

## On The Epistle of James

from Archibald Robertson, *Origins of Christianity* (1962; orig. 1954), Chapter 7. Online at <http://www.ditext.com/robertson/oc7.html>

What the rank and file thought of these disputes can be gathered from the pamphlet called in our Bibles the Epistle of James. This is not the work of James of Jerusalem, the antagonist of Paul. The author is acquainted with the Greek text of the Old Testament, but not with the Hebrew, and himself writes good, fluent Greek. Nor are the conditions which he describes those of the primitive church. The churches have become corrupted by class distinctions and "respect of persons"; the rich have good seats at meetings, and the poor sit on the floor or stand.<sup>116</sup> Internal evidence points to the reign of Hadrian. To match the spate of pseudo-Pauline or pseudo-Petrine literature circulating in the churches, the author fathers his composition on James, the leader of the Palestinian church honoured next after Peter. For him Christianity is not a negation, but an extension of Judaism: he addresses his work to "the twelve tribes of the dispersion".<sup>117</sup> In his respect for the Jewish law and his revolutionary attitude to riches he belongs to the Essene tradition which antedates Christianity and had so much to do with its beginnings. He is not interested in dogma. He quotes no Gospel and never mentions the crucifixion or resurrection. He refers to Jesus Christ as the "Lord of glory" who will judge the world.<sup>118</sup> His attitude to the intellectuals who wrangle for the control of the churches is "A plague on all your houses!" There is too much talk and too little action, too much humbug about justification by faith while brothers and sisters go naked and hungry. Echoing the ancient prophets, he bids the rich exploiters of labour weep and howl for the miseries that are coming on them in "a day of slaughter".<sup>119</sup> His readers are to be patient, firm and united. "The coming of the Lord is at hand . . . The judge stands at the doors."<sup>120</sup>

This revolutionary pamphlet was late in winning canonical rank. No writer of the second century mentions it. Origen in the third quotes it as "the Epistle said to be by James". Eusebius in the fourth notes that its authenticity is denied, and classes it among "disputed books which are nevertheless known to most".<sup>121</sup> Like the Apocalypse, this Epistle was preserved in the teeth of their leaders by the rank and file whose aspirations it reflected. The Syrian churches, where the primitive type of Christianity which it embodies was latest in disappearing, were the first to admit it to their canon. Jerome, writing in Palestine at the end of the fourth century, notes that its authorship is questioned, but himself accepts it as genuine. Thus it won a place in the New Testament. In modern times Luther rejected it as an "epistle of straw"; but the Anabaptists loved it and often knew it by heart. Its value lies in the evidence it affords of the persistence of a revolutionary tradition in second-century Christianity.