

International Mail

Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude

A Message to Jewish Believers

Paul was not the only servant of Christ sending letters around the Mediterranean world. The Bible includes eight other letters that the early believers accepted as authoritative from God. Three were written by the Apostle John; two by the Apostle Peter; one each by James and Jude, two brothers of Jesus; and one by an unknown author.

The latter bears only the title, "To Hebrews." It was apparently sent to a single community of Jewish believers living somewhere in the Roman Empire. Its author was someone with stature in the international network and a personal bond with his readers: perhaps Paul, Apollos, or Barnabas.

These Hebrew believers were facing two temptations to cool their passion for Jesus the Messiah. On one hand, they were still strongly attached to their Jewish ethnic identity and to the religious traditions of their people. They wanted to continue keeping the ceremonial laws, the festivals, the food laws, and so on. In many ways, they felt more akin to other Jews than to Gentile followers of Christ.

At the same time, they were facing persecution to abandon

their commitment to Jesus. The pressure may have been coming from unbelieving Jews, who viewed them as traitors to God and true Judaism, and followers of a blasphemer. It was normal for Jews who announced faith in Jesus to be expelled from their synagogues, have their children barred from synagogue schools, and lose their jobs in areas controlled by Jews. Stresses like these may have begun to cause these Hebrew believers to reconsider their pledge to Christ.

Or, the tension may have been coming from the secular authorities. By AD 60, Rome was beginning to distinguish between Christianity and Judaism. The latter was a legal religion, but the former—if it was not just a Jewish sect—was not. As Judaism and Christianity diverged, it was becoming necessary for Hebrew believers to throw in their lot either with the people of Christ or with the Jews. To remain a Jew would mean security; to identify with Christ would mean legal and social limbo. The writer to the Hebrews observed that his readers had not yet had to shed their blood because of allegiance to Jesus, but we know that a scant four years later this was no longer true.

No matter what the precise source of their conflict, one thing was certain: Serving Jesus Christ was costing these Hebrew believers more than they were comfortable paying. Their apostolic friend faced them with this burning question: Is Jesus worth it all? Then he proceeded to persuade them that the answer was yes.

His message was that the way of Christ is better than any alternative—particularly Judaism. Jesus is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, a greater priest than Aaron, a greater sacrifice than those offered in the temple. He totally understands our weaknesses because He experienced life as a man; He learned what it feels like to obey God amid terrible suffering. Yet He is a priest in the line not of Levi but of Melchizedek, whose name means “king of righteousness.” David had foreseen the coming of an eternal Priest-King in his line and had written, “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:4). This Priest offered one perfect Sacrifice once for all humans, for all time. Therefore, the butchering of animals day after futile day was obsolete. It was a picture to explain what Jesus would do,

but now it was passé and would soon fade away.

The writer wanted his Hebrew comrades to understand how suffering fits into the life of God’s people. “It was fitting,” he wrote, “that God . . . should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering” (Hebrews 2:10) because pain is the hallmark of life after Eden. The writer goes on, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (2:14-15).

So death need hold no terror for His servants. They can follow the example of God’s people in every generation who have endured anguish with clear-eyed hope because they were convinced that God was telling them the truth—even with no material evidence to back it up. Noah built a landlocked boat and kept faith in it for half a year; Abraham went to his grave with only one son and a square yard of land; Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph bet their lives on a Kingdom they never saw; Moses gave up princedom; Rahab risked her neck for a God she’d only heard of. Generations of faithful Jews had faced death because they refused to settle for the easy compromise. Could this generation do less?

The choice was stark. Jesus’ death had gained access for believers to the very throne room of God. They had the full rights of sons and daughters to stand before the Father and tell Him anything. But if they retreated from this offer out of fear of what unbelievers might do, there was no other hope available to them. To know that Jesus was the Son of God, and to reject Him for self-protection, was to choose death.

To the writer of this letter, Jesus fulfilled the Old Covenant in every minute detail. His last illustration summed up his point. Under the Old Covenant, the blood of a sin offering was brought to God’s throne in the temple, but the body was burned outside the camp or city because it was corrupt—stained with the evil of the people for whom it substituted. Therefore, “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but

we are looking for the city that is to come" (13:12-13). The holy city of Ezekiel's vision. A new Jerusalem. The Kingdom of God.

James

The letter to the Hebrews is written in more elegant Greek than any other New Testament book. It is also the New Testament's finest overall commentary on the Old. Clearly, its author was a man of remarkable learning and culture.

The little letter of James, by contrast, is the plain talk of a Jew who probably knew little of the world outside Palestine. The author identifies himself simply as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1). Of the three followers of Jesus named James (the English equivalent of Jacob), this one was probably the eldest of Jesus' four brothers. However, he based his authority not on physical kinship to Jesus, but on having been forgiven by Him.

During Jesus' earthly lifetime, James thought He was a bit crazy. But when Jesus appeared to him after the Resurrection, James changed his mind. He became a leader of the Jerusalem community; Paul even called him a "pillar" of that team. James's judgment of the Gentile question carried the day at the first Jerusalem council.

James was known as "James the Just" by the people of Jerusalem, both followers of Christ and others. He was scrupulous in observing the Law and had a reputation for holiness and asceticism. However, the Jewish historian Josephus recorded that James was stoned by the Jews in AD 62 for violating the Law.

James did try to make the way of Christ more appealing to Jews by encouraging Jewish believers to keep the Law and avoid eating with Gentiles. But there is no evidence that he claimed the Law was necessary for pleasing God, and he supported outreach to Gentiles that did not bind them to the Law. He was eager to compromise on purely cultural issues, but he utterly refused to compromise with pagan morals.

Because of its very Jewish flavor, James's letter has caused Gentile believers some confusion. It barely mentions Jesus at all, and never His death and resurrection. Some readers have felt it contradicts Paul's teaching that one cannot do anything to earn

God's favor. But in fact, James shows no sign of ever having read Paul's letters to the Romans or Galatians. He simply uses some of the same words differently.

James may have written as early as AD 45, before Paul began planting communities and before there were many Gentile believers. Or, he may have written as late as from AD 55 to 60, when Paul's teachings were being widely discussed, misquoted, and misconstrued. Either way, it seems that James was trying to correct a distortion of the gospel. A lot of people had responded to the news that they could enter the Kingdom of God just by believing that Jesus was King and God. But some of them got the idea that being born into God's family was all there was to it, that believing in Jesus was just a mental agreement to a set of ideas.

James wanted to counter this notion that one could remain a spiritual baby forever. To him, "believing" or "faith" was not just a mental assent. It was the kind of active trust that moved Abraham to tie his son to an altar, that prompted Rahab to put her life on the line. Even demons believe intellectually, said James. Real faith can be seen in actions like caring for the poor and avoiding moral corruption.

James was writing to people who he assumed knew the gospel, so he didn't rhapsodize on mystical union with Christ or the meaning of the Crucifixion. Instead, he got down and practical about how to live in light of the gospel. He called his readers to a tested, mature commitment.

James was blunt. Don't blame God when you are tempted to do evil; blame the slime in your soul and deal with it. Don't call yourself the community of God and then treat well-dressed people better than shabby ones. Don't claim to be a teacher of the gospel when you can't control your mouth. Don't imagine you're wise if envy and ambition are poisoning your heart. Don't just read the Bible; do what it says.

James may have been committed to the outward rules of the Law, but he was no legalist. He understood human psychology surprisingly well. The reason you have conflicts with people, he said, is not because of them. It's because you have desires in your heart, and you want to make people fulfill them. Your desires aren't met because (1) you refuse to depend on God for

them, or (2) they are selfish. James's solution: First, just decide that God is in charge, and you are not. Second, stop listening to what you know is demonic deception. Third, go to God with your desires, trusting that He'll welcome you. Stop pretending and face the damage that your self-centeredness is doing. Grieve over it. When you really want God more than your selfish desires, He will be able to change your heart and satisfy your longings.

First Peter

We know much less about Peter's activities than Paul's because he didn't have a friend like Luke following him around taking notes. Tradition has it that Barnabas's nephew Mark took notes on Peter's memories of Jesus, and that those notes became the basis of the Gospel of Mark. But what Peter did after the book of Acts leaves him in Jerusalem around AD 50 is unknown. Early sources are unanimous that he died in Rome under Nero's persecution, either in the pogrom immediately after the fire, or a year or two later. He had evidently been in Rome for some time nurturing the communities there.

Of the two surviving letters of Peter, the first says Peter wrote it (along with Paul's former colleague Silas) from "Babylon" (5:13). Early believers sometimes used that name to symbolize the ultimate corrupt pagan city, so Peter may have been referring to Rome. Alternatively, he may have been in literal Babylon (which at that time was a small town on the Euphrates River) or in an Egyptian military outpost by that name.

He sent this letter to believers in several provinces of Asia Minor. They were suffering the usual harassment by pagan neighbors and the normal hassles of life, and Peter wanted to help them live up to their calling in the midst of the stress. He addressed them as "aliens and strangers in the world" (1 Peter 2:11) — citizens of another Kingdom who should not be surprised that the people of this planet find them confusing, unnerving, even threatening. He also named them "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (2:9). Their mission: to praise their Master not only with their lips but also with their lives.

He wrote, "Live such good lives among the pagans that,

though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (2:12). How does a pagan glorify God? By turning away from his rebellion and toward Christ. The behavior of a royal priest draws unbelievers to God. So, in 3:15 he tells his readers to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." Don't be alarmed if a coworker or a city official ridicules or interrogates you. See it as an opportunity to offer life to that person. A royal priest is ready with the words of the gospel as well as the deeds.

Like Paul, Peter saw daily life as an ideal chance to make Christ attractive. A slave who did excellent work and endured abuse without bitterness would stand out in the crowd. A wife who glowed with inner contentment would make a pagan husband take notice. A husband who treated his wife with respect would be noteworthy. A community where the leaders were not in it for the money or the prestige, and where the young respected instruction from the old — that would be something for the pagans to think twice about.

Second Peter

In his first letter, Peter dealt with how to respond to persecution from outside the community. In his second, he addressed the other main problem that plagued the body: fraudulent teachers distorting the gospel for their own gain. Peter was evidently furious when he dictated this letter, for it rings with comments like, "These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them" (2 Peter 2:17)!

The community to which Peter wrote was being thrown into confusion by men who distorted the gospel so badly that they could even justify drunken orgies in broad daylight. They may have been forerunners of the full-blown cults of the next century who said nothing a spiritual person did with the body mattered. They preyed upon people who had just converted to Christ from paganism and were struggling to give up wild sex and drinking. According to Peter, the false teachers "promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity — for a man is a

slave to whatever has mastered him" (2:19).

Also, the charlatans were claiming to have some secret knowledge beyond the gospel that one needed to know in order to be secure about one's life after death. Against this notion, Peter insisted that God had already given believers "everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him" (1:3). It is knowing Jesus personally and intimately, not knowing some esoteric body of information, that enables a person to live the spiritual life.

Finally, the false teachers were ridiculing the idea that Jesus would ever return and usher in the end of the earth as we know it. It had been decades since Jesus' departure, and a lot of believers were getting impatient. They hadn't expected to have to live their whole lives waiting. But Peter responded that God's slowness allowed more people to have a chance to respond to His invitation.

It was indeed looking like the whole first generation of believers might die out before Christ's return. That was not at all what Peter and his colleagues had expected thirty years earlier when they ate and talked with the resurrected Jesus. They expected the end of the world any day. But in looking back, Peter understood that Jesus had said nothing that guaranteed He would return within Peter's lifetime, or even within the century. Like Abraham, Peter and his readers had to keep looking forward with unproven hope.

Jude

Much like his brother, Jude called himself "a servant of Jesus Christ," but he also emphasized that he was "a brother of James" (Jude 1). He knew he was too obscure to claim authority on his own; he preferred to claim kinship with a leader in the Jerusalem community rather than with Jesus Himself. After all, every one of his readers could claim to be a brother of Jesus in the only way that really counted.

Jude's letter is a short warning about frauds similar to those Peter denounced. Disagreement about precise understandings of the gospel was one thing — there was plenty of room in the body for that. But these men were claiming that God's free forgiveness

meant they could commit any immorality they wanted and not fear God's anger. Paul had been accused of teaching that, and he had strongly denied it. Jude pulled out all the stops in condemning such an idea, which was a slap in God's face. As Paul had told the Romans, what person who really loved God enough to receive His grace would want to enslave himself to activities that grieved God?

One odd practice both Peter and Jude warned against was slandering spirit beings, even evil ones. It's hard to imagine why so many false teachers were mocking demons, and one might wonder what was wrong with doing so. But respect, even for evil beings, seems to be a value in God's Kingdom. Rudeness and contempt are devilish characteristics, even when directed against the Devil himself.