JAMES, EPISTLE OF

The Epistle of James has great prominence for Latter-day Saints. They believe that it was composed by James, the brother of the Lord (Gal. 1:19); that it was written to all the house of Israel, but particularly to those in this dispensation or era; and that it directly inspired Joseph Smith to begin to seek answers from God in prayer. Several teachings from James, including those concerning “pure religion and undefiled,” bridling the tongue and controlling anger, the interdependence of faith and works, and blessing the sick, are frequently cited in general conferences and in other Church talks.

That James addresses the lost tribes of Israel (James 1:1) is significant, since Latter-day Saints believe that the ten tribes will be literally gathered in the latter days (A of F 10) and that the tribe of Ephraim, strongly represented in the Church, has the responsibility of carrying the priesthood blessings of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph to the ten tribes (cf. D&C 133:20–35). The President of the Church holds the keys of the gathering of Israel (cf. D&C 110:11). Since the restoration of the gospel through Joseph Smith will effect the gathering, it is notable that Joseph Smith, while reading James 1:5, was deeply moved to prayer, which led to his First Vision in 1820, an event that opened the way for the latter-day gathering of Israel (see Israel: Gathering of Israel). James’s statement about not doubting also characterized Joseph Smith. Quoting James 1:5–6 and Hebrews 11:6, President David O. McKay stated, “In this scripture lies the secret of Joseph Smith’s emergence from obscurity to world-wide renown. His belief in God was absolute, his faith in divine guidance unswerving” (IE 65 [Mar. 1962]:149). Many conference talks and presentations apply James 1:5 and Joseph Smith’s First Vision to the potentials of prayer in solving life’s problems.

Another passage often quoted is James 1:22–24, together with 2:14–18 and 24–26, on the relation between faith and works. Latter-day Saints believe in the “infinite and eternal” power of the atonement, that it will bring to all mankind an end to the basic effects of the Fall of Adam; it automatically forgives the sins of those who are without the law (e.g., children under the age of eight, mentally handicapped, and those who have not known the gospel), provides a universal resurrection (cf. Mosiah 15), and restores mankind back to the presence of God for judgment. However, when individuals willfully rebel against the law that they know, they must repent, be obedient, and prove by their good works that they accept the grace of the atonement for their personal sins. For such, forgiveness of personal sins through the atonement is conditional upon their “works,” as Latter-day Saints understand the word—faith, repentance, obedience, and serving others in many ways, including performing vicarious temple ordinances (see Grace).

To underscore the need to serve others, Church leaders often cite James 1:27 on “pure religion and undefiled,” relating it to Mosiah 2 in the Book of Mormon, wherein King Benjamin exhorts his people to serve selflessly and without concern for the recipient’s social or economic status. By so living, people show the pure religion or charity of heart that is manifested in helping others without seeking personal credit. Much of this service is directed toward the young and the elderly, particularly when the traditional support of a nuclear family is not available. Thus, compassionate service becomes a major component of “pure religion and undefiled.”

A fourth principle from the Epistle of James appreciated by Latter-day Saints is the admonition to control one’s temper and tongue (James 1:26; 3:3–10) and be patient in affliction (James 5). These extensions of the sermon on the Mount are principles enunciated frequently by Church leaders.

Of special prominence in Church sermons is James 4:17, regarding sins of omission. Latter-day Saints are encouraged to perform service and good works, and they are reminded that while God judges the intent of the heart, he also requires his people to do every good thing, “for of him unto whom much is given much is required” (D&C 82:3). Further, this scripture is linked with D&C 58:26–29, in which members are encouraged to “be anxiously engaged in a good cause of their own free will.”

Latter-day Saints hold a deep and firm belief in healing by faith through blessings by priesthood holders. Concerning this ordinance, D&C 42:43–44 corresponds to James 5:14–16 (see Sick, Blessing The). Olive oil is consecrated for the purpose of anointing the sick. Then in the healing ordinance one Melchizedek Priesthood bearer anoints, and another “seals” the anointing through
prayer and blesses the sick person as inspired. Many can attest to miracles of healing through faith and the power of the priesthood; they consider them private and sacred. Far from being an “epistle of straw,” as Luther called it, the Epistle of James is profound and very relevant for LDS theology.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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JAMES THE APOSTLE

James, the son of Zebedee and one of the original apostles of Jesus Christ, played an important part in the restoration of the GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST when he and his brother John appeared with Peter as heavenly messengers to the Prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and conferred on them the MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD and the apostolic office, including the keys, or authority, of presidency. This ordination had been promised as forthcoming by John the Baptist on May 15, 1829, when he bestowed the AARONIC PRIESTHOOD on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery (D&C 13; JS—H 1:68–73). In a revelation dated August 1830, the Lord refers to the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood and notes the participation of James: “Peter, and James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles, and especial witnesses of my name” (D&C 27:12). In a later epistle to the Church (D&C 128:20), Joseph Smith, reviewing the major events of the restoration, mentions this event and locates its happening near the Susquehanna River between Harmony, Pennsylvania, and Colesville, New York (see MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD: RESTORATION OF).

In the twenty-two references to him in the New Testament, James is never mentioned apart from either his brother John or Peter. In the lists of the apostles, he is always given precedence after Peter except on two occasions when Andrew’s name follows Peter’s, where it is clear that this order is due to his family connection (Matt. 10:2; Luke 6:14). James’ importance is due to his membership in what may be called a presiding council. This idea is borne out by the fact that Peter, James, and John were members of a select circle and were privileged to be present with Jesus on special occasions from which other apostles were excluded, including the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:22–23, 35–43), the TRANSFIGURATION on the mountain (Mark 9:2–9), and the agony in GETHSEMANE (Mark 14:32–42).

According to Joseph Smith and later presidents of the Church, James, with Peter and John, received special authority and keys from Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on the MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION. This was in addition to other keys received during their ordination as apostles that endowed them with power for their ministry as the

Joseph Smith Seeks Wisdom from the Bible, by Harold T. (Dale) Kilbourn (1970s, oil on canvas, 21" × 22"). While reading James 1:5, Joseph Smith was inspired to ask God which church was right. Pondering this scripture, Joseph went to pray in a grove of trees near his home. There, God the Father and his son Jesus Christ appeared and instructed him (JS—H 1:11–20).