

Finally I get to explaining reasons why the brother of Jesus, in my judgment, almost certainly did not write the book of James. The explanation will come in two parts, or possibly three. In this one I build on my last post, by arguing that it seems completely implausible that James \*could\* have written the letter. (For those of you inclined to think he used a “secretary” to do it for him — I’ve posted on this a bunch in the past, to show why that didn’t happen; just search for “secretary” on the blog). In my next post or two I’ll give additional reasons, for those of you not completely enthralled with questions of who could read and write in antiquity. Both discussions are edited versions of what I say in my book *Forgery and Counterforgery*.

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There are solid reasons for thinking that whoever wrote this letter, it was not James, the brother of Jesus. The first, as already mentioned, is that James of Nazareth could almost certainly not write.

Whoever produced this letter was a highly literate native speaker of Greek, grounded in Hellenistic modes of discourse and able to use abundant rhetorical devices and flourishes. It is often noted that the book employs a sophisticated use of participles, infinitives, and subordinate clauses. Even Luke T. Johnson, a supporter of authenticity, points out that ...

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... points out that the language consists of “a form of clear and correct koine [Greek] with some ambitions toward rhetorical flourish... comparable in quality if less complex in texture, to that of Hebrews.”<sup>[1]</sup> Johnson also notes that the author makes vigorous use of rhetorical devices found in many Greco-Roman moral discourses, but associated especially with the diatribe.<sup>[2]</sup> Matt Jackson-McCabe, concurs: not only does the author evidence a “relatively high proficiency in Greek grammar, vocabulary, and style”; he “is “more generally at home in literate, Hellenistic culture,” using commonplaces of Greco-Roman moralistic literature (horses with bits, ships and rudders, controlling the tongue in order to control the body, and so on).<sup>645</sup>

It seems unlikely that an Aramaic-speaking peasant from rural Galilee wrote this. Here I can simply refer the reader back to the discussion of literacy in antiquity, and in Palestine in particular, in the previous post. What applied to the fisherman Peter applies to the common laborer James as well (an apprentice carpenter? We don’t know how he earned a living), or even more so. As far into the backwoods as Capernaum was, the little hamlet of Nazareth was more so; excavations have turned up no public buildings, let alone signs of literacy. Even if James’s well-known brother could read – and so was considered highly exceptional by his townsfolk (Luke 4:16; cf. Mark 6:2) – it would have been Hebrew; nothing suggests that Jesus could write; if he could do so it would have been in Hebrew or Aramaic, not Greek. And by all counts he was the star of the family.

This was a part of the world where literacy was likely 1-2% or even less. Where would James have learned to write Hebrew? Or to read Greek? To write Greek? To write literary Greek? Greek that shows knowledge of the diatribe? And that uses rhetorical flourishes known from Greco-Roman moralists? All of that would have taken many years of intensive

education, and there is precisely zero indication that James, the son of a local τέκτων, would have had the leisure or money for an education as a youth. Moreover, there were no adult education classes to make up the deficit after his brother's death years later. One should not reason that James could have picked up Greek after Jesus' death on some of his travels. If he did learn any Greek, it would have been of a fumbling kind for simple conversation; writing literacy was not (and is not) acquired by sporadic conversations in a second language - especially writing literacy at this level. And James certainly would not have mastered the Scriptures in Greek, as the author of this letter has done (see 2:8-11, 23; 4:6). And so, despite the remarkably sanguine claims of some scholars about the Greek-writing skills of uneducated rural peasants of Nazareth, it is virtually impossible to imagine this book coming from the pen of James.<sup>[3]</sup> The conclusion of Matthias Konradt is understated at best: "it remains questionable . . . whether one might expect the rhetorical and linguistic niveau of James from a Galilean craftman's son."<sup>[4]</sup> More apt is the statement of Wilhelm Pratscher: "Even if one assumes a widespread dissemination of Greek in first century C.E. Palestine, one will nevertheless scarcely consider possible the composition of James by the brother of the Lord, especially when one compares it to the markedly simpler Greek of the Diaspora Jew Paul."<sup>[5]</sup>

[1] The Letter of James; AB 37A (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 7.

[2] Letter of James, p. 9. 645

Matt Jacson-McCabe, "The Politics of Pseudepigraphy and the Letter of James," in Jörg Frey, et al., eds, Pseudepigraphie und Verfasserfiktion, pp. 621.

[3] Contra J. N. Sevenster, Do You Know Greek? How Much Greek Could the First Jewish Christians Have Know (Leiden: Brill, 1968), who argues that James would have known Greek. Sevenster's study has been superseded, indeed, demolished by the more recent investigations of M.Chancey, M. Bar Ilan, and C. Herzer mentioned in the previous chapter. And so, Lindemann, Paulus, is precisely wrong to maintain. "The Greek of James is indeed the weakest argument against its authenticity" ("In der Tat ist die griechische Sprache des Jak das schwächste Argument gegen seine Echtheit," p. 241, n. 57). And when John Painter (Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997]) maintains that James could have been the author, since as a Galilean he would have been fluent in Greek, he is simply arguing on the basis of assertion, flying in the face of the evidence; his further claim that we need to take into account "the educative effect of the Jesus tradition" fails to address the hard issues (p. 238). Training in Greek composition was not part of first-century catechism.

[4] "Es [bleibt] gleichwohl fraglich ... dass einem galiläischen Handwerkersohn das rhetorische und

sprachliche Niveau des Jak zuzutrauen sei." "'Jakobus, der Gerechte': Erwägungen zur Verfasserfiktion des Jakobusbriefes," in Jörg Frey et al., eds, Pseudepigraphie und Verfasserfiktion, pp. 578.

[5] "Selbst wenn man eine weite Verbreitung des Griechischen im Palästina des 1. Jh.s n. Chr. annimmt,

wird man eine Abfassung des Jak durch den Herrenbruder selbst kaum für möglich halten, insbesondere, wenn man daneben das merklich einfachere Griechisch des Diasporajuden Paulus stellt." Der Herrenbruder Jakobus und die Jakobustradition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987) p. 211.



[Does the Book of James Have the Same Concerns as the Historical James?  
Could Most People Write in Antiquity?](#)