

The Epistle of James

Author, Provenance, Setting, Reception, and Early Witness

1. THE AUTHOR

- The letter opens: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1).
- The consensus of the early church is that this is James, the brother of Jesus.
- He was a leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19; 2:9).
- Tradition remembers him as “James the Just,” known for righteousness, humility, and prayer.
- Martyred in Jerusalem about AD 62 (Josephus, Antiquities 20.9.1).

2. PROVENANCE

- Written from Jerusalem to Jewish believers in the diaspora.
- Addressed “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (James 1:1).
- If by James the brother of Jesus, written before AD 62. Many place it in the mid to late 40s.
- That early date would make it one of the first New Testament writings.

3. CULTURAL SETTING

- Written to Jewish believers facing trials, poverty, and pressure to compromise their faith.
- They were scattered across the Roman Empire, not a single congregation.
- Their world was shaped by Jewish tradition and Scripture, Greek language and thought, and Roman power and social order.
- The issues are real-world ones: favoritism, rich and poor, the tongue, oppression, and perseverance in suffering.

4. EARLY WITNESS AND RECEPTION

1 Clement · Rome, c. AD 95

Echoes the letter’s themes and holds up Abraham and Rahab as examples of active faith, the same pair James uses in chapter 2. Does not cite it by name.

Shepherd of Hermas · Rome, early 2nd century

Strong parallels, especially its warnings against being “double-minded,” a rare word James himself uses (James 1:8; 4:8).

Origen · Alexandria and Caesarea, c. AD 230

The first writer we know of to cite the letter by name as Scripture. He also records that some in his day still questioned it.

Eusebius · Caesarea, c. AD 325

Lists James among the “disputed” books, while noting it was read publicly in most of the churches (Church History 2.23.25; 3.25.3).

Athanasius · Alexandria, AD 367

His Easter letter lists the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, James among them.

Jerome · Bethlehem, c. AD 393

Notes the earlier doubts, includes the letter in the Vulgate, and writes that “little by little, as time went on, it obtained authority” (Lives of Illustrious Men 2).

Augustine and the councils · North Africa, AD 393 and 397

Augustine received and quoted the letter, and the Councils of Hippo and Carthage listed it in the settled canon of Scripture.

5. THE SHAPE OF THE STORY

- ✓ Its themes echo in Christian writing from the first century onward.
- ✓ Cited as Scripture by name from the third century, beginning with Origen.
- ✓ Questioned by some, read publicly by most. Eusebius records both.
- ✓ Universally received by the end of the fourth century, and read as Scripture by the whole church ever since.
- ✓ Read as a complement to Paul, not a contradiction: one living faith, received by grace and shown by what it does.

6. WHERE THE WITNESSES LIVED

- **Rome** · 1 Clement, Shepherd of Hermas
- **Alexandria** · Origen, Athanasius
- **Caesarea** · Origen, Eusebius
- **Bethlehem** · Jerome
- **Hippo and Carthage** · Augustine and the councils

From Rome to Africa to the Holy Land, the letter was known, weighed, and finally received across the whole Roman world.

7. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Written by James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church.
- Sent to dispersed Jewish believers, addressing real-life struggles.
- Echoed early, cited from the third century, received by the whole church by the end of the fourth.
- Valued for its practical wisdom, its call to holiness, and its insistence that living faith shows itself in action.

*“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only,
deceiving your own selves.”*

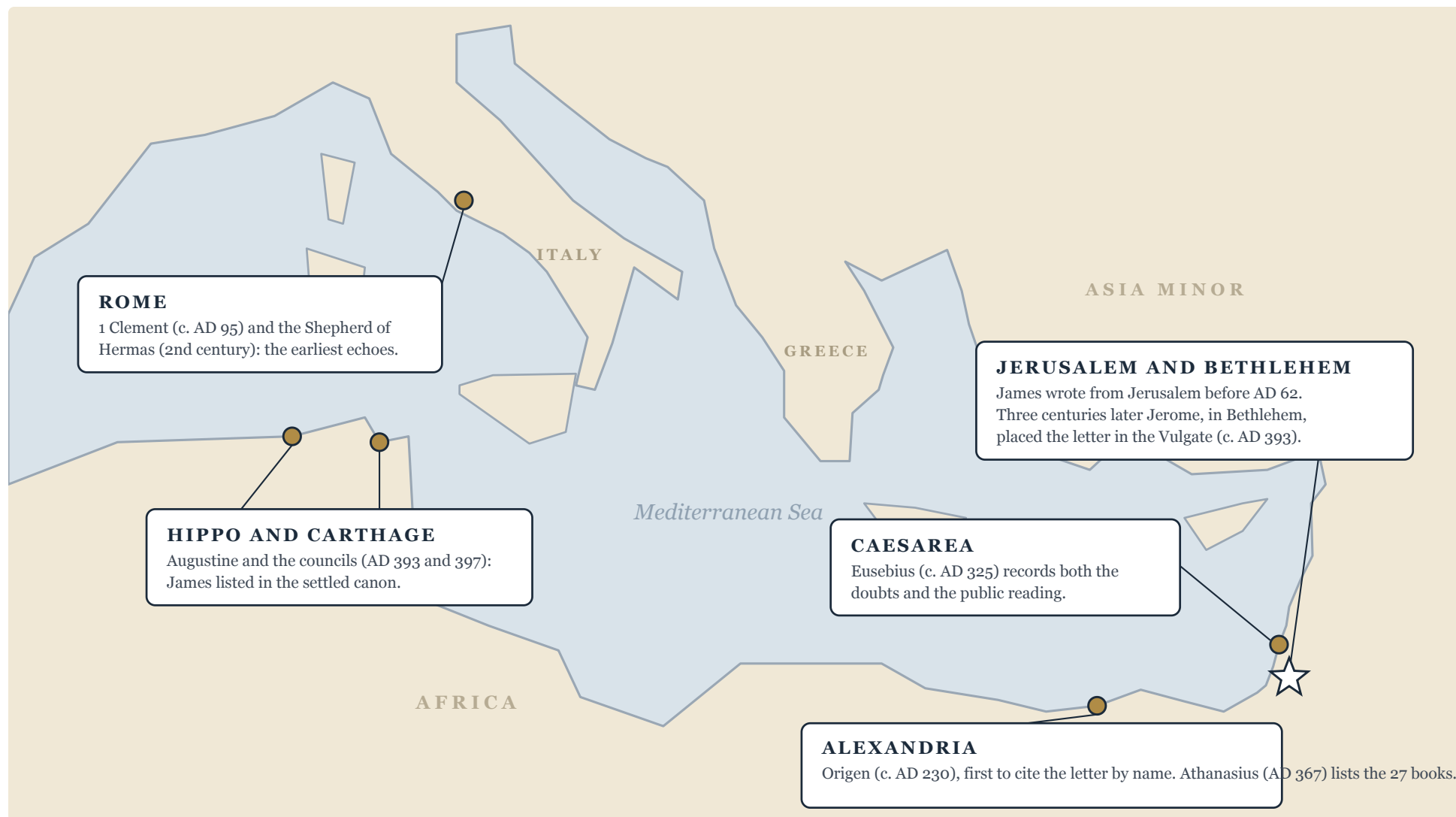
JAMES 1:22

James calls believers to a faith that is genuine, compassionate, and active in the world.
The early church weighed this letter carefully, received it, and passed it on to every generation.

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Map: Where the Early Witnesses Lived



A simplified study map. The letter went out from Jerusalem, and within three centuries it had been read, weighed, and received from Rome to Africa to the Holy Land.

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