

With James the Just assumed to be the author of this letter, and there being no extant tradition of him ever traveling outside of the Land of Israel to visit other Believers, we may safely assume that James was in or around the vicinity of Jerusalem when he wrote his epistle. A geographical location of the Land of Israel may be safely assumed when one considers things like the scorching east wind (1:11), the tossing waves of the sea (1:6), and “the early and late rains” (5:7)—all features of the region.⁴⁵

WHAT IS THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF JAMES?

Throughout religious history, the Epistle of James has been associated with some controversy, as it was accepted rather late into the Apostolic canon by emerging Christianity, it has been viewed with much skepticism because of its emphasis on works, and it has been tended to be ignored by too many people in preference to the Pauline letters. A potential mistrust of the Epistle of James has also passed into much academic examination of the letter, as well as the Bible reading of many laypersons. Yet, among those who have sought to have a holistic reading of Scripture, those who appreciate texts which describe the practical wisdom of God’s people, and those whose faith is focused on matters of holiness and piety—the Epistle of James has been a major source of guidance and inspiration. So, while it may be said that James is ignored by many, those who have paid attention to James have benefited greatly from it.

In his Fourth Century *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius had to acknowledge how the Epistle of James was “Among the disputed books, although...known and approved by many” (3.25.3).⁴⁶ Eusebius would also record, “These accounts were given respecting James, who is said to have written the first of the epistles general (catholic) but it is to be observed that it is considered spurious” (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.25).⁴⁷ “Eusebius himself regarded James, the Lord’s brother, whom he calls an apostle, as the author, but he clearly knew the status of the letter was debatable because of uncertainly regarding its authorship” (*IDB*).⁴⁸ While there were doubts among many Christians of the Second-Third Centuries concerning the authorship of James, Moo details some of the other factors which contributed to the epistle’s late canonical acceptance:

“Early Christians tended to accord special prominence to books written by apostles; and James was such a common name that many probably wondered whether the letter had an apostolic origin or not. Moreover, James is filled with rather traditional and quite practical admonitions: it is not the kind of book that would figure prominently in early Christian theological debates. At the same time some early Jewish-Christian groups misrepresented some of the teaching of James in support of their own heretical agendas. Knowledge of this use of James among orthodox theologians may well have led them to look askance at James.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Cf. McCartney, pp 24-26.

⁴⁶ *Ecclesiastical History*, 91.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁸ Barnett, “James, letter of,” in *IDB*, 2:794.

⁴⁹ Moo, 4.

One of the most notable, errant views of James the person, is seen in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*: “The disciples said to Jesus, ‘We know that you will depart from us. Who is to be our leader?’ Jesus said to them,

The lack of seeing any specific reference to the sacrifice of Yeshua, and perhaps even some kind of declared “gospel message” of the salvation available in Him, has also contributed to people being skeptical of the Epistle of James. However, much of this perception only comes from **a surface level reading of the text**, as a careful and detailed examination of the Epistle of James will reveal anything but this. Moo asserts how, “while Jesus’ person and work might be generally absent, his teaching is not. No NT document is more influenced by the teaching of Jesus than James.”⁵⁰ Guthrie further attests, “there are more parallels in this epistle than in any other New Testament book to the teaching of our Lord in the gospels.”⁵¹ Some quite notable connections, which are seen between James and Yeshua’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, include:

- 1:2: Joy in the midst of trials (cf. Matthew 5:10-12).
- 1:4: Exhortation to perfection (cf. Matthew 5:48).
- 1:5: Asking for good gifts (cf. Matthew 7:7ff).
- 1:20: Against anger (cf. Matthew 5:22).
- 1:22: Hearers and doers of the Word (cf. Matthew 7:24ff).
- 2:10: The whole law to be kept (cf. Matthew 5:19).
- 2:13: Blessings of mercifulness (cf. Matthew 5:7).
- 3:18: Blessings of peacemakers (cf. Matthew 5:9).
- 4:4: Friendship of the world as enmity against God (cf. Matthew 6:24).
- 4:10: Blessing of the humble (cf. Matthew 5:5).
- 4:11-12: Against judging others (cf. Matthew 7:1-5).
- 5:2ff: Moth and rust spoiling riches (cf. Matthew 6:19).
- 5:12: Against oaths (cf. Matthew 5:33-37).⁵²

Other important parallels with the teachings of Yeshua include:

- 1:6: Exercise of faith without doubting (cf. Matthew 21:21).
- 2:8: Love to one’s neighbor as a great commandment (cf. Matthew 22:39).
- 3:1: On the desire to be called teacher (cf. Matthew 23:8-12).
- 3:2ff: On the dangers of hasty speech (cf. Matthew 12:36-37).
- 5:9: The Divine Judge at the doors (cf. Matthew 24:33).⁵³

The Epistle of James undeniably parallels the teachings of Yeshua the Messiah,⁵⁴ particularly His Sermon on the Mount. James focuses the obedience of God’s people onto the same, foundational and imperative ethical matters, which can be quite easy for many religious

“Wherever you are, you are to go to James the righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being” (logion 12; Thomas O. Lambdin, trans., “The Gospel of Thomas,” in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990], 127).

⁵⁰ Moo, 27.

⁵¹ Guthrie, 729.

⁵² Cf. *Ibid.*, pp 729-730.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 730.

⁵⁴ Davids, 48; Bauckham, in *ECB*, 1484; McCartney, pp 50-51; McKnight, pp 25-27.

people—who are used to going through some kind of mere “motions”—to dismiss. There are also parallels and connections which can be made between the Epistle of James and the Wisdom literature of both the Tanach and Apocrypha (i.e., Proverbs, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon).⁵⁵ This contributes to the main thrust of James on teaching his readers how to act properly in the circumstances in which they found themselves.

Even though James makes many allusions to the Torah or Law of Moses, his focus is not so much on the ritual of various commandments, as it is on the Torah’s moral message to human beings.⁵⁶ In addition to emphasizing the love that God’s people are commanded to have toward one another (2:8-9), James warns about sins such as adultery and murder (2:11), the proper handling of the tongue in speech (3:8-10), an emphasis on godly wisdom (3:17), how one is to be humble and pure before God (4:8-10), and to be very cautious when speaking against or judging other brothers or sisters (4:11). James also goes to great lengths to explain the perseverance that God’s people are to have (5:7), and how they are not to complain against one another (5:9). James’ message, although delivered to a First Century audience with First Century concerns, is widely universal for just about any time.

Among the noticeable themes discussed in James, poverty-piety is affluent in various places (2:2-6).⁵⁷ This has a definite association with various parables and teachings about wealth seen in the words of Yeshua, as well as some kind of significant connection to admonitions appearing the Torah and Tanach (Deuteronomy 10:16-19; Ezekiel 16:49; Amos 2:6-7; Psalm 86:1-2).

The history of interpretation of the Epistle of James is noticeably struck by the fact that the Reformer Martin Luther rejected the canonicity of the letter, calling James an “epistle of straw.” Luther, and various others following him, have concluded that the letter of James derided the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith. At the same time, many Christians throughout more recent religious history, Protestant and Catholic, have tended to value the Epistle of James on various levels. Piety movements especially, and others tending to emphasize the value of good works, have highly regarded James. Contrary to Luther, the Reformer John Calvin more adequately summarizes the position of a great number of Protestants in approaching the Epistle of James:

“I am fully content to accept this epistle, when I find it contains nothing unworthy of an apostle of Christ. Indeed, it is a rich source of varied instruction, of abundant benefit in all aspects of the Christian life. We may find striking passages on endurance, on calling upon God, on the practice of religion, on restraining our speech, on peace-making, on holding back greedy instincts, on disregard for this present life—these, and such like, which we shall deal with duly in their proper places.”⁵⁸

Given the importance of Martin Luther, though, as one of the first major Reformers, modern commentators such as Moo have tried to offer some explanations as to why he held James in such low regard. Perhaps in the Sixteenth Century, Luther was attempting to reform

⁵⁵ Witherington, pp 394-395; cf. Moo, 8.

⁵⁶ Wessel, “James, Epistle of,” in *ISBE*, 2:960.

⁵⁷ Davids, pp 41-47; McCartney, pp 37-38.

⁵⁸ John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark & Luke and James & Jude*, trans. A.W. Morrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 259; cf. Moo, pp 5-6.

a Catholic system which considered works—specifically works as defined by the Roman Catholic Church—as a means to justification and salvation. Moo observes, “Luther, faced with forms of Roman Catholic medieval theology that placed great emphasis on works in salvation, naturally focused on Paul in his preaching.”⁵⁹ Luther did consider James to have many good things to say, but in his theology had extreme difficulty reconciling it with the writings of Paul, which emphasized the grace of God.

In the wake of Luther not quite knowing what to do with the Epistle of James, many Protestant leaders of note have had various degrees of success and difficulty, in seemingly having to reconcile this letter with the writings of Paul, which largely emphasize grace.

Moo mentions the activities of John Wesley in the Eighteenth Century, as he was “confronting...a church largely indifferent to the moral imperatives of the gospel.”⁶⁰ Wesley would use a text like James to tell his parishioners to attain “Christian perfection,”⁶¹ detailing in his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*,

“I tell you, as plain as I can speak, where and when I found this. I found it in the oracles of God, in the Old and New Testament; when I read them with no other view or desire but to save my own soul. But whosoever this doctrine is, I pray you, what harm is there in it? Look at it again; survey it on every side, and that with the closest attention. In one view, it is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is one desire and design ruling all our tempers. It is the devoting, not a part, but all our soul, body, and substance to God. In another view, it is all the mind which was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked. It is the circumcision of the heart from all filthiness, all inward as well as outward pollution. It is a renewal of the heart in the whole image of God, the full likeness of Him that created it. In yet another, it is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves.”⁶²

Whether ancient or more modern, the challenge that many have had when examining James, is what appears to be his preoccupation with the works of God’s people (2:14-26). He attests “that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24). This has been confusing for many, especially in light of Paul’s word, which is that salvation comes “not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:9). Are James and Paul at theological and spiritual odds—or do James and Paul need to be placed in a better context, on their own merits? If the latter is to be the preferred choice of action, then not only does an interpreter have to consider James and Paul as possibly having different vantage points in describing “justification,” but also the different dynamics of “justification” themselves, ranging from a forgiveness and remittance from sin to being recognized as a member of God’s covenant people.

⁵⁹ Moo, 43.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 37.

⁶² John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1966), 117.

The reader is referred to some of the useful notes and observations in Joel B. Green, “The Letter of James,” in Joel B. Green, ed., *The Wesley Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), pp 1500-1504.

The theological debate surrounding the Epistle of James, for many centuries, has been: How can James, and his emphasis on works, be reconciled to the words of Paul, which largely emphasize grace? Moo offers the perspective, “Works, claims Paul, have no role in getting us into relationship with God. Works, insists James, do have a role in securing God’s vindication in the judgment. Paul strikes at legalism; James at quietism. Each message needs to be heard.”⁶³ J.A. Motyer is a bit more to the point, in his publication, *The Message of James*: “disagreement between James and Paul is in fact artificially produced by wrenching James’ words out of their context.”⁶⁴ One is identified as expositing on saving faith (Paul), and another is identified as expositing on the life required by faith (James). Some interpreters have thought that parts of the Epistle of James were composed to engage with a garbled form of Pauline teaching on faith, and that had James and Paul actually been able to interact in person more frequently, that presumed differences between them could have been easily ironed out.⁶⁵ Paul himself was not at all opposed to good works flowing from genuine saving faith (i.e., Ephesians 2:10); he was opposed to people thinking that their good works provided saving faith (i.e., Ephesians 2:8-9). *ISBE* summarizes,

“The best-known passage in which faith is mentioned is 2:14-26, and here faith and works are contrasted. A study of this passage reveals that the author is not attempting to refute Paul. The two stand basically in agreement. For both James and Paul faith finds its object in the Lord Jesus Christ, and both are agreed that the first thing to do with faith is to live by it. The ‘faith’ of which James speaks in 2:14-26 is really not faith at all, in the true Hebraic sense of confidence and trust in God that elicits appropriate action.”⁶⁶

A reasonable examination of the text of James’ letter will not prove his writing to be in conflict with Paul’s words about justification by grace. James was concerned about a life of faith manifested in works, as he stated, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works [*ek tōn ergōn mou tēn pistin, ἐκ τῶν ἔργων μου τὴν πίστιν*]” (2:18). For a figure such as James, works are to be the external evidence of one’s faith in God, and are to show that a man or woman actually has faith. What is interesting, of course, is that James’ words on the works of a Believer were widely written before much of Paul’s teaching on human actions. In the Epistle of James, it is possible that there were those who misinterpreted some of Paul’s preliminary teachings on works, and James had to issue some correction. Wall addresses how one has to appreciate the letter of James as being complimentary to Paul:

“[Many] have come to depend upon the book’s wise solutions to everyday situations, which insist that a fully biblical religion requires more than mere confessions of orthodox faith. In this sense James offers a complementary ‘check and balance’ to the accents of the Pauline letters, helping to form a biblical witness that commends a firm trust in the saving work of the Lord Jesus (Pauline) and a practical wisdom patterned after his life (James).”⁶⁷

⁶³ Ibid, 37.

⁶⁴ Motyer, 19.

⁶⁵ Carson and Moo, pp 625-626.

⁶⁶ Wessel, “James, Epistle of,” in *ISBE*, 2:960-961.

⁶⁷ Wall, “James, Letter of,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, 545.

The Apostle Paul himself recognized the authority and calling of James as a servant of the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 15:7, James is mentioned by name, before “all the apostles.” Martin indicates how “He recognized James as a leader who was prominent in the mother church. He appealed to James’ authority as a witness of the resurrection, and claimed himself to be a member of that company.”⁶⁸ Yet Martin also draws the conclusion, remarking that “He was reluctant to state plainly that James was, in Paul’s own estimation, an apostle—according to what is perhaps the best conclusion we can reach on the ambiguous wording of 1 Cor 15:7.”⁶⁹ Of course, we have to note that in 1 Corinthians 15:7, James is mentioned by name, while the rest are reserved only the category of “apostles.” While some have used this as a way to downplay James, James mentioned by name, as the half-brother of Yeshua and leader of the Jerusalem assembly, could be taken as a recognition that he was in a slightly higher status than that of the Apostles.

The importance of James the Just for the First Century Body of Messiah was quite significant, given the spurious involvement of his name in the incident at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14), with what many conservative interpreters feel was an inappropriate appeal by some Jewish Believers to stir up trouble by somehow appealing to him, when they were, in fact, unauthorized.⁷⁰ McKnight actually says, regarding the importance of James as a leader, “I am a Protestant and not in direct fellowship with the See of Rome, but if asked who was the ‘first pope,’ I would choose James. He was at the center of the church, the whole church, because the whole church had its start in Jerusalem.”⁷¹ Even if the Epistle of James is said to be a bit “primitive,” as it were, in comparison to later theological issues and controversies which would erupt in the First Century Body of Messiah, James is a pretty important letter to be considered in terms of the absolute essentials of faith. It is the product of the half-brother of Yeshua, and should be studied and probed for worthwhile applications for serving God in our hurting world.

The Epistle of James offers Bible readers some of the most practical theology, which many modern Christian examiners appropriately recognize is well-needed for our times. James is one of the most frequently read letters in the Bible by people, but can be misunderstood because of its high emphasis on works. Many of today’s evangelical Christians, in reviewing James’ letter, have made great progress in trying to restore a greater appreciation of it for contemporary Believers. This does not only concern responsible Bible reading, but also in stirring Believers to action in the world, and in having an understanding of doctrine which is not stale in spiritual value. McCartney summarizes much of this:

“Our Western Christian heritage has vigorously stressed the importance of doctrine, focusing on propositional truth as crucial for Christian identity, because ideas and thoughts make a difference in actions and relationships, particularly our relationship to God. But James reminds us that the ultimate purpose of Christian instruction, the goal of doctrine, is a godly character and righteous behavior. This purpose is also found in Jesus’s teaching and even in

⁶⁸ Martin, xxxviii.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Moo, 17 astutely observes, “Did James himself send these people with his blessing? Or were they simply claiming to represent James without his authority?” Moo opts for the latter view.

⁷¹ McKnight, 12.

that of Paul...but it has tended to become lost in our battles over precise doctrinal formulation. James reminds us that genuine faith is more than a matter of simply acknowledging the right concepts; it is right living in accordance with those concepts.”⁷²

Motyer also makes some observations, which he directs toward modern Christian readers of James:

“As we look around us today...the abandonment of the old reactive separatism from the world has led to a forgetfulness of the concept of separation, and for very many Christians what goes in the world goes in the church. If everyone does it, why should not the Christian? We need to discover and live by positive Christian standards—not reacting against the world around us, but by responding obediently to the Word of God within the world around us. James wrote his letter just for us.”⁷³

While more Western Christians in the past have had difficulty relating to the various groups within James’ First Century audience,⁷⁴ in our global world and economy, where the plight of those in undeveloped countries where poverty runs rampant can be readily seen on television or the Internet—James’ words about those in need should be more impactful. For Twenty-First Century evangelicals, James presents a perspective of works required of Messiah followers, which are most relevant and highly significant, as a demonstration of the love of God toward human beings.

HOW DOES JAMES RELATE TO MESSIANIC BELIEVERS TODAY?

Unlike some of the varied challenges that either older or more contemporary Christian traditions have had with the Epistle of James, today’s Messianic movement tends to have a very high appreciation of James. In much Messianic teaching, James’ words about the works of Messiah followers tend to be emphasized, on different levels, in connection with Messianic Believers’ Torah observance. Yet, while the Epistle of James is often valued by many Messianic people, there is some definite room for improvement. There is a need for Messianic readers to be a bit more text-conscious about all of the various issues seen in the letter, for them to pay a little closer attention to the nature of the works James has in mind, and most especially to not make the reverse error of many Christians, overplaying the Epistle of James at the expense of the letters of Paul.

How are today’s Messianic Believers to approach the Epistle of James? An unnecessary amount of debate actually surrounds the common English title of this letter, which the 2011 *Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—The New Covenant* rendered as “Jacob”⁷⁵ (the Complete Jewish Bible has “Ya’akov”). While it is useful for readers to be informed about the issues of *Iakōbos* (Ἰάκωβος) and *Ya’akov* (יַעֲקֹב), there are some petty diatribes that can be witnessed among Messianics, which can take readers away from the much bigger issues of the actual contents and applications of the letter itself. There have been some Messianic Jewish attempts

⁷² McCartney, 3.

⁷³ Motyer, 15.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁷⁵ *Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2011), 403.

to address the Epistle of James, beyond David H. Stern's *Jewish New Testament Commentary*,⁷⁶ including the remarks appearing in Arnold G. Fructenbaum's *Ariel's Bible Commentary*,⁷⁷ and the volume *James the Just Presents Applications of Torah* by David Friedman, with D.B. Friedman.⁷⁸ (This second publication is not a verse-by-verse analysis of the epistle, as much as it is a series of essays presenting some proposed connections between James and ancient Rabbinical perspectives.)

Immediately jumping into the Epistle of James, there are various quarters of the Messianic community, where some rather caustic emotions are probable to erupt, when the intended authorship of this letter is considered. James identifies his audience as "the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad" (1:1), and no reader or interpreter across a broad spectrum denies that Jewish people were his primary audience. Tension arises in conjunction with the issue of the corporately exiled Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, as pockets of people to the immediate north of Israel, in Syria and Lebanon, would have been among their descendants—and this is a likely location for much of James' audience (Acts 11:19). The real debate is not whether ethnic Israelites are an intended audience of James' letter, but whether any people entirely of the nations, are also intended. This is a definite place where if non-Jewish Believers are included as recipients of James' letter as well, an examiner has to stay, as far as possible, away from appropriating any themes of supersessionism, where the so-called "Church" is now the "New Israel."⁷⁹ Instead, a Kingdom of God known by a restored twelve tribes of Israel, should be in view, in conjunction with James' own words at the Jerusalem Council about Israel's Kingdom realm expanding to incorporate those of the nations (Acts 15:15-18; Amos 9:11-12).

Much of the issue regarding a wider audience than just First Century Jewish people, for the Epistle of James, is actually going to be determined from the author's appeal to classical philosophy and moralism (3:6),⁸⁰ and many in the Messianic movement struggle with classical Mediterranean background issues in the Apostolic Scriptures. No reader of James doubts that there are parallels between this letter and the Tanach or Old Testament, particularly its Wisdom literature. However, connections with classical philosophy indicate that there were Diaspora Jews among the letter's recipients, and among Diaspora Jews inevitably came those proselytes and God-fearers who would also come to Messiah faith.

While Messianic readers will necessarily be tuned in to connections made between the Tanach, and other ancient bodies of Jewish literature, and what is communicated in James—Johnson actually draws the conclusion that the letter of James' worldview, is closest to that of the Pauline letters:

⁷⁶ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), pp 725-742.

⁷⁷ Arnold G. Fructenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Messianic Jewish Epistles* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2005), pp 205-313.

⁷⁸ David Friedman, with D.B. Friedman, *James the Just Presents Applications of Torah* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer, 2012).

⁷⁹ Barnett, "James, Letter of," in *IDB*, 4:796; Wessel, "James, Epistle of," in *ISBE*, 2:964; Guthrie, pp 747-748; Wall, "James, Letter of," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, 548; Moo, 23.

⁸⁰ Cf. Carson and Moo, 624.

“Of all the compositions from the first-century Mediterranean world, in fact, James most resembles the letters of Paul in its style and outlook. The resemblance is not restricted to the disputed lines in 2:14-26, nor is it due to the dependence of one writer on the other. Rather, despite the obvious differences between the extant literature of each author, James and Paul share a range of convictions and perceptions that is best explained by the hypothesis that both are first-century Jewish members of the messianic movement with significant roots in the world of Palestinian Judaism.”⁸¹

While Bible readers, surveying the Epistle of James and the Pauline letters, can make some broad connections between the similarities between them—theologically speaking, Messianics, as much as many Christians, can have a tendency to think that James and Paul disagree on some issues. Messianic people today can demonstrate some difficulties, in sorting out the relationship between faith and works—and more frequently than some leaders and teachers probably want to know, in the minds of many individuals, James and Paul are pitted as adversaries, rather than dealing with different situations. James’ audience has dismissed the proper actions attendant with faith, and Paul’s audiences have often placed human activity as a cause for earning salvation. And, not enough are informed about how different components of “righteousness” or “justification” are in play,⁸² which may not always involve being cleared from sin. A good approach for sorting through James’ letter and Paul’s writings is offered by the introduction to James (Jacob) in the TLV:

“Some wonder if there is a conflict between Jacob and Paul: Paul teaches that we are set right before God, justified by our faith, while Jacob says that this happens from our works (2:24). Actually Paul and Jacob compliment each other. God declares us to be righteous because of our faith, while our faith witnesses to others through our deeds. A true faith will show itself in how we live. Paul and Jacob would both be quick to agree to that. We say we have faith in *Yeshua*; now, let’s live like it!”⁸³

James the Just was not someone who believed that the Torah or Law of Moses had been abolished for Messiah followers. Even among examiners who do believe that the Torah has been abolished for the post-resurrection era, such as Moo, he still has to conclude, “James maintains the continuing authority of the OT law for Christians only insofar as it has been ‘fulfilled’ by Jesus. James’s appeal to the ‘love command’ as *the* royal law forges a direct link with Jesus; and James, of course, alludes to the teaching of Jesus throughout his letter.”⁸⁴ Given the many connections between James’ letter and Yeshua’s Sermon on the Mount, many of the Torah-prescribed or related actions that James discusses, will be related to acts of kindness, mercy, and heart attitude.

For James, obedience to God is not something that is crafted out of some kind of legalistic duty, but rather the completeness or the perfection of the individual. The term *teleios* (τέλειος) appears in this epistle multiple times (1:4, 17, 25; 3:2), to describe the proper character of the

⁸¹ Johnson, in *NIB*, 12:180.

⁸² Carson and Moo, 633; Moo, pp 37-43; Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 253.

⁸³ *Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant*, 403.

⁸⁴ Moo, 33.

Believer. *TDNT* describes it, in relation to James' writing, as a "sense" of being "'whole' or 'complete'...Those are who do the whole work and whose steadfastness works itself out fully. This means looking into the 'entire' law of liberty (1:25) and doing it. This law brings liberty with its observance. It finds fulfillment in love but also in self-control, for the whole person bridles the whole body, including the tongue (3:2ff)."⁸⁵ In its ancient classical usage as a philosophical term, "*téleios* carries the sense of full humanity with an orientation to what is worthwhile and ethically good."⁸⁶ Consequently, when James admonishes his readers to attain to "perfection," all of these excellent qualities are being alluded to. Believers in Messiah Yeshua are to strive for a maturity that engulfs their entire being, and is to be evidenced in good ethics, morality, and spiritual steadfastness. James addresses a fair amount of inter-personal and inter-congregational related issues, and being perfect—meaning striving for the goal of excellence—is an overriding theme throughout James' epistle. The introduction to James (Jacob) in the TLV astutely concurs,

"Jacob focuses on ethics—how to live out the life of faith. This resonates with the emphasis of many modern Jews for whom ethics is often at the front of the agenda. The difference is that Jacob says that our life flows from our faith in *Yeshua* (2:1). He speaks to such issues as dealing with suffering; handling temptation; treating people fairly rather than playing favorites; showing the reality of one's faith through deeds; and using one's tongue properly (avoiding what modern Judaism calls *lashon ha-ra* [לְשׁוֹן הָרַע], hurtful speech or gossip)."⁸⁷

Recognizing that the good works, based in the Torah, which James emphasizes—**largely concern ethics and morality**—there should be no surprise how some significant connections have been proposed between his epistle and the Holiness Code of Leviticus ch. 19:

JAMES AND THE TORAH OF GOD ⁸⁸	
LEVITICUS 19:12-18	THE EPISTLE OF JAMES
You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD (19:12).	do not swear...so that you may not fall under judgment (5:12).
You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob <i>him</i> . The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning (19:13).	Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, <i>and</i> which has been withheld by you, cries out <i>against you</i> ... (5:4).

⁸⁵ G. Delling, "*téleios*," in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abrid. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1164.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant*, 403.

⁸⁸ This chart has been adapted from Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 254.

<p>You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am the LORD (19:14).</p>	<p><i>no parallel</i></p>
<p>You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly (19:15).</p>	<p>My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Yeshua the Messiah with <i>an attitude of personal favoritism</i> (2:1).</p>
<p>You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD (19:16).</p>	<p>Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge <i>of it</i> (4:11).</p>
<p>You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him (19:17).</p>	<p>let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (5:20).</p>
<p>You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people (19:18a).</p>	<p>Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door (5:9).</p>
<p>but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD (19:18b).</p>	<p>If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well (2:8).</p>

When was the last time that any of us, in our own personal reading of the weekly Torah portions, or in a *Shabbat* service, have seen connections made between Leviticus 19:12-18 and the Epistle of James? Probably not as frequently as we should, because in a letter like James, we see how important these principles are to be followed by men and women of faith in everyday life and interactions.

Not only have many Jewish Believers entered into the Messianic movement, and as a result have been reconnected to their Jewish heritage—but so have many non-Jewish

Believers also entered into the Messianic movement, having started a diligent pattern of Torah study. But many of us *all wonder* where this Torah study and observance will lead us, and how we are to really practice it in the world. For Messianic Believers, the Epistle of James offers us a great venue, as we consider the faith required of the Believer, the works required of the Believer, and the right heart attitude toward one another in the community of faith and the world at large.

A lost emphasis on the works of the Believer is something that is being restored to those in today's Messianic community. Unfortunately, various teachers who examine James, can fall into the trap of emphasizing the works of a Believer over the grace of God—without a proper balance of the two. We do not come to faith in Messiah Yeshua solely for the sake of demonstrating our devotion to God by our works. After we come to faith in Yeshua we are to obey our Heavenly Father because we love Him and because we want to please Him, and we are to love one another. This is something clearly emphasized by James in his comments concerning “the royal law” (2:8).

Everyone in the Messianic movement today needs to hear James' message regarding perfection. While none of us may be able to be entirely perfect this side of eternity, we still nevertheless need to strive for greater and greater excellence. We can definitely see many non-Jewish Believers, in particular, who enter into the Messianic movement not because they are spiritually convicted that they need to be following the Torah and hence live as Messiah Yeshua lived, but because they are trying to prove themselves superior to others. This is evidenced in the attitudes of those who unwarrantedly criticize our Christian brothers and sisters, and rather than reason with them constructively on various issues, condemn them mercilessly. As a movement, all of us need to have a mature attitude instilled within us, whereby we are never having to prove how we are “better than everyone else.” *James addresses how the Messianic movement today needs a heart check.*

James delivers a very strong message to the Messianic community today. We are a still-developing movement, as well as a maturing movement. *No one should be under any illusions that bringing together Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, and making a difference in the world together, is an easy thing.* James admonishes us about the personal piety and holiness that we should all be striving for, while we must also be ethical, moral, and above all loving toward our fellow human beings. These are lessons that should be second nature to all of us, especially if we claim that we follow the Torah. Paul A. Cedar validly writes, “I believe that James should be one of the first books read and mastered by the new Christian. Too often the church has mastered the art of informing people regarding what they *should* be doing, but has failed to teach them *how* to do it!”⁸⁹ **How much more so does this apply to us as Messianic Believers who need to know how to properly live the Torah in modern society, positively impacting others with the truth?** What are some of the areas, described by James, where we need to seriously improve?

There is a widespread tendency among many Messianics for them to think that the “works” James primarily expects are those of keeping the Sabbath, the appointed times of Leviticus 23, or eating kosher—when this is not only the case. An honest reading of the

⁸⁹ Paul A. Cedar, *The Preacher's Commentary: James, 1&2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 9.

Epistle of James demonstrates how its author is much more concerned about those required actions of people of faith that help instill a sense of human wholeness in others. As James summarizes, “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world” (1:27).

Messianic Believers today should know the appropriate place that works play in their lives. They follow the Torah’s commandments because the Messiah Yeshua did. They cannot just have “faith in their faith”; our faith in the God of Israel must be evidenced by good conduct in the world, and the standard that the Lord has set forth in His Torah. James, the half-brother of Yeshua, continued to live by this standard, and instructed others to live by it as well. He emphasizes the ethics and morality that all Messiah followers *and* emulators should have, as they live forth God’s love in the world.

On the technical side as you prepare to read this commentary on James, note that I have purposefully refrained from overly using Hebraic terminology, other than the name “Yeshua the Messiah” for Jesus Christ, and on occasion “Torah” instead of Law, for the familiarity of most readers, and those who can be easily confused by unfamiliar words. The 1995 New American Standard, Updated Edition is the base English translation used in these studies, because of its literalness and widespread usage among many conservative evangelical Christians. Other major English versions I consult include the Revised Standard Version and New International Version.

References to the Greek Apostolic Scriptures are from United Bible Societies’ 1998 Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition, the same basic text as the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graecae, 27th Edition. If you have any competency in Greek, an excellent resource to employ in examining our text is the Nestle-Aland Greek-English New Testament, which includes the 27th Edition GNT and a parallel RSV.

ABBREVIATED OUTLINE OF JAMES

- I. Greeting (1:1)
- II. Trials and how to meet them (1:2-4)
- III. Wisdom and how to obtain it (1:5-8)
- IV. Wealth and how to regard it (1:9-11)
- V. Temptation and trial distinguished (1:12-15)
- VI. Good gifts (1:16-18)
- VII. Hearing and doing (1:19-27)
- VIII. Against partiality (2:1-13)
- IX. Against a barren faith (2:14-26)
- X. Qualities required in teachers (3:1-18)
 - a. Control of speech (3:1-12)
 - b. True wisdom (3:13-18)
- XI. Dangers (4:1-17)
 - a. Human passions (4:1-10)
 - b. Evil speaking (4:11-12)
 - c. Rash confidence (4:13-17)
- XII. Warnings to wealthy oppressors (5:1-6)
- XIII. Encouragements to the oppressed (5:7-11)
- XIV. Against oaths (5:12)

- XV. The power of prayer (5:13-18)
 XVI. Help for the backslider (5:19-20)⁹⁰

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⁹⁰ Adapted from Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 757-759.