

The letter of James

A Better Way of Living

Session Three: The Content and Style of the Letter

I understand the letter is written in good Greek. This suggests James was something of a scholar. No doubt, like Jesus his first language was Aramaic and they would both as boys have read and studied the Scriptures in Hebrew in the synagogue. They would also have had some basic Greek, as throughout the Roman Empire it was the lingua franca of the time. Like modern Bible scholars James may have studied Greek in depth so that he could read the Septuagint (the Greek translation from the Hebrew, dating from about 150 BC) and very possible compare the accuracy for himself with the Hebrew original. Did many Jews in the diaspora read the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew texts? As James is writing to them in Greek it seems possible.

The letter comes across as somewhat disjointed. This is apparently because it is composed of highlights from different sermons. These sermons are what James would have preached to the believers in Jerusalem. In fact this letter gives us a great insight into the content of what the earliest Jewish Christians were hearing at their meetings. Many of the other New Testament letters are addressing a specific subject or in some of Paul's, problems in a specific church.

Read through the letter again and draw up a list of contents for yourself. Make it brief, with single words or short phrases. It needs to be of help if you want to remind yourself of what James' advice is on a particular subject, but can't remember just where he wrote it.

Can you define what he means by "The law that gives freedom" in 2:12?

As you read notice his style and the ways he tries to startle or intrigue us so as to catch our attention and help our memories. He uses more imperatives than Peter. There are also paradoxes, rhetorical questions and imaginary conversations. He throws in a few insults, but more than compensates for those with the reassurance of saying "brothers" and even "my dear brothers" frequently.

Take special note of his similes and metaphors. It's interesting to list them too.

Do you like his style?

Does it help you remember the points he makes?

Think about Jesus' style of teaching and compare it with James' style of writing. Do you see similarities if so what strikes you? What about any differences?

In his opening sermon about James' letter on 17th June, Andrew told us that it is written in the style of the Wisdom Writings. Which books of the Bible do we call the Poetry and Wisdom Writings?

Which book is James emulating in his letter and how is the style similar and how does it differ?

What common theme do you see in Proverbs 2:1-6 and James 1:2-7?