The letter of James the Just, the half-brother of Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah, is not without its controversy. Often considered to have the most Jewish character among all the books of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament), James' epistle sits between two extremes: those who deny his message, and those who give his message a weight which it was never intended to have. James' letter has a distinctive emphasis on the works of the individual, and so many have viewed what he has to say, as actually annulling the grace of God in the process of salvation. Some have denied James' place in the Biblical canon, and others have forgotten who James was as a humble, kind, and patient servant of the Lord.

James' epistle has a universal moral message for all of humanity, and especially the Messianic community today. Written at the emergence of First Century Messianic faith, James was observing some of the controversies and issues creeping in, as the gospel message went beyond the Land of Israel, and God's Kingdom was in the process of being restored. Some were causing discord and forgetting the ethics which God required His people to have in the Torah. When you add to this the early persecutions the Believers faced, coupled with the fact that corrupt rich people were being shown favor in the assembly, you have a letter which mainly focused upon matters of practical faith, holy living, and consideration for others. James' admonitions must be heeded, in order for people to find themselves in the will and purpose of the Lord.

In the commentary *James for the Practical Messianic*, Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee addresses what we need to learn as Messianic Believers today from James' epistle. He takes into account the distinct Jewish character of James, considering various passages in the letter with statements made in a variety of secondary and tertiary materials, both Jewish and classical. Most importantly, major theological positions and ,opinions which have existed over the centuries regarding James, are addressed. Does the Epistle of James at all contradict the theology of the letters of Paul? Some of the current scholastic trends in examination of James are also considered, both enriching and challenging the diligent student, who is looking for a distinctive Messianic perspective of this letter.

JAMES

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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J.K. McKEE

MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS
messianicapologetics.blog

JAMES
FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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ABBREVIATIONS AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a list of abbreviations for reference works and special terms which are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as *TWOT* for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*
AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament
Ara: Aramaic
ASV: American Standard Version (1901)
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)
b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.
BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)
BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.
CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)
CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)
CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)
CJSB: Complete Jewish Study Bible (2016)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls
EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*
EJ: *Encylopaedia Judaica*
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)
Ger: German
GNT: Greek New Testament
Grk: Greek
HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
Heb: Hebrew
HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*
ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*
Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)
JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
KJV: King James Version
Lattimore: The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore (1996)
LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)
LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)
LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)
LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)
LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
LXX: Septuagint
m. Mishnah
MARV: Messianic Apologetics Revised Version*
MT: Masoretic Text
NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*
NEB: New English Bible (1970)
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*
NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*
NIV: New International Version (1984)
NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
NKJV: New King James Version (1982)

* This is a modified and adapted edition of the public domain World Messianic Bible (WMB).

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
NT: New Testament
OT: Old Testament
REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
t. Tosefta
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TLV: Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life Version (2014)
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition
v(s). verse(s)
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*
Vul: Latin Vulgate
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)
WMB: World Messianic Bible (2020)

PROLOGUE

It should go without saying, that the Epistle of James is a highly valued and appreciated text, for many in our broad Messianic faith community. While there are many active discussions and debates pertaining to statements such as, "faith, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17, NASU), "a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24, NASU), and the ever-imperative "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" (James 1:27, NASU)—on the whole our engagement with the Epistle of James, at least on a surface level, is one which tends to be generally positive. In all of my family's experience in the Messianic community, since 1995, we have never really encountered any Messianic person, who does not have some favorable disposition toward reading and applying James' letter, to his or her life. We have, however, encountered many of our Christian brothers and sisters, widely ignore or discount the messages of James, or are at least confused in many ways, possibly feeling that James has an irreconcilable message when compared or contrasted to Paul's letters. Likewise, there are Messianic people, who while favorable to James, have probably not let its words penetrate their hearts and minds enough—as this letter certainly presents many challenging statements to the spirituality and behavior of each of us.

When many think of James the Just, they think of a dedicated, godly man, who was committed to a life of complete service to the Body of Messiah. While James the half-brother of Yeshua was likely too young to have been a noticeable part of His teaching ministry, James' contemplative, fair-minded, practical, but also direct approach to the issues of the day, is detectable in the Biblical record we have of him—most notably that of the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council, and the letter which bears his name. It is quite easy to peruse through the Epistle of James, and then be compelled to flip to the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew chs. 5-7, noticing a wide variety of parallel words and connections between the concepts elucidated. Many a Messiah follower are greatly moved by the historical record regarding James, as seen in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* (2.1.2, 3; 2.23.4-5), and his fierce dedication to prayer, holiness, and acts of kindness and mercy toward others. When we each reflect upon the example and teachings of James, we all see a figure of faith worthy of emulation, and are significantly reminded of our own mortal limitations.

James for the Practical Messianic was the first real volume issued in the *Practical Messianic* commentary series (when I realized that this would become a series), and the first study conducted for my Wednesday Night Bible Study podcast, which originally started in 2005. James has a timeless moral and ethical message, which we should all cherish deeply, and one

which doubtlessly issues many challenges to people in our still-emerging and developing Messianic movement. Over the past year or so (late 2011-2013), as each title released by our ministry has been formatted for paperback and Amazon Kindle eBook, I have had to evaluate the current content status of each, with some revisions and updates required here and there. In the case of the Epistle of James, the letter itself needed to be revisited, not because of any major changes of interpretation or perspective on my part—but more specifically because of the length of time which has passed since this publication's initial release, new challenges present in the Messianic world, and most significantly because of new resources acquired for my library.

This commentary on James has gone through a few noticeable updates, which include expansion of previous points, more examination into the Greek source text of the letter, but most especially engagement with some more examiners on the epistle. More detail has been specifically expelled in investigating various Jamean passages which appear to be in conflict with Pauline passages over the issue of "justification." Is the "justification" in view a remission of sins and a declaration of innocence before the Holy One, *or* might it pertain more to a demonstration of membership of a man or woman as a part of God's covenant people? Too many are not aware of the wide meanings which justification has for both Hebrew and Greek, which English tends to lack.

Given the almost eight years which have transpired since *James for the Practical Messianic* was first released, while I have given more attention to some new and useful proposals regarding this letter—my primary attention is, as always, to the text, and how James should be considered and applied by individuals within the Messianic movement. There is no question, now in 2013, that the broad Messianic movement really needs to hear what James the Just has to say! Over the past several years, as we have entered into the 2010s, there have been a variety of less-than-useful spiritual and theological perspectives witnessed, which have been deterring us from accomplishing the goals of the Kingdom of God. We need to decisively return to the words and messages of those early Messianic leaders like James, so that we might be useful for the Kingdom. James poignantly said, "you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away" (James 4:14, NASU). Many of us need to be humbled, committing ourselves back to God and His purposes, so that we do not waste any unnecessary time, energy, and resources on those things, which do not only take people away from Messiah Yeshua—but do not contribute to the human wholeness which James' letter speaks so prolifically of!

J.K. McKee
Editor, Messianic Apologetics

This update of *James for the Practical Messianic* (2025), mainly involves a refresh of the material, as well as a smoothing over and streamling of some arguments. Also considered, are new theological and spiritual developments, which have taken place within the Messianic community. These most especially include some of the experiences our family has had, since relocating from Central Florida back to North Texas (late 2012), and then getting reintegrated into the Messianic Jewish movement (2013-present). I hope and pray that this commentary can continue to be a useful resource for many.

INTRODUCTION

The Epistle of James[1] has been one of the most debated books of the Bible among theologians, examiners, and many laypeople, for centuries. At the same time, the Epistle of James has also been highly valued, by many people seeking instruction on practical matters of faith and obedience, good works, and in making a difference in the world for God. Outside of the Gospels, the letter of James is regarded as probably having the most substantial Jewish character of any of the writings in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament), as it is traditionally the product of James the Just, half-brother of the Lord Yeshua. The letter of James has a very direct message for people who are stagnant in their faith, and are not living up to the essential matters of holiness and piety. It is for these, and many other reasons, why having an appropriate understanding of the Epistle of James—and the role it plays not only for spirituality, but among the other books of the Apostolic canon—is so important for Messiah followers.

That James demonstrated a strong fidelity, to God's Torah and a Jewish way of life (Acts 15:13-21; 21:18-24), is something which bears strongly on this letter, as a great deal of difficulty is present for Christian readers who tend to discount or devalue the importance of God's Law. However, even among those who tend to have a negative disposition, for the Law of Moses in the post-resurrection era, have to admit that James 1:22—"But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (NASU)—can surely be regarded as **"the most famous command in the NT"** (Douglas J. Moo),[2] which born again Believers certainly need to obey. Those, who choose to delve into the Epistle of James, see a heavy emphasis upon both faith *and* works, as James intended to address a genuine faith for Believers, manifested in good works of mercy and grace toward others, with a definite concern for the marginalized in society.

A cursory review, of how the Epistle of James has been approached in history, does reveal how this letter has not always been appreciated. James was not immediately accepted as canonical by a wide range of authorities within the emerging Christian Church of the Second and Third Centuries. By the Third Century, Clement of Alexandria recognized James

[1] Please note that in spite of the common reference to James as "the Book of James," I am going to purposefully refer to the text as either the Epistle of James or a letter of James, and not use this reference. By failing to forget that this text is a letter written to a specific audience in a specific setting, we can make the common error of thinking that this was a text written *directly to us*. Our goal as responsible interpreters is to try to reconstruct what this letter meant *to its original audience first*, before applying its message in a modern-day setting.

[2] Douglas J. Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1.