

# COMMENTARY

## I. GREETING: JAMES 1:1

### BEHIND THE TEXT

The author of James does not identify himself beyond his name and his relationship to **God and . . . the Lord Jesus Christ** (see Introduction). The use of **Christ** as if it were **Jesus'** surname and not a title reflects the influence of Hellenism (Davids 1982, 63).

The author refers to himself as a *doulos*, a **servant** or **slave**. Today, we think of servants as voluntarily serving others, versus slaves forced to serve masters/owners. In the first century, a *doulos* belonged to a lower social and economic group. This group “constituted the greatest number but possessed the fewest goods.” They were “identified not by parentage, birthplace, or occupation, but by the one(s) in whose service [they] stood” (Brosend 2004, 32-35).

James' phrase **servant of God** has a dual background. It certainly reflects the sociological understanding of the identity of a *doulos*, one who stood in a relationship of service to another. But as a traditional Jewish Christian, James must also have seen himself among Israel's other servants of God. This title placed him in the company of Moses, the servant of God (Num 12:7); God's servants the prophets (Jer 7:25; 25:4); and Isaiah's servant of Yahweh (52:13—53:12). James' identification of himself as the **servant . . . of the Lord Jesus Christ** reflects the early Christian practice of identifying their leaders as standing in a special relationship to Christ (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1).

James addressed his readers ambiguously as “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (NRSV). This seems to indicate an audience of Jewish background, perhaps Jewish Christians living in Syria, Rome, Greece, or Asia Minor. Many Diaspora Jews had lived outside Judea for centuries, some since the Babylonian exile. Jewish Christians of the Diaspora were familiar with the trials of Jewish resident aliens outside Palestine (see Introduction, “Audience”).

Some Jewish families, like Paul's, may have earned or bought Roman citizenship. But most lived as noncitizens, subject to the whims of government authorities. Even when they were not specifically targeted for persecution, they suffered from a lack of status and influence within their communities. Their distinguishing dietary and ritual laws made them stand out as strange. Even Palestinian Jews were subject to the caprice of the Romans who occupied first-century Palestine (see Introduction, “Audience”).

## IN THE TEXT

■ Verse 1 follows the customary pattern of the letter openings in the NT. These generally conform to the conventions of ancient Greco-Roman letter writing. Authors identified themselves by name and title, named their addressees, and closed with a salutation. Here James offers only his name. There is no personal or biographical data as in some of Paul's letters.

The English name **James** (*Iakōbos*) is from *Jacomus*, the Latin rendering of the OT name Jacob (Hebrew *yaqōb*). Thus, “a number of modern European languages now have two male names from the same linguistic root” (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 47). If the writer of this letter was James the brother of the Lord (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3), as ancient tradition assumed, the lack of mention of his special relationship with Jesus remains a mystery.

An explanation may be found in the self-description that follows. Instead of mentioning his family relationship to Jesus, James preferred to use a strong word (*doulos*, **slave**) describing his relationship with God and with the Lord Jesus Christ. Apparently, James' personal relationship with Jesus Christ as his Lord, and his submission to be his servant, is more important than his

family connection. His Christian identity is defined by his servant-Lord relationship rather than his brother-brother relationship.

The term *doulos* identifies a slave bonded to another for life—a “bond-servant” (NASB). James understands himself as a slave committed to the service of God and Jesus Christ. His life is completely dedicated to God.

James does not identify himself as either a leader or an apostle. In his letters, Paul used his apostolic designation when he needed to establish his authority. James’ failure to identify himself as a leader may indicate that he was well known to his readers and his authority taken for granted.

James’ self-identification as a servant/slave might be taken as an expression of humility. This is how John Wesley explained James’ mentioning Jesus only twice in his letter: “It might have seemed, if he mentioned him [Jesus] often, that he did it out of vanity, as being the brother of the Lord” (Wesley 2003, 810).

But to be a **servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ** was no insignificant matter. This is the only passage in the NT in which this exact title appears. The closest parallel is Paul’s self-designation as a “servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ” in Titus 1:1. In Jewish tradition, a **servant of God** is “a designation of privilege and honor” (Martin 1988, 4). The title was used to describe all of Israel’s great leaders. James used it to distinguish himself from his readers “as a figure of authority” (Martin 1988, 4).

By combining **a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ** as he does, James possibly equates Jesus with God. The grammar is not unambiguous, but perhaps James intended this distinction. At the very least James uses the fullest title of Jesus, calling him both Master and Messiah (**Lord and Christ**; Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 47).

The designation of James’ addresses as **the twelve tribes scattered among the nations** is ambiguous. Literally, he calls them *the twelve tribes in the Diaspora*. We cannot be certain whether he intends a literal or metaphorical force for *Diaspora*. The Greek word order emphasizes the **twelve** tribes, not their Diaspora location. This suggests that they lived in these areas as aliens and sojourners.

Some scholars consider **the twelve tribes** a metaphor for “the Christian Church conceived of as the True Israel inheriting the rights of the ancient people of God” (Ropes 1973, 118). Others take it as a literal reference to the ethnicity and status of James’ audience. Would James, the leader of the Jewish-Christian church, make a distinction between the two (see Bauckham 1999, 14-15; and Introduction, “Audience”)?

James was written at a time (A.D. 40s) when the distinction between Jews and Christians was not clear, since most Christians were Jews (Brosend

2004, 31). Judaism in the early first century consisted of several varieties: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, and Christians.

According to Acts 11:26, the followers of Jesus were first called “Christians” in Syrian Antioch. This may have been intended to distinguish them from Jewish communities that did not accept Jesus as Israel’s Messiah or welcome Gentile converts. This scattering (dispersion) of Jewish Christians from Judea, which led to the conversion of many in Antioch, occurred after Stephen’s death about A.D. 35.

Some of the scattered Jewish Christians may have been born where they lived. But from a sociological perspective, their ethnic and religious background distinguished them from those who lived around them. Their different values and lifestyle did not meet the expectations of the cities they inhabited. They were open to ridicule, perhaps even physical and social abuse, for their beliefs and practices.

Verse 1 ends with a salutation of a single word: **Greetings**. This translates *chairein*, the infinitive of the verb *chairō*, meaning “rejoice” or “be glad.” It is the standard greeting in most ancient letters. This is another reason for considering the book of James to be a letter. Since it has no standard letter closing, it is really a mixed genre (see Introduction, “Form and Genre”).

This greeting was common in the first century. But it appears in no other canonical letter. It is found in two letters incorporated into Acts (see Acts 15:23; 23:26). The first of these reports the decision of the Jerusalem Council, where James presided. Perhaps this offers another reason for assuming this James was the author of the NT letter we call James.

Paul’s letters commonly used a related Greek word, *charis* (“grace”) combined with *eirēnē* (“peace”: Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:3; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; Titus 1:4; Phlm 1:3; similarly 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2). This surprisingly reflects a more “Jewish-oriental . . . and Christian liturgical practice” than the standard Greco-Roman greeting in James (Davids 1982, 64).

“Why are these influences absent from a Jewish Christian letter” like James (Davids 1982, 64)? Did James lack the “creativity and mastery of Greek” of Paul? Or, did the later Hellenistic redactor of James “not think in Paul’s more Aramaic terms” (Davids 1982, 64)? Or perhaps James simply adopted the convention of his time and saw no theological need to expand on this greeting as Paul did. James simply says, “Hello!” (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 48).