
How Christian Is James?

Because James contains little that is distinctively Christian, it has been suggested that it was originally a Jewish manual of instruction given a mere veneer of Christianity by means of the references to Jesus in James 1:1; 2:1. But even though James does not reflect on the death and resurrection of Jesus or develop any other distinctively Christian theology, the author's prominent and broad use of Jesus traditions argues for an author and readers who regard Jesus' teachings as authoritative and normative, hence it is "Christian." Compare the following passages in James with the corresponding passages in the Gospels (remembering that James is more probably dependent on oral traditions rather than one or more of the written Gospels for access to Jesus' teachings):

- James 1:4; Matthew 5:48 ("maturity/completeness" as the goal of discipleship)
- James 1:5; Matthew 7:7 (assurance that God gives generously to those who ask: "ask . . . and it will be given to you")
- James 1:22; Matthew 7:24-27 (the importance of doing, not merely hearing, the "word")
- James 2:5; Luke 6:20 (the poor will be heirs of the kingdom of God)
- James 2:13; Matthew 5:7 (the merciful will be shown mercy)
- James 2:14; Matthew 7:21 (doing the will of God [the "works" that spring from faith] is what matters)
- James 3:12; Matthew 7:16 (the fruits show the kind and quality of the tree)
- James 4:4; Matthew 6:24; John 15:18-19 (one cannot be a friend both to God and the world [or its treasures])
- James 4:10; Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11 (those who humble themselves will be exalted by God)
- James 4:11-12; 5:9; Matthew 7:1 (against condemning one's neighbor, for fear of God's judgment)
- James 5:2-3; Matthew 6:19-21 (laying up treasures on earth where rust and moth destroy, and the consequences of laying up treasure rather than dealing justly with others)
- James 5:12; Matthew 5:34-37 (against swearing "either by heaven or by earth")

Many of these traditions spoken by Jesus also have parallels in contemporary or previous Jewish literature. Nevertheless, the accumulation of so many parallels between James and Jesus suggests that Jesus' teachings—both Jesus' passing along of available tradition and innovation within that tradition—were highly formative for James and so, James expected, for the lives of his audiences.

authoritative use by the Roman church (where Clement and Hermas originated) accord with the importance of the Jewish-Christian community there and the explicit claim in James 1:1 that this was a communication to Jewish-Christian communities in the Diaspora.

Who read James? James addresses the twelve tribes in the Diaspora. Whatever we make of this way of describing the readers, the author seems to address a very broad audience whose circumstances will vary widely from place to place. Students need to be cautious