

**Abraham in the New Testament: in the letters of Paul and
James**

By Darin White, McNair Scholar

Mentor: Dr. Michael Baltutis

Department of Religious Studies

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Darin White

Dr. Michael Baltutis

McNair Scholars Program

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Abstract

During the first century C.E. Christianity's theology was still being figured out between Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity. Paul, a self-proclaimed apostle of Jesus Christ, proclaimed that circumcision wasn't necessary for Gentiles to become Christians. On the other hand there was a Jewish sect that believed circumcision was necessary. James was of the group that believed Gentiles weren't required to circumcise themselves; however, James' delegation at Antioch still didn't eat with Gentile Christians. There remained a division. What was seen as right for one group wasn't right for the other group and vice versa. This division can best be illustrated by James' use of the story of Abraham to argue that faith required works for justification. Paul, on the other hand, used the story of Abraham to argue faith alone was required for justification. History has shown that Paul's theology became prevalent. The letters of James and Romans, written by James and Paul focus on the story of Abraham in the Hebrew Bible; each author was able to tailor their story to their argument, Paul focusing on faith while James focused on works.

Literature Review

New King Version Holy Bible was used throughout my paper. It showed how the letter of James thought about justification by faith and works. In the letter to the Romans, I tell the story of Abraham that Paul uses to argue his position on faith (Rom 4:3) In the letter of Galatians it showed how Paul fought the circumcision sect within Jewish Christianity (Gal 2:9). I finally use the *Book of Acts* to tell Paul's biography and to explain the division in the first century church (Acts 11:1-3).

The Brother of Jesus and the Lost Teachings of Christianity written by Jeffery Butz showed how James' had preeminence in the Jerusalem Church (Butz15). As well as how others viewed him highly (Butz16). It showed how the Ebionites and Elkesaites, a sect of messianic Jews, disdained Paul because of his lack of teaching the law to Gentiles (Butz17).

In James Dunn's book *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* it showed how great of a division there was between Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians (Dunn 254).

E.C. Blackmans book *The Epistle to James* showed how the belief in faith alone is not James' teaching. (94).

The Anchor Bible Dictionary showed how "Paul and his party prevailed" in the council in Jerusalem over "gaining recognition of Titus as a Christian without circumcision" (ABD188). It was also used to show that "Peter and other Jewish Christians caved into their visitors (a delegation from James in Jerusalem) censure and cut off table fellowship with the Gentile Christians (ABD188). The Anchor Bible Dictionary expounded on the letter of James (ABD 623).

Timo Laato's article "Justification According to James" showed how Laato's belief that justification is the same in the letters of James and Paul; they just use different terminology (Laato 76). He also states that James and Paul "theology" are the same (77).

In *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Sophie Laws thinks that Paul would never have agreed with James' assertion that justification is not by faith alone (Laws 133).

In the article "Justified by Faith Alone: Reconciling Paul and James," author David Maxwell points out that the letters of Paul and James use the Greek word to justify [dikaioo] in two different ways, so he concludes that the letters of Paul and James are not contradictory. He shows how Clement of Rome used the word [dikaioo] in two different ways in the same paper.

In Robert Rakestraw's article "James 2:14-26: Does James contradict Pauline Soteriology?" he also argues about the word [dikaioo] is used in a demonstrative and analytical way whereas James uses the word in a declarative, forensic and judicious way (Rakestraw 40). In other words Paul is talking about works of the law while James is talking about good deeds.

Jack Sanders, in his book *Ethics in the New Testament*, says that "James is responding to Paul's argument that faith alone justifies a Christian not faith and works, like James teaches. (Sanders 120). Sanders believes that Paul is arguing against James' letter.

A.N. Wilson's book *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* was used in Paul's biography. He says Paul was "educated strictly according to ancestral law" (37) Saul/Paul was a Jew.

Finally *Josephus: The Complete Works* showed how James was stoned to death unjustly.

Methodology

I read the letters of Romans, Galatians, James from the New King James version of the Holy Bible. I also read the *Book of Genesis* and *Acts* In the Holy Bible. These were my primary sources. Then I read portions of five books on James and Paul. I also read from the Anchor Bible Dictionary. Then I read seventeen scholarly articles before I decided to use three of them.

Introduction

In today's world there are many different denominations of Christianity. Every time there is a division within a denomination over doctrine that can't be rectified, people split into another denomination. This has been happening since the beginning of Christianity. If we look at the early first century church, one sees the division between Messianic Judaism (Christian that still followed the Law of Moses) and Gentile Christianity (who didn't believe they needed to be circumcised). This first split can be seen in the context of the letter of James and the letters of Romans in the Abraham narrative. Both Paul and James use the story of Abraham to argue diametrically opposing positions. Paul emphasizes righteousness by faith in the Abrahamic story in Genesis while James focuses on works in the Abrahamic story; this division came about by the clash between Messianic Judaism and Gentile Christianity portrayed in the letters of Romans by Paul and by the letter of James.

Abraham and Israel

Abraham is a legendary figure. His story is found in the Book of Genesis, the first book in the Holy Bible. The story begins with God telling Abraham to "get out of his country, from his family and his father's house, to a land that God will show him. God says, I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless

those who bless you and curse those who curse you, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3). Because of this Abraham leaves Ur (Iraq), an ancient city on the Euphrates and settles in Canaan (Israel). Abraham’s wife Sarah was childless. And all Abraham wanted was an heir. God eventually opens up Sarah’s womb and she has a son. Abraham and Sarah name him Isaac. Abraham was ninety nine years old and Sarah was ninety years old when this happens. For that reason Isaac is considered the chosen one, because God miraculously opened up Sarah’s womb when she was passed the age child birth. God told Abraham to circumcise all the males in his household, a sign of the covenant between Abraham and God, and all of Abraham’s descendants. To be a Messianic Jew you had to be circumcised.

Jews are direct descendants of Sarah and Abraham through Isaac. Isaac and his wife Rebecca had Jacob, whose name was changed by God to Israel. Israel had twelve sons that grew into twelve tribes who were later enslaved in Egypt and delivered by God through Moses. The twelve tribes eventually settle in Canaan and established a kingdom, so the promise to Abraham by God, in the Genesis narrative, was fulfilled.

Paul

Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, through the will of God (1 Cor 1:1). This statement opens up the first letter to the Corinthians. But who was this great man that has thirteen letters attributed to him in the New Testament? To begin with his name was Saul, a Jewish name, before he changed it into a Greek one. He was born in Tarsus, the capital city of Cilicia, as a Roman citizen. He was a contemporary to Jesus Christ. He was a tent maker according to Acts (Wilson 29). This was probably his father’s trade. As for his education, Paul said, “I am a

Jew...brought up in this city (Jerusalem) at the feet of Gamaliel, (a great rabbinic teacher) and educated strictly according to our ancestral law” (Wilson 37).

Saul is first spoken about in the *book of Acts* where he was some type of Temple police officer. He oversaw the stoning of Stephen the Deacon, a Christian (before they were even called Christians) in Jerusalem (Wilson 51). In Acts it says that Saul “ breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1, 2). The fact that he had access to the high priest with letters to a different province of Rome in Damascus attests to his high office.

The *Book of Acts* tells the story of his conversion to Christianity. While Saul was traveling to Damascus “a light shone around him from heaven...and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” and he said “who are you Lord?” and then the Lord said “ I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:3-5). Saul says “Lord, what you want me to do?” and the Lord said to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what to do” (Acts 9:6). He goes into the city and is baptized in the Holy Spirit and then baptized in water, to finish his conversion. He then goes out into Damascus and starts preaching that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 9:22). He returns to Jerusalem where he meets with the other disciples and explains his vision and everything that had happened to him and is sent out to Tarsus, because it is said that the Hellenists attempted to kill him (Acts 9:29). There after he is known to us English speaking people simply as Paul.

Paul began to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He first went to Nabataea (Arabia). Three years later he returned Jerusalem and spoke with Peter for fifteen days and with James, the

brother of the Lord (ABD 188). He then has three missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor and Greece, establishing Churches throughout the Roman provinces. Of particular interest is a meeting at Antioch where Paul and the Jewish leadership contend whether the new Christian converts needed to be circumcised. Christianity became a religion requiring no circumcision while Messianic Judaism required circumcision.

This is where the use of the word Christian begins to be used. I would argue that the word Christian was first used here because this is where Christianity had officially split from messianic Judaism (Christians that still followed the Mosaic Law) on one side where Paul and Titus (Gentile Christians) and the other side were Peter and the delegates from James, who was the head of the Jerusalem Church. They were still considered a sect of Judaism. The split occurred over table manners. Peter was eating with Gentile Christians and when the delegates from James came, Peter excluded himself. Paul confronts Peter to his face and accuses him of hypocrisy. "After heated debate Peter and the other Jewish Christians caved into their visitors' censure and cut off table fellowship with the Gentile Christians" (ABD 188). This left Gentile Christians outside of Judaism but Paul remained loyal to the Gentile Christians. Henceforth, Paul and the gentile churches founded by him were on their own, although plagued by a sect in Messianic Judaism, who were under the authority of James in Jerusalem.

In Antioch we first see the split between Messianic Judaism and Gentile Christians. People were still trying to define what the rules were for the church. It ended up being split between those who believed in circumcision and those who didn't believe in it. Paul himself was a Jewish Christian but as an apostle to the Gentiles he didn't believe that they had to conform to the Mosaic Law. "Indeed I Paul say to you if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep

the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by the law. You have fallen from grace” (Gal 5:2-6). Paul obviously was very vehement against the requirement put on Gentiles by some Messianic Jews who believed in circumcision.

Paul eventually gets in trouble with Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and has to defend himself against the Sanhedrin. He has to be rescued by Roman soldiers. Paul had to stand trial before Felix, the procurator, and when Festus was about to hold the trial in Jerusalem, Paul appealed to Caesar, for he was a Roman citizen. He finally was martyred (beheaded) in Rome under Nero in the mid-sixties C.E.

James

James was the brother of Jesus. Jesus had four brothers—James, Jose, Judas, and Simon as well as sisters (Buts 8). Jesus lived in Nazareth, a town in Galilee, so if Mary and Joseph lived there James had to have been raised there as well. I take the Helvetian stance that Jesus’ brothers and sisters were Mary and Joseph’s children not step brothers or cousins, like the Greek Orthodox or Roman Catholics believe.

We learn in the New Testament that Mary and Jesus’ brothers prayed with the apostles shortly after the crucifixion of Jesus (Acts 1:12-14). In First Corinthians, where we learn not only was James a witness to the resurrection, but also that Jesus’ other brothers were traveling evangelists as well (Buts 15). And that James played a leadership role in the Jerusalem church (Buts 15). In fact after Peter was arrested James became the Bishop of the Jerusalem Church.

Two apocryphal books of the New Testament are written about James, the Gospel of the Hebrews and Protevangelium of James. Also in the Nag Hammadi library there are gnostic writings of him as well, the Apocryphon of James, the First Apocalypse of James and the Second

Apocalypse of James. Even the Gospel of Thomas refers to James. “These writings all bear witness to the high esteem in which James was held by early Christians” (Butz 16).

James is highly regarded among Messianic Jews in the early history of the church. Ebionites and Elkesaites, groups of people who believed that Gentile Christians should be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses. “They revered James because he still practiced Judaism and believed in Jesus Christ as the messiah, but disdained Paul for his desire to jettison the requirement that Gentile converts adhere to Jewish law” (Butz 17). This came to a head at Antioch when Paul admonished Peter for hypocrisy because he shrunk back from eating with Gentiles when James’ delegation came to the council from Jerusalem.

Richard Bauckham, wrote “A theological tradition which originated with Martin Luther subordinates the epistle of James to Paul...Luther famously deplored James’ contradiction of the Pauline ...doctrine of justification by faith alone...and regulates James to a virtually apocryphal status at the margin of the canon” (Butz 19). The letter of James is the seventh book from the last book of the Bible where Martin Luther put it.

According to Flavius Josephus in his book *Antiquity of the Jews*, James was wrongly accused of breaking the law by the chief priest. He was stoned to death in 62 C.E. Because of the outcry among law abiding Jews the chief priest was replaced by King Agrippa’s decree (Josephus 20, 9).

The Significance of Abraham in the Letters of Paul and James

In the early years of this new religious movement, Paul and James wrote their letters. James’ letter and Paul’s letter to the Romans both use the story of Abraham to argue their opposing viewpoints. Paul ties Gentile Christianity to Abraham. In the letter of Romans, Paul

wrote “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt” (Rom 4:1-4). He must have felt that by using Abraham’s story, it would anchor Gentile Christians in the promises God had made to Abraham. This would legitimize the Gentile Christians and give them a firm foundation to build on. Paul argued that Abraham was declared righteous when he believed God would give him a son, even though Sarah was barren and past the age of child birth. He argued that after Abraham was declared righteous God gave him the sign of circumcision. So all the Gentile Christians had to do was have faith in Jesus Christ. They too, could call themselves children of Abraham.

On the other hand James stresses works in the story of Abraham. He focuses on the story of the sacrifice of Isaac whereas Paul focused on the birth of Isaac. In the story God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. He was about to sacrifice his son but an angel stops him. Then God sanctifies Abraham for his good work. James wrote “was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which says Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness, and he was called the friend of God” (2:21-23). James is talking to Messianic Jews. They would understand perfectly James argument that “faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:17) Messianic Jews would still follow the Law of Moses and works of the law, like circumcision, while also believing in Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

E.C. Blackman says “that the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone is not James teaching; it is in fact the antithesis of it” (Blackman 94). Paul argues that “if Abraham was justified by works he has whereof to Glory” (Rom 4:2) But James says “Abraham was justified by works” (Jas 2:21). Also Sophie Laws Author of the *Epistle of James* says “Paul could surely never have tolerated James’ explicit assertion that justification is not by faith alone” (Laws 133). The division between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians couldn’t be sharper.

Jack Sanders in his book *Ethics in the New Testament* comments on the division between Paul and James as well. But in his book he argues that James is responding to Paul in Romans. In James 2:24 “man is justified by works [ex ergon] and not by faith [ek pisteos] alone [monos]. The phrase [ek pisteos] doesn’t appear anywhere in the New Testament except in Romans, Galatians, and James” (Sanders 120). He goes on to say that this is not accidental. “The phrase by faith alone [ek pisteos monon]...never occurs in Paul’s writing...righteousness is by faith [ek pisteos] in order that it might be righteousness of grace [kata charin], for the promise to all the seed to be fixed, not only the seed of the law but also to the seed of Abraham’s faith. James 2:24 thus appear to be a conscious attempt to reverse the Pauline language” (Sanders 120). Sanders point is very clear that the letter of James and Romans show a sharp divide in the early first century church as well as Paul’s argument that Gentile Christians are the sons of Abraham by faith in his seed-Jesus Christ. Messianic Jews are the sons of Abraham by blood. James Dunn, says “that there was a much deeper divide between Paul and Messianic Judaism emanating from Jerusalem” in the first century church as supposed (Dunn 254).

There are three current scholars that argue that the letter of James is not contradictory to Paul’s letter to the Romans. First we have Robert V. Rakestraw who contends that “Abraham’s works are counted for his justification” (Rakestraw 39) Notice how it says works in the plural not

work. And the only portion of the story of Abraham in James is Abraham's work of binding Isaac in order to be obedient to God's command. Rakestraw reverts to a scholar named Davids who contends that the plural form of works is used to explain all ten tests God had given Abraham according to Jewish tradition. So James would be referencing Abraham's previous trials as well to show that "faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:17). This would change the whole position of how James is perceived (against faith alone) by Paul. James would be looking at the entire life of Abraham and the faith he had during his trials to show what it means to be a faithful believer in Jesus Christ; that you have to walk in faith over one's lifetime.

Rakestraw's argument focuses on the use of word justify. The Greek word for justify is [dikaioo]. Paul uses the word to mean justified when "the memory of our righteousness has been wiped out and we are accounted righteous" (Rakestraw 40). On the other hand James uses justify to show that people "who by true faith are righteous prove their righteousness by obedience and good works...not by an imaginary mask of faith" (Rakestraw 40). He goes on to say that the "demonstrative-analytical sense of [dikaioo] is thus held to be distinct from the declarative-forensic-judicial usage found in Paul" (Rakestraw 40). In other words Paul is talking about works of the law, like circumcision and following the Mosaic Law, while James is talking about good behavior.

Another author who thinks that Paul and James' letters are not contradictory is David R. Maxwell. He also keys into the word justify in Greek [dikaioo]. But his argument is based on the fact that he believes that [dikaioo] means "show to be righteous in those contexts where the contrast is between works and words, not faith and work" (Maxwell 377). He shows how the word justify [dikaioo] is used in two totally different ways by examining a paper by Clement of Rome who was an early church father in the generation right after the Apostles. Clement writes

“let the wise manifest his wisdom not in words but in good deeds” and that “Clement’s exhortation against boasting” is not about “how one becomes righteous, but how one appropriately shows that righteousness to others” and that the “choice is between works and words, not works and faith” (Maxwell 378). So Clement uses the word [dikaioo] to “mean show to be righteous” in his first example (Maxwell 378).

In his second example he shows how Clement uses the word for justify [dikaioo] in a totally different way. He writes that those “in Christ Jesus are not justified by ourselves” by our deeds...but through faith by which Almighty God has justified all men” (Maxwell 378).

In the first example Clement says we are justified by works and in the second example he says that people are justified through faith. Maxwell argues that Clement is using the same word [dikaioo] in two different ways in the same letter. It “can mean two things: ‘reckon righteous’ as in Romans four and ‘show to be righteous’ in James two” (Maxwell 378). What determines how [dikaioo] is used is whether one is talking about faith and works or words and works. He argues then that “righteousness before God is by faith alone” like Paul says, but that “righteousness manifests itself by works and not by idle words about faith unaccompanied by works” like James says (Maxwell 378).

Finally our last person to argue that James and Paul are not contradictory is Timo Laato, Pastor in the Church of Finland. Laato argues that Paul and James are basically saying the same things but that their using different terminology to express themselves. When Paul talks about the story of Abraham he “never relates works-righteousness to Christians, presumably to avoid a Jewish misunderstanding” and “in his view good works necessarily arise from faith” but he uses terminology like “the fruit of the Spirit,” “living according to the Spirit,” “love as the fulfillment

of the Law,” and “fulfilling of the Law of Christ” to show works-righteousness (Laato 76). It’s also an important point that their not talking about works of the Law but good behavior. Laato then says that “James and Paul differ only in “terminology, but not theologically” (Laato 77).

We have looked at authors who believe the letters of Paul in Romans and the letter of James are contradictory as well as authors who thought the letters are harmonious. What is important here is not who is correct but the fact that they’re divided. There is a division among them just like there was a division between Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians in the early first century church. The letters of Paul and James came out of this division, Paul focusing on faith and James focusing on works, in the Abrahamic story.

Division in the Church

The letter of James and the letter to the Romans, written by Paul, show a division in the early church between the circumcision group, who were under James’ authority, and Paul. Keep in mind that the theology of James and Paul were still in the making. Both were trying to figure out how Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians were supposed to act. What exactly was the relationship between the two groups? Peter, a disciple of Jesus Christ was caught in between the argument. He was even confused on how to treat Gentile Christians and on how to understand the relationship between Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians. For he had been eating with Paul and Gentile Christians, but when a delegation from James came, Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles. Paul chastised Peter for hypocrisy. This took place after Peter’s vision and an understanding he had developed earlier. Peter was a pillar who founded the Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians. He was part of James’ camp.

In the *Book of Acts* Peter is reported to have had a vision while he was praying of “all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air, and a voice came to him, Rise Peter; kill and eat” (Acts 10:12, 13). And Peter responds by saying he has never eaten anything unclean, but the voice commands him by saying “What God has cleansed you must not call uncommon” (Acts 10:15). Before Peter has much time to contemplate what he saw and heard, he is summoned to the house of Cornelius the centurion, a Gentile. Peter preaches to Cornelius’ household and while he is about to finish “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word, and the Messianic Jews who believed in circumcision were astonished...because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also” (Acts 10:44, 45).

Then when Peter came back to Jerusalem the circumcision group within James’ camp chastised Peter and said “You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!” (Acts 11:1-3). Here we see that some Messianic Jews objected that Peter preached to Gentiles in their own homes, but Peter defended himself, explaining his vision and how he could not “withstand God” (Acts 11:17). The Messianic Jews were astonished that God poured out his Spirit on the Gentiles as well. It appears that God showed no partiality between Jews and Gentiles. This leads up to the fight between Paul and Peter and a delegation from James at Antioch. Peter behavior flip flops. He didn’t know the boundaries between this new Christian movement and Messianic Judaism any more than anyone else did. Theology was being made in real time.

Here is Peter arguing for Pauline theology. It is reported that “men came down from Judea and taught the brethren “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas decide to go up to Jerusalem and talk to the “apostles and elders about this question (Acts 15:2). In Jerusalem Paul and Barnabas report

everything that has been done by God and immediately “the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up” and said that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised and made to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:5). But Peter rose up and defended Paul. The apostles and elders decided that the Gentiles didn’t need to be circumcised to be saved, but they did put some regulations on them concerning food “polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20).

In response the apostles and elders send a delegation to Antioch, Syria and Cilicia telling them that “some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying you must be circumcised and keep the whole law-to whom we gave no such commandment” (Acts 15:23, 24). There seems to have been three groups- Messianic Jews who believed in circumcision, Messianic Jews that believed that Gentile Christians need not be circumcised and Gentile Christians. Christianity was still being worked out in the first century C.E. There were still doctrinal issues that needed to be straightened out. By this time Peter had been straightened out by Paul.

Their relationship was troubled from the beginning of Paul’s new movement. In Paul’s letters he is putting down new theology for Gentile Christians to adhere to. Paul was fighting against the sect of Messianic Judaism that felt Paul should make Gentile Christians adhere to the Law of Moses. These fights between Messianic Judaism and Gentile Christianity created situations that needed to be straightened out. This is how the New Testament letters of Paul to the Galatians and to the Romans and the letter of James came about. The letters came to be out of the struggles between Messianic Judaism and Gentile Christianity. Paul and James were writing down what they believed to be important in their prospective positions. Paul believed in faith and James believed in works.

Paul's Struggles with the Circumcision Group in Galatia

Paul bitterly defends his position as an apostle to the Gentiles. He says in Galatians that “if anyone preaches a different gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed” (Gal1:9). Paul is talking about how the circumcision group, who thought that Gentiles were to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses; these people were preaching these words to the Galatians in opposition to what Paul was preaching. He goes on to say that he went up to Jerusalem (Mother Church) and revealed his Gospel to the Gentiles to the authorities (James). Yet not even “Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. And this occurred because false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you” (Gal 2:3-5).

He goes on to say that Peter was an apostle to the circumcised just like he was an apostle to the Gentiles and how “James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship” (2:9) Here Paul was telling the Galatians that he was approved by the leadership in Jerusalem and that the circumcision group was wrong. Paul vehemently defends his position that Gentiles were not supposed to be circumcised after they had obeyed the Gospel Paul preached, and if they had given into the circumcision group, they were in error. Paul says “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are now being made perfect by the flesh? (Gal 2:3) For those that gave into the circumcision group had placed themselves under the law again and into bondage.

Paul trying to mend the rift

Paul wanted to travel to Rome, but before he did he wrote a letter to them called Romans. In the letter one can see his effort at unifying the Messianic Jews and the Gentile Christians. He says that he was “not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Rom 1:9). In this passage he puts Jews first but he also puts Greeks on an equal footing.

Paul then lays into the circumcision group with a fiery argument about circumcision. He says “circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision?” Paul goes on to argue that a Jew “is not one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter” (Rom 2:28, 29). Paul’s argument keys up the battle between the Spirit and the flesh. Paul is trying to teach the believers in Rome what saves a person is not done outwardly by following the works of the Law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul ends the letter of Romans with some advice about those “who cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom 16:17, 18). Paul was making sure that no one of the circumcision group would deceive them into believing they had to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses.

Conclusion

Theology was being made up in the letter of James and the letter to the Romans, written by Paul, in the early first century church. James was the Bishop of Jerusalem and was a Messianic Jew. Paul also was a messianic Jew, but he also was an apostle of Jesus Christ who didn't believe that Gentiles he was converting to Christianity need be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses. In practicing this, he created a new religion called Christianity. There was a great battle over who was correct. This battle can be seen in the Abraham narrative between Paul and James. Paul focused on the faith of Abraham and James focused on works of Abraham. This epic struggle can now be seen by reading the New Testament, which at the time didn't even exist. The New Testament letters of Paul and James were created out of this epic battle. Present day scholars still disagree whether the letter of James and the letter of Paul are contradictory or not. The debate is forever with us.

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