

Chapter One

commentary

1 – James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Yeshua Messiah, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.

As noted in the Introduction, the name “James” most likely came into the English language as a blending of pronunciations for the Hebrew name Ya’akov (Jacob). The Greek *Ἰάκωβ*, *Iakōb* in our text clearly links to the patriarch whose name became synonymous with “Israel,” for that was the name given to Jacob by God Himself (Gen 32:28).

That the epistle is addressed to the “twelve tribes” is therefore perfectly fitting for an author whose name was *Iakōb*. But as we read the inspired words of this epistle, we recognize that when James addresses himself to the “twelve tribes,” he is not limiting his words specifically to only a Jewish audience. For by the time of the Apostles, it was already known that the Abrahamic covenant promised God’s blessing upon “all nations,” not just the chosen nation of Israel. It seems highly likely, then, that in this opening verse James is emphasizing God’s plan to graft into the believing remnant of Israel the elect from the nations whom God has chosen to save, just as Paul teaches in his epistle to the Romans (11:17–24). Here, once again, we see the plan of God, revealed at the very beginning of the Scriptures, is at the heart of the Apostolic Scriptures. For the faithfulness of God to His promise is shown when both Jew and Gentile are gathered together into one body, being blessed as equal participants in the eternal salvation secured for them by the saving work of Yeshua Himself.

The word order of the Greek in the first phrase of this opening verse is interesting because it is not what one might expect. It is *Ἰάκωβος θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δούλος*, which literally would be: “James, of God and the Lord Yeshua Messiah, a slave.” What this word order emphasizes is the One to whom James was a slave, i.e., that he was fully given to serve the Almighty. The point is this: while he clearly identifies himself as a slave, the primary emphasis is on the One he serves, not on himself. For he puts “slave” as last in the clause giving the first place to “God and the Lord Yeshua Messiah.” Thus, from the very beginning of the epistle, even in this nuanced method, James intends to show that if we are all to be servants of the Most High, He must receive first place in all aspects of our life. As Paul writes:

He [Yeshua] is also head of the body, the *ekklesia*; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. (Col 1:18)

But we must also emphasize that from the very beginning, James is identifying himself as a “bond servant of God and of the Lord Yeshua Messiah.” If, as we have suggested in the Introduction, this James is, in fact, the brother of Yeshua, we hear a remarkable confession from him. For according to John’s Gospel, early on Yeshua’s brothers were not convinced that He was, in fact, the promised Messiah.

After these things Yeshua was walking in Galilee, for He was unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him. Now the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, was near. Therefore His brothers said to Him, “Leave here and go into Judea, so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. for no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world.” For not even His brothers were believing in Him. (Jn 7:1-5)

What was it, then, that convinced James that Yeshua was, in fact, the promised Messiah? Surely it was the work of the Ruach opening His eyes and heart to the truth, but it seems very likely that the primary event that brought James to be a “bond-servant of the Lord Yeshua” was our Lord’s resurrection from the dead. For Paul gives us this historical record in 1Corinthians.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; (1Cor 15:3-7)

Though the wonder of Yeshua’s incarnation remained to one extent a mystery to all who lived at that time, the truth of His resurrection on the third day could not be dismissed. Did James, the brother of Yeshua, believe in the coming Messiah? It would seem that he did. But did he identify the promised Messiah as his brother, Yeshua? It seems very

likely that this occurred at the time of Yeshua's crucifixion and His triumphant resurrection. And so it is with all who believe. The resurrection of Yeshua forever seals the reality that He is the promised One, that He is the Son of God, and that He alone is the Savior of sinners.¹

Thus James, who being carried along by the Ruach HaKodesh (2Pet 1:21) wrote this epistle, identifies himself as one together with every true believer, for all who are truly in Yeshua have an ongoing commitment to serve the Lord Yeshua Messiah with all of one's life. As we study this epistle, then, we will see how strongly James calls each one of us to be a bond servant of Yeshua, and in doing so, he identifies with us as one who practices what he preaches.

...to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: – While there ultimately were 13 tribes when the tribe of Joseph was divided into Ephraim and Menasseh, the common usage of “twelve tribes” traditionally designated the fullness of the Israelite people descended from “Jacob and the twelve patriarchs.”² Here James uses this same broad label to identify the believing remnant of Israel that has been enlarged by the ingathering of believers in Yeshua from the nations. We also see that the remnant of Israel, i.e., the true believers from the twelve tribes, have not lost their identity as Israel, nor are their tribal identities lost. Moreover, the very fact that Yeshua chose twelve Apostles shows that His mission was to bring to Himself the believing remnant of the twelve tribes enlarged by those grafted in from the nations. Israel is never forgotten in God's saving work.

And Yeshua said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matt 19:28)

... Greetings. The Greek *χαίρειν* (*chairein*) is an infinitive which could be understood to mean “for well-being” or more commonly, “may it be well with you.” It was a common greeting, and we find the same greeting used in the Apostolic letter sent out by the Jerusalem Council under the leadership of James as recorded in Acts 15:23.

...and they sent this letter by them, “The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.” (Acts 15:23)

1 Cf. Acts 13:32-33; Rom 1:1-4; Phil 3:10;

2 Cf. Acts 7:8; compare Ex 24:4; 28:21; 36:21; Josh 4:5; Ezek 47:13.

The use of the Greek *xairō* as a standard way of giving a friendly greeting in the ancient Greek world, is based upon the general meaning of the word: “to be in a state of happiness and well-being, to rejoice, to be glad.”¹ Used here as a greeting, it portrays the author’s desire that his letter would find its recipients in a state of wellness and joy.

Thus, the greeting itself has a clear connection to the opening exhortation of the epistle in the next verse, which likewise speaks of “joy.”

2–3 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

The opening command, “Consider,” translates the Greek imperative *ἡγήσασθε* (*hēgēsasthe*) from the verb *ἄγω* (*agō*) which carries a basic meaning “to direct the movement of an object from one position to another” or “to lead or encourage” in a particular direction. This exact form of the verb *agō*² is found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures. Thus, in these opening words, James immediately is teaching us that we must know and affirm the truth as it has been given to us by God Himself, through the Incarnate Word Yeshua, and in the inspired, written word, the Scriptures. We must take our daily experiences, including the trials we encounter, and understand them in light of what God has said and the eternal salvation He has procured for all those who are His through faith in Messiah Yeshua. We must commit ourselves to viewing all of life through the lens of what God has said is true.

At the very beginning of our Epistle, we encounter our author admonishing us to find joy in trials, which seems shocking at first. Did not Yeshua teach His disciples (and us) to pray for deliverance from trials? Indeed, the last request of the Disciples Prayer is this:

And do not lead us into testing, but deliver us from evil. (Matt 6:13)

Granted, the traditional translations of the prayer (Matt 6:9–13; Lk 11:2–4) have the last request this way:

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (Matt 6:13)

But it should be stated that the Greek word translated “temptation”

1 BDAG, “χαίρω,” p. 1074.

2 2nd person pl. aorist middle imperative