to the two apostles named James. He does not identify himself as an apostle but rather as 'slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1).' This probably leaves us with the third James, the one Matthew and Mark referred to as 'brother of the Lord' (Mtt 13:15; Mk 6:3). He was the leader of the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem. The one Paul acknowledged as one of the pillars (Gal 2:9). In the Acts of the Apostles he appeared as the spokesman for the Jewish Christians (12:17, 15:13-21). Josephus the Jewish historian notes that he was stoned to death by the Jews under the high priest Ananus II in 62 AD. Given the excellent Greek in which it is written, it appears that it was written by a trained Hellenistic writer. Probably a secretary of James.

### **Content:**

This Letter has none of the characteristic features of a letter except the address. Thus, it belongs more to the genre of exhortation or parenesis and is concerned almost exclusively with ethical conduct. This unique style of this New Testament book makes it comparable to the Jewish wisdom literature of the Old Testament and the extracanonical Jewish literature (Book of Enoch, Qumran documents). It consists of a series of didactic proverbs and sayings of Christ in the synoptic gospels. This letter emphasizes sound teaching and responsible moral behavior. He for example admonishes the people to control the tongue which is able to direct the whole course of our lives despite its size (1:19; 2:12). The *raison d'être* for responsible moral behavior involves the concept of salvation, expectation of judgment, conversion, forgiveness of sin (1:17; 4:12).

This letter was written primarily to encourage Christians who were facing persecution to persevere (5:7-12). He reminded them that hardships produce steadfastness (1:2-4). Also, to motivate them to hold on to the law of God. To explain that faith without obedience to God is useless (2:11, 17, 18) and to instruct in Christian living especially under persecution and duress. In this regard he warns against the dangers of wealth and riches. Reminding the Christians of the misery which accompanies a heart that is set on riches and wealth (5:1).

In its practical nature, it invites the Christians to a life of humility reminding them that God gives special grace to the humble (4:6). For the humble are the ones who understand the fragility of life and the sovereignty of God (4:13-17). It is this humble faithfulness that will one day result in true glory (1:12). In this regard, he rebukes prayer that is motivated by impure motives (4:2-4) and reminds the Christians to pray in a variety of life situations being assured that God will change things for the better (5:13-18).

In this catholic epistle therefore is summarized, the Christian call to a life of humility, prayer and a lived-out faith. It is an epistle which is so practical in its wisdom and a good guide for Christian moral behavior. (Fr Denis Tameh)