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The Situation of St. James' Epistle in the Early Church. Implications for Authorship and Canonicity

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Abstract

This study deals with the objections against the authenticity of St. James' Epistle based on external evidence. We present the position of the Western and Eastern Church regarding this book, trying to show that the historical sources do not support the theories of pseudonymity but favour the traditional view that James, the brother of the Lord, is its author.

Keywords:

Epistle of St. James, authorship, New Testament canon

I. Introduction

During much of the Christian history, James has been one of the most neglected books in the New Testament. It did not become widely known until the third century, and then its authorship and canonicity were disputed for two centuries. During the Reformation, Erasmus and Cardinal Cajetan questioned its authorship, and Martin Luther relegated it (along with

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Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation) to an appendix in his German translation of 1522. Nineteenth and twentieth-century scholarship widely denied its authenticity¹. And for some recent commentators “pseudonymity is still the most plausible explanation for the authorship of the letter”².

One of the arguments on which those who deny the authenticity of St. James' Epistle rely is the seemingly unclear place of this epistle in the old tradition of the Church, particularly the silence about it of the ecclesiastical writers before Origen, and the vacillation of those after Origen.

Here is a synthesis of the opinions of those who challenge the authenticity of the epistle:

The epistle seems to be unknown in the West, lacking from the Muratorian Canon, and the most important manuscripts of *Vetus Latina*. The occurrence of some of its verses in I Clement³, *The Pastor* of Hermas⁴ and at St. Ireneus⁵ indicates that the epistle depends on these works and so it belongs to the second century AD⁶.

Also, in the West, the epistle was not used by Tertullian, Ipolitus and Cyprian, and Jerome mentions that some ecclesiastical writers expressed doubts about it⁷.

In the East, despite the fact that Origen attributes this epistle to James, the brother of the Lord⁸, a century later Eusebius puts it among the

¹ Peter H. DAVIDS (*Epistle of James*, coll. *New International Greek Testament Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982, p. 4) gives an extensive list of commentators and other scholars categorized according to their position on authorship.

² David R. NIENHUIS, *Not By Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas, 2007, p. 102.

³ See X, 1-7; XII, 1; XVII, 2; XXIII, 1; XXX, 1-3; XXXI, 2; XXXVIII, 2; in : Sfântul CLEMENT ROMANUL, “Epistola către Corinteni”, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, transl. notes and index Pr. D. Fecioru, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 1, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1979, pp. 37-88.

⁴ See Vision, 3,1-6; Mandate II, 2. 3,1. 5, II, 5. 9, 2. 1, II, 6. III, 2.11,5 - 9.12,1,1. V, 2. VI, 3; Mandate 12, II, 4, in: HERMA, “Păstorul”, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, pp. 217-330.

⁵ *Adversus Haereses* IV. 3.4 (PG 7, 1009), IV.16.1 (PG 7, 1016).

⁶ See Martin DIBELIUS, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, revised by Heinrich Greeven, coll. *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary of the Bible*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1976, pp. 31-34.

⁷ See *De viris illustribus*, 2 and 4, PL 23, 640- 645.

⁸ *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Romanos* IV, PG 14, 989, 990; *Commentarius in Johan.*, *Fragm.* 126; M. MEINERTZ, *Der Jakobusbrief und sein Verfasser in Schrift von*

“controversial” books of the Holy Scripture⁹, while, another century later, Theodore of Mopsuestia denies its authenticity¹⁰.

Thus, although the letter finally made it into the New Testament canon in the 4th century AD, the objections, against its authenticity, say its deniers, continued until the Middle Ages. In the dawn of the Reformation we have Erasmus¹¹ questioning the authenticity of James on grounds of literary style and, of course, Luther who fiercely attacked this “straw epistle” because it teaches justification by works, sharply contrasting the sound Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone¹². Luther’s position had a tremendous influence on later scholars, especially Protestants, with the result that, even today, many of them reject its authenticity¹³.

In the following we shall examine the evidences.

II. St. James’ Epistle in the Western Church

The absence of our epistle from the Muratorian Canon (160-180 AD) cannot be used as a proof against its authenticity and acceptance in the Early Church. First of all, it should be borne in mind that the Canon’s manuscript not only does not have a beginning, but also has a lot of gaps that leave the impression of a collage made of pieces from a much larger work. In addition, the manuscript has an apologetic rather than historical character, its author promoting the opinion of some local ecclesiastical circles, even if presented as belonging to the “Catholic Church”.

But what matters most is that the author does not demand an apostolic origin for the books contained in Canon, since they include apocryphs or pseudo-epigraphs; he simply exposes the existing view on these books.

Überlieferung, Freiburg, 1905, p. 109. See also M. DIBELIUS, *James*, p. 52.

⁹ *Istoria Bisericească* II.23.25, in: EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, *Scrieri. Partea Întâia*, transl., study, notes and index Pr. D. Fecioru, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 13, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1987, pp. 95.

¹⁰ *Adversus Nestorianos* 14, PG 86, 1365.

¹¹ See *Opera omnia*, London, 1962, vol. 6, col. 1038.

¹² See Jaroslav PELIKAN, Helmut. T. LEHMANN (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1955, vol. 35, pp. 362, 396-397.

¹³ See Alicia J. BATTEN, *What Are They Saying about James?*, Paulist Press, New York / Mahwah, 2009, pp. 34-38.

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As regards the Epistle of St. Jacob in particular, we note from the beginning that, after listing the Epistles of St. Paul, except Hebrews, on page 10b the author also mentions the false or doubtful ones that circulated at that time, such as those falsely named “to the Laodiceans” or “to the Alexandrians” of Paul, and which had a clear Marcionite influence, and then adds¹⁴: “et alia plura quae in catholicam ecclesiam recepi non potest fel enim cum melle misceri non concernit”¹⁵, after which he continues: “epistula sane Judae et superscriptio Iohannis duas in catholica habentur et Sapientia ab amicis Salomonis in onore ipsius scripta. Apocalypses etiam Ioannis et Petri tantum recipemus quam quidam ex nostris legi in ecclesia nolunt”¹⁶. Next, Hermas’ Pastor, Valentine’s and Basilides’ writings, and others are mentioned.

From the above it becomes clear that the one who composed the writing called The Muratorian Fragment does not make a special remark of the General Epistles as a concrete collection, and the mention of Peter’s Apocalypse is accompanied by the observation that it does not enjoy universal acceptance. The case of St. James’ Epistle is similar to that of the I Peter, which is also not mentioned, but that does not mean that it was not accepted since we find quotes at St. Polycarp and Papias, and St. Irenaeus is the first to attribute it to St. Peter¹⁷. The same holds true for the Epistle of St. James, of which, as we have seen, echoes (quotes) appear in I Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas and Irenaeus. If the purpose of the author had been to enumerate the accepted books, among which we find Judas II and III John, the Apocalypses of John and Peter, and even

¹⁴ See the Latin text of the fragment and its English translation in: Edmon L. GALLAGHER, John D. MEADE, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, pp. 178-182.

¹⁵ “And several others which cannot be received into the Catholic Church - for it is not fitting that gall be mixed with honey.”; E. L. GALLAGHER, J. D. MEADE, *The Biblical Canon...*, p. 181.

¹⁶ “The Epistle of Jude and two of the above-mentioned (or, bearing the name of) John are counted (or, used) in the Catholic [Church]; and [the book of] Wisdom, written by the friends of Solomon in his honor. We receive only the apocalypses of John and Peter, though some of us are not willing that the latter be read in Church.”; E. L. GALLAGHER, J. D. MEADE, *The Biblical Canon...*, p. 181.

¹⁷ Lee Martin McDONALD, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority*, Hendrickson Publishers, 2007, p. 396: “Early witnesses validate the use of the book in the church, and it does not appear to have been seriously questioned in the fourth century, even though it is missing in the Muratorian Fragment.”

apocryphal or heretical books, he would certainly not have omitted James and I Peter. Therefore, the omission of these two epistles should not be attributed to ignorance or doubt on their authenticity, but to the purpose and character of this apologetic writing.

Equally erroneous is the position of those who deny the authenticity of our epistle, because, they say, there are echoes (quotes) from it in I Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, Irenaeus etc., and this would allegedly indicate the existence of a common source for all these, of Judeo-Christian provenance, or Jacob's epistle would derive from the writings mentioned above. As it is known, this Judeo-Christian tradition includes the Proverbs, the Wisdom of Sirah, the Wisdom of Solomon, the Testament of the 12 Patriarchs, the Qumran Discipline Manual, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas. For no reason I Clement and Irenaeus can be ranked among these.

Of course, referring to Jewish Christians (1, 1)¹⁸, the Epistle of James resembles this spiritual tradition. However, there is no substantial evidence that it depends on the Judeo-Christian writings mentioned above¹⁹. It would be ridiculous to assume that this presumed dependence could only be reduced to the the fragments quoted in I Clement, Hermas, and Irenaeus. The last one lived in Lyon and Rome during the writing of the Muratorian Canon, and certainly knew the Epistle of St. James, from which he quotes in his writings, which invalidates the objection that he does not mention it. Perhaps we should suppose instead that by quoting James Irenaeus follows Clement of Rome and Hermas. In any case, the fact that James' name is not mentioned by the above writers is not a sure proof that they did not know the epistle and its author. On the contrary, exposing some fragments from it advocates knowledge of it. In fact, we know that, in a similar manner, other writers of the same time quote verses from the New Testament books without mentioning the names of the authors²⁰.

As to the fact that this epistle is missing from the main manuscripts of *Vetus Latina*, which Western scholars consider to be detrimental to

¹⁸ See D. A. CARSON, Douglas J. MOO, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005, pp. 628-629 and the bibliography therein indicated .

¹⁹ See Luke Timothy JOHNSON, *The Letter of James. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible: v. 37A, Doubleday, New York / London / Toronto / Sydney / Auckland, 1995, pp. 112-113.

²⁰ We find quotations from Acts in: Barnabas, I Clement, Polycarp, Papias; quotations from Romans in: Barnabas, Polycarp, Justin etc.

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its authenticity and canonicity, this can be explained by the rarity of the preserved manuscripts of that collection (Vetus Latina) and the nature and the circumstances of its origin. As we know, the translation into Vetus Latin of the collection of New Testament books is not the work of a single author, made by a particular church or by a concrete person or a precise editorial committee, but is the result of particular endeavors of various persons and local churches. Already Tertullian speaks of various Latin translations of the Biblical books in Africa²¹, and Augustine clearly highlights their variety: “Qui enim scripturas ex Hebraea lingua in Graecam verterunt, numerari possunt, Latini autem interpretes nullo modo. Ut enim cuique primis fidei temporibus in manu venit codex graecus, et aliquantulum facultatis sibi utriusque linguae habere videbatur, ausus est interpretari”²². Augustine suggests a gradual revision of the translations²³, as in the case of Itala²⁴. However, their diversity was a real problem, which created quite a lot of confusion in the Church. This was also the reason why Pope Damasus entrusted Jerome the task of achieving a unitary Latin translation of the Holy Scriptures. Anyway, Jerome clearly shows that in the old Latin manuscripts he has found the seven catholic epistles included in the catalogue of the canonical books²⁵. This testimony and the fact that from among the first preserved manuscripts of the Vetus Latina collection²⁶, the

²¹ See *De Monogamia*, 11; *Adversus Marcionem*, IV, 2.

²² *De Doctrina Christiana* II, 11 (S. AURELI AUGUSTINI, *De Doctrina Christiana Libri Quatuor et Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, Lipsiae, Sumtibus et Typis Caroli Tauchnitii, 1838, p. 42: “For the translations of the Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek can be counted, but the Latin translators are out of all number. For in the early days of the faith every man who happened to get his hands upon a Greek manuscript, and who thought he had any knowledge, were it ever so little, of the two languages, ventured upon the work of translation.”)

²³ AUGUSTINE, *De Consensu Evangelistarum*, II, 128 (66).

²⁴ *De Doctrina Christiana*, II, 22 (15): “In ipsis autem interpretationibus Itala caeteris praefertur; nam este verborum tenacior cum perspicuitate sententiae”.

²⁵ See *Prolegomena 7, Epistolae canonicae*: “Non idem ordo est apud Graecos, qui integre sapiunt, et fidem rectam sectantur, Epistolarum septem, quae, canonicae nuncupantur, qui in Latinis codicibus invenitur: ut quia Petrus primus est in numero Apostolorum, primae sint etiam eius Epistolae in ordine caeterarum... Est enim prima earum una Jacobi; Petri duae; Johannis tre et Judae una”. A. H. CHARTERIS, *Canonicity*, Edinburgh - London, MDCCCLXXX, p. 290.

²⁶ The most important manuscripts of Vetus Latina have been edited in two collections: *Old Latin Biblical Texts*, 7 vols, Oxford, 1883 and *Collectanea Biblica Latina*, 8 vols, Rome, 1912.

Epistle of James is included in *ff* (*Corbeiensis*)²⁷, *s* (*Bobbiensis*)²⁸ and *m*²⁹ makes certain its belonging to the canonical books of the *Vetus Latina* collection.

The fact that it was not often used in the second century and beginning of the third century AD can be explained by its shortness and its special content, which is not a source from which theological arguments of great importance can be extracted. All this negative attitude of contemporary scholars comes from Luther's rejection of James because it apparently contradicts the Pauline teaching on justification "by faith alone" (*sola fide*)³⁰. But this theme seems to have concerned no one in the Early Church, being the product of the Reformers, who claim that man is justified only by faith.

In addition, contemporary scholars seem to neglect the fact that the second century Christians still had the very widespread living tradition, whose authority and authenticity no one doubted. It was only when this tradition began to fade away, that the Christians began to write down these great articles of faith, both to help the oral tradition survive and to prevent the absurd, malevolent and anti-ecclesiastical conceptions of heretics, who struggled to alter the historical tradition of the Church³¹.

These heretical actions of the Jews or pagans created confusion about the authenticity of the New Testament books by producing false writings or false titles, by imitating all literary styles, namely the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelations³². Evidence that sometimes these demonic attempts have succeeded is the fact that many Christian communities were deceived into using some of these false writings in worship³³. That is why the Church was forced to create a collection of the authentic ones to

²⁷ J. WORDSWORTH, "The Corbey St. James (*ff*) and Its Relation to Other Latin Versions and to the Original Language of the Epistle", in: *Studia Biblica*, 1, Oxford, 1885, pp. 113-150.

²⁸ See J. WHITE, *Old Latin Biblical Texts*, vol. 4; J. BICK (ed.), *Wiener Palimpseste, Part 1. Cod. Palat. Vindobonensis 16, olim Bobbiensis*, Viena, 1908, p. 72 .

²⁹ PSEUDO-AUGUSTINE, *Liber qui appellatur Speculum et liber de divinis scriptoris sive speculum*, in: F. WEHRICH (ed.), *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 12, Viena, 1887.

³⁰ See Dan G. McCARTNEY, *James*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2009, pp. 53-56.

³¹ Lee Martin McDONALD, *The Biblical Canon...*, pp. 246-249.

³² Lee Martin McDONALD, *The Biblical Canon...*, pp. 323-342.

³³ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, *Istoria Bisericească* III.25.4, p. 127.

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distinguish them from the false, making the apostolic origin of a book the absolute argument of canonicity³⁴.

This explains why the Epistle of James is not used in the West by Hippolytus³⁵, or by Cyprian, and at Tertullian we find only some vague echoes³⁶. Jerome³⁷ and Augustine³⁸, by enumerating it in the canon, restore the tradition of the Eastern and Western churches, especially since Augustine participated in the councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397 AD). Canon 39 of the Carthage Synod places the Epistle of Jacob on the seventh position in the Catholic Epistles group and before the Apocalypse³⁹, adding: “*sunt autem canonicae scripturae hae, quia e patribus ista acceptimus in ecclesia legenda...*”⁴⁰. Also, Codex Claromontanus (D), from the sec. IV, preserved in Greek and Latin, lists all the seven Catholic epistles⁴¹.

From that time on until the Reformation, the Epistle of James is mentioned in all the collections of the Western Church among the canonical books of the New Testament. Thus, in the *Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, (6th century), written in New Gaul, the Epistle of James is placed after the I and II Peter⁴². Pope Innocentius I (402-417) listed it at the end of the seven Catholic epistles, followed by Acts and Revelation⁴³. Rufinus places it after I and II Peter, with the indication

³⁴ Diac. Ioan I. ICA jr., *Canonul Ortodoxiei*, vol. I: *Canonul apostolic al primelor secole*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2008, pp. 194-200.

³⁵ Nevertheless in the disputed work “A Discourse by the Most Blessed Hippolytus, Bishop and Martyr, on the End of the World, and on Antichrist, and on the Second Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ” XLVII there is a quotation from Jas 2, 13 (in: SAINT HIPPOLYTUS, *The Sacred Writings of Saint Hippolytus*, Jazzybee Verlag, s.l., s.a., p. 330).

³⁶ In Tertullian’s work *Adversus Iudaeos* 600, 2 (PL 2, 638) there a possible allusion to James 2, 23 in referring to Abraham as “amicus Dei deputatus”.

³⁷ See *Ad Paulinum Epist.* LIII, 8; *Dr viris illustribus* 2;4.

³⁸ *De Doctrina Christiana* II, 12.

³⁹ See J. D. MANSI, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, vol. 3, Graz, 1901, 891B; B. F. WESTCOTT, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament during the First Four Centuries*, Cambridge, 1896, pp. 550-551.

⁴⁰ B. F. WESTCOTT, *A General Survey...*, pp. 551.

⁴¹ See David R. NIENHUIS, *Not By Paul Alone...*, pp. 74-75.

⁴² *Ordo Scripturarum Novi Testamenti*, PL 59, 159.

⁴³ See *Ad Exsuperium episcopum Tolosanum*, PL 20,502 „Haec sunt ergo quae desiderata moneri voluisti...”

*Iacobi fratris domini et apostoli una*⁴⁴. Philastrios places it at the end of the Catholic epistles group⁴⁵. Cassiodorus offers three catalogues of the books of the Holy Scriptures, namely that of Jerome, that of Augustine, and that of the “old translation” (Vetus Latina)⁴⁶. Julius Africanus⁴⁷ and Isidor of Seville place the epistle of Jacob in the front of the Catholic ones, followed by Acts and Revelation⁴⁸.

III. St. James’ Epistle in the Eastern Church

The overall image is the same in the East. Here the epistle is first clearly attributed to James, the brother of the Lord, by Origen (beginning of the 3rd century AD). He is known as acutely sensitive to the distinction between tradition and innovation⁴⁹. Origen’s recognition of James therefore argues for the writing having had some earlier use at least in the Alexandrian church. In any case, Origen championed James vigorously, including him in his canon⁵⁰, and in his extant writings citing James some 36 times from 24 different verses⁵¹. He calls the author “the brother of the Lord”⁵², as well as “James the Apostle”⁵³. He also refers to the letter as “scripture”⁵⁴. This testimony of Origen is of great importance and value, not only because he lives at the time when the oral tradition of the Church (2nd century) began to be written down, but also because the testimony comes from a man reputed for his scientific research in Holy Scripture, with an amazing rigor and method. But many have interpreted his words that accompany a quote from James. 2, 17, “the letter that circulates under the name of James”⁵⁵, as expressing certain doubts and reservations of Origen over the authenticity

⁴⁴ See *Commentarius in Symbolum apostolorum*, 36, PL 21,373.

⁴⁵ See *Liber de haeresibus* 60, PL 12,1199-1200.

⁴⁶ See *De Institutione divinarum Litterarum*, 14, PL 70, 1120.1125.

⁴⁷ *De simplici doctrina*, PL 68, 19.

⁴⁸ See *In libros veteris ac Novi Testamenti proemia*, PL 83,159.

⁴⁹ See ORIGEN, *De Principiis* I.8 (PG 11, 120) and IV.2.4 (PG 11, 365).

⁵⁰ ORIGEN, *In Librum Jesu Nave* VII, 1 (PG 12, 857).

⁵¹ L. T. JOHNSON, *The Letter of James*, p. 130.

⁵² ORIGEN, *Commentarium in Epistulam ad Romanos* IV, 8 (PG 14, 989).

⁵³ ORIGEN, *In Exodum Homiliae* III, 3 (PG 12, 316).

⁵⁴ ORIGEN, *In Leviticam Homiliae* II. 4 (PG 12, 418).

⁵⁵ ORIGEN, *Commentarium in Iohannem* XIX, 6 (PG 14, 596).

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and canonicity of the epistle⁵⁶. However, it is clear that this expression does not suggest any doubt from Origen or others regarding the epistle, but is a plain proof of its acceptance by the Church.

Before Origen, we have Clement from Alexandria (150-215), who, in his lost work Hypotyposes, as Eusebius notes, gives “abridged accounts of all canonical Scripture, not omitting the disputed books, — I refer to Jude and the other Catholic epistles, and Barnabas and the so-called Apocalypse of Peter”⁵⁷. His views are founded on the testimonies of his teacher, Panten, whom he mentions by name. Thus, the tradition Clement preserves goes up to the apostolic age. Unfortunately, we cannot know for sure whether the term “disputed” belongs to Clement or expresses Eusebius’ or others’ views. As we will see below, Eusebius has no reservations about the authenticity of Jacob’s epistle. Complementary information on Clement’s views on this epistle can be found in Photius and Cassiodorus. The first, analyzing the dogmatic character of Clement’s Hypotyposes, of which he possessed a copy, observes that “The entire work includes notes on Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, St. Paul’s epistles, the Catholic epistles, and Ecclesiasticus”⁵⁸. From this testimony of Photius we see that Clement regarded as canonical the Catholic epistles, so presumably also James. Cassiodorus (c. 540 AD) makes a Latin translation of Clement’s book entitled *Adumbrationes Clementis Alexandrini in epistolas canonicas*⁵⁹. Here it is recalled that Clement the presbyter, also surnamed the Stromateus, wrote commentaries on the canonical epistles, that is on I Peter, Judah, I and II John and James, in a clean and blameless language. However, the quotations added as an example come from I Peter, Judah, I and II John, missing those from James. Obviously this is a confusion between Judah and James. This cannot, however, shake the argument that Clement regarded James’s epistle as authentic and canonical.

There are two other testimonies contemporary with Origen. The first is from the Pseudo-Clementine work *De Virginitate*, probably originating from Syria or Palestine⁶⁰, where James 3, 1 is quoted⁶¹. The second is in

⁵⁶ Martin DIBELIUS, *James...*, p. 52.

⁵⁷ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, *Istoria Bisericească* VI.14.1-2, pp. 237-238.

⁵⁸ PHOTIUS, *Myriobiblion*, Codex 109, PG 103, 284.

⁵⁹ PL 70, 1377.

⁶⁰ Martin DIBELIUS, *James...*, p. 52.

⁶¹ *De virginitate* I, 11 (PG 1, 404D).

Papyrus Oxyrhynchus X, 1229, where James 2,19-3, 2 is quoted, in the Egyptian version of the text of the New Testament⁶².

A very important moment in the history of the New Testament canon is the testimony of Eusebius of Caesarea (263-340 AD). Starting from the tradition of the Church and knowing well the opinions of the older church writers on each New Testament writing, Eusebius divides into three categories the Christian books used in the Church: firstly, the “accepted writings” confessed by all as authentic and canonical, or, in Eusebius’ words, “those works which according to ecclesiastical tradition are true and genuine and commonly accepted”; secondly, the “disputed writings”, but nevertheless “known to most ecclesiastical writers”; and, thirdly, the „rejected writings (...) which no one belonging to the succession of ecclesiastical writers has deemed worthy of mention in his writings”⁶³. The first category includes the Gospels, Acts, St. Paul’s Epistles, 1 John, I Peter, and Revelation. In the second category the other Catholic epistles are included. It is to be observed, however, that although he himself considers the Revelation to be canonical, in a later note he places the Revelation among the rejected writings, mentioning that “some, as I said, reject it, but which others class it with the accepted books”⁶⁴. In this regard, therefore, the teachers of the Church have different opinions. Something similar happens in the case of the Catholic Epistles, James in particular. Thus, after quoting from Joseph’s Antiquities the presentation of James’ martyrdom, Eusebius adds: “These things are recorded in regard to James, who is said to be the author of the first of the so-called catholic epistles. But it is to be observed that it is disputed; at least, not many of the ancients have mentioned it, as is the case likewise with the epistle that bears the name of Jude, which is also one of the seven so-called catholic epistles. Nevertheless we know that these also, with the rest, have been read publicly in very many churches”⁶⁵. What is most important here, however, is the number of the Catholic Epistles - of which James is first listed - and the fact that they are to be treated separately from the false writings, Eusebius himself differing from the writers who considered them to be inauthentic.

⁶² B. P. CRANFELL, A. S. HUNT, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Part 10, London 1914, p. 16; K. ALAND, “Neue neutestamentliche Papyri II”, in: *New Testament Studies* 9 (1963), p. 307.

⁶³ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, *Istoria Bisericească* III.25, pp. 127-128.

⁶⁴ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, *Istoria Bisericească* III.25.4, p. 127.

⁶⁵ EUSEBIU DE CEZAREEA, *Istoria Bisericească* II.23.25, p. 95.

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In fact, even Eusebius does not make heavy use of James, he does not hesitate to quote James 5, 13 under the title “the holy apostle”⁶⁶, or James 4,1 as “scripture”⁶⁷ and, in a theological exposition, he uses James 5,16 to make a key linguistic point⁶⁸. So the criticism against Eusebius that he had an ambiguous, even doubtful attitude toward James' epistle appears to be totally wrong⁶⁹. In this regard, it's worth mentioning the manuscript of Euthalius (4th century AD), which contains the Acts and the Catholic Epistles, “in order to follow accurately the manuscripts in the library of our good friend from Caesarea, Eusebius”⁷⁰. This note proves that the seven Catholic Epistles were a special collection since the second century and that it was accepted by Eusebius, who created in Caesarea a library for studying and transcribing old manuscripts.

An interesting testimony about the authority of the Epistle of James, at the end of the second century and the beginning of the third century AD, is given by the Coptic translations of the New Testament, the Sahid, the Bohairic and the Faiumic. The first began in the second century, while the last two ended in the fourth century. However, they all include all the Catholic Epistles⁷¹. But the same cannot be said about the old Syriac translation (*Vetus Syra*), preserved in only two incomplete manuscripts. Likewise, in St. Ephraim, we find quotes only from the Acts and Pauline Epistles. If however, as it is now believed, the next Syrian translation, Peshitto or Peshitta, which includes James, was accomplished before the break of Syrian Church from Orthodoxy (431 AD) by revising the text *Vetus Syra*, then it is probable that James was also present in the complete manuscripts of *Vetus Syra*⁷².

⁶⁶ EUSEBIUS, *Commentarium in Psalmos* LVI, 2 (PG 23, 505).

⁶⁷ EUSEBIUS, *Commentarium in Psalmos* C, 5 (PG 23, 1244).

⁶⁸ EUSEBIUS, *De Ecclesiastica Theologia* III, 2 (PG 24, 976).

⁶⁹ Martin DIBELIUS, *James...*, p. 52.

⁷⁰ PG 85, 676-77.

⁷¹ P. J. BALESTRI (ed.) *Sacrorum biblicorum fragmenta coptosahidica*, vol. 3: Καινή Διαθήκη, Rome, 1904; George W. HORNER, *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Southern Dialect Otherwise Called Sahidic and Thebaic*, 7 vols., The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1911-1924. Also, George W. HORNER, *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Northern Dialect Otherwise Called Memphitic and Bohairic*, 4 vols., The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1898-1905; Walter C. TILL, “Coptic biblical texts published after Vaschalde's lists”, in: *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 42 (2) (1960), pp. 220-240.

⁷² H. G. GWILLIAM, “The Place of the Peshitto Version in the Apparatus Criticus of the

IV. Ancient authorities favouring the canonicity of the epistle

The formation of the New Testament canon was completed by the fourth century AD. The need for an authoritative collection of Christian writings arose in the context of the doctrinal struggle against heresies, which was carried out on the ground of the Holy Scriptures and Tradition. At that time, the authority and canonicity of the Epistle of James were confirmed throughout the Church, since, from then on, it is included in all the catalogues of the New Testament books⁷³.

Here is a complete picture of these catalogues:

Epistle 39 of St. Athanasius⁷⁴ and the treatise attributed to him - falsely according to many scholars - *Synopsis of Sacred Scripture* where James is at the forefront of the Catholic Epistles⁷⁵.

Canon 58 of the local Council of Laodicea (about 360 AD), where James is also in front of the Catholic Epistles. This catalogue was approved by the fifth-sixth Ecumenical Council (692 AD) and by the Jerusalem Council in 1672⁷⁶.

In the same position we also find it at St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386)⁷⁷.

St. Epiphanius of Salamis in Cyprus (315-403) speaks of “the General epistles of James and Peter, John and Jude”, in the order we have today⁷⁸.

St. Amphilochius of Iconium (340-394) presented his teaching on the canon in *Iambics for Seleucus (Iambi ad Seleucum)*, a didactic poetic work formerly attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus. About the Catholic epistles he says: “Of the Catholic epistles some say seven, others only three must

Greek New Testament”, in: *Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica* 5 (1903), pp. 187–237.

⁷³ All the participants in the debates of the first Ecumenical Council (325) had to extract their arguments from the Holy Scriptures. In this context there were no controversies over any of the New Testament books. In the *Syntagma*, or collection of Acts of the he First Nicene Council, written by Gelasius of Cyzicus, the canonicity of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles is never doubted (J. D. MANSI, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, vol. 2, 848E, 857E).

⁷⁴ ATHANASIUS, *Epistula XXXIX* (PG 26, 1177).

⁷⁵ ATHANASIUS, *Synopsis Scripturae Sanctae* VI, 52 (PG 28, 405-8).

⁷⁶ J. D. MANSI, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, vol. 3, 574.

⁷⁷ CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechesis IV de Decem Dogmaticis* XXXVI (PG 33, 499).

⁷⁸ EPIPHANIUS OF SALAMIS, “Against Anomoeans” 22, 5, in: *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III. De fide*, transl. by Frank Williams, coll. *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies* 79, Brill, 2013, p. 536.

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be accepted: one of James, one of Peter, one of John, otherwise three of John, and with them two of Peter, and also Jude's, the seventh"⁷⁹.

From Didymus the Blind (313-398) we have the oldest extant commentary on James⁸⁰. He also quotes some 23 times from 16 verses in James in his other theological works⁸¹.

St Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389) gave a pronouncement on the canon towards the end of his life, in the form of a poem: "Concerning the Genuine Books of Divinely Inspired Scripture". He says: "And the seven catholic, [which include] one of James, two of Peter, three of John also; and Jude is the seventh"⁸².

St. John Chrysostom (344-407), uses James often, quoting the letter some 48 times from 20 separate verses⁸³. These citations do not include his *scholia* on James that are found in the *Catena* and are extensive enough to be grouped together as a virtual commentary⁸⁴.

The Apostolic Canon 85 presents a catalogue of the accepted biblical books in which the seven Catholic epistles are included without any dispute: "one of James, three of John, one of Jude, two of Peter"⁸⁵. The Apostolic Canons is a series of eighty-four or eighty-five canons (Syriac versions have as few as eighty and eighty-one canons) occurring in book 8, chapter 47 of the Apostolic Constitutions. Generally, this collection is considered to be the literary output of the compiler(s) or editor(s) responsible for the Apostolic Constitutions itself. The Apostolic Constitutions is a composite work, comprising the Didascalia (Books 1-6), the Didache (Book 7), and the Apostolic Tradition, together with some other material (Book 8). Researchers generally agree that the Apostolic Constitutions was written in Syria, probably in Antioch, sometime between 375 and 380⁸⁶.

Finally, our epistle is included in some very important uncial manuscripts (written in capital letters) from the 4th-5th centuries: Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus and Ephraemi Rescriptus.

⁷⁹ PG 37, 1957.

⁸⁰ DIDYMUS, *Enarratio in Epistolam Beati Iacobi*, PG 33, 1749-54.

⁸¹ L. T. JOHNSON, *The Letter of James*, p. 130.

⁸² PG 37, 474.

⁸³ L. T. JOHNSON, *The Letter of James*, p. 132.

⁸⁴ ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *In Epistolam Sancti Iacobi*, PG 64, 1040-52.

⁸⁵ E. L. GALLAGHER, J. D. MEADE, *The Biblical Canon...*, p. 137.

⁸⁶ E. L. GALLAGHER, J. D. MEADE, *The Biblical Canon...*, pp. 134-135.

Testimonies about the canonicity of the Epistle of James, later than the fifth century, we find:

- at Leontius of Byzantium (first half of the 6th century)⁸⁷;
- in the canons attributed to Anastasius of Sinai⁸⁸;
- in the canons of the 5-6 Ecumenical Synod, Trullan (691-692), where the previous canons of the Ecumenical Councils and of the Holy Fathers were confirmed⁸⁹;
- at St. John of Damascus (VIII century)⁹⁰;
- at Nikephoros of Constantinople (IX century)⁹¹;
- at the Nestorian bishop of Nisibe, Ebed-Jesu (13th century)⁹²;
- at the Oecumenius of Tricca (10th century), in his commentaries on James and the other Catholic epistles⁹³;
- in the commentaries on the Catholic epistles of St. Theophylactus of Bulgaria (11th century)⁹⁴
- in the Confession of Cyril Lucaris⁹⁵;
- in the Confession of Dositheus, Patriarch of Jerusalem (1641-1707) and in that of the Jerusalem Council (1672)⁹⁶;
- in the Catechism of St. Philaret, Patriarch of Moscow (1839)⁹⁷.

The only exception in this period is, according to the testimony of Leontius of Byzantium, Theodor of Mopsuestia⁹⁸.

⁸⁷ PG 86, 1204.

⁸⁸ PG I, 515-517.

⁸⁹ J. D. MANSI, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, vol. 11, 940.

⁹⁰ *Dogmatica* IV. 17, in: Sfântul IOAN DAMASCHINUL, *Dogmatica*, transl. Pr. Prof. Dumitru Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2005, p. 220.

⁹¹ PG 100, 1057.

⁹² *Catalogus Librorum Ecclesiasticorum*, in: B. F. WESTCOTT, *A General Survey...*, p. 571.

⁹³ PG 119, 451.

⁹⁴ PG 125, 1131.

⁹⁵ For an English translation of this Confession, see the appendix of J.N.W.B. ROBERTSON (trans.), *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem, Sometimes Called the Council of Bethlehem, Holden Under Dositheus, Patriarch of Jerusalem in 1672*, Thomas Baker, London, 1899, pp. 185-215.

⁹⁶ J.N.W.B. ROBERTSON (trans.), *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem*, pp. 111-174.

⁹⁷ R. W. BLACKMORE (transl.), *The Doctrine of the Russian Church*, A. Brown and Co., Aberdeen, 1845, pp. 29-142.

⁹⁸ LEONTIUS OF BYZANTIUM, *Contra Nestorianos et Eutychianos* III, 14, PG 86, 1365C.

V. Conclusions

From the above historical retrospective it becomes clear that the argument against the authenticity and canonicity of St. James' Epistle, based on the situation existing in the Early Church, becomes completely unjustified. Indeed, the testimonies of the old ecclesiastical tradition strongly demonstrate the early use of the epistle and its inclusion in the canonical books of the New Testament.

Especially important in this matter is the information coming from Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, Photius, Cassiodorus, Origen, Pseudo-Clementine writing *De virginitate*, as well as the coptic translations of the New Testament, and *Vetus Latina* (2nd century).

The fact that Origen is the first to attribute this writing to James the brother of the Lord does not imply that, before him, tradition ignored or rejected that epistle. On the contrary, given the scientific character of Origen's work, his testimony gains much weight regarding the previous Church, in favour of James' epistle.

St. James' authorship is also proved by the internal evidence, such as the writer's self-presentation (1,1), his Judeo-Christian background, the geographical and social environment of the recipients, the similarities with the Saviour's teaching in the Synoptic Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and other the information in the New Testament about James.

In our opinion, the epistle of James is a practical admonition addressed to the Hellenized Jewish diaspora who had professed belief in Jesus as the Messiah and Lord, with the purpose of emphasizing the need for the works of faith. The date should be before the fall of Jerusalem, probably shortly anterior to the martyrdom of St. James, in 62.