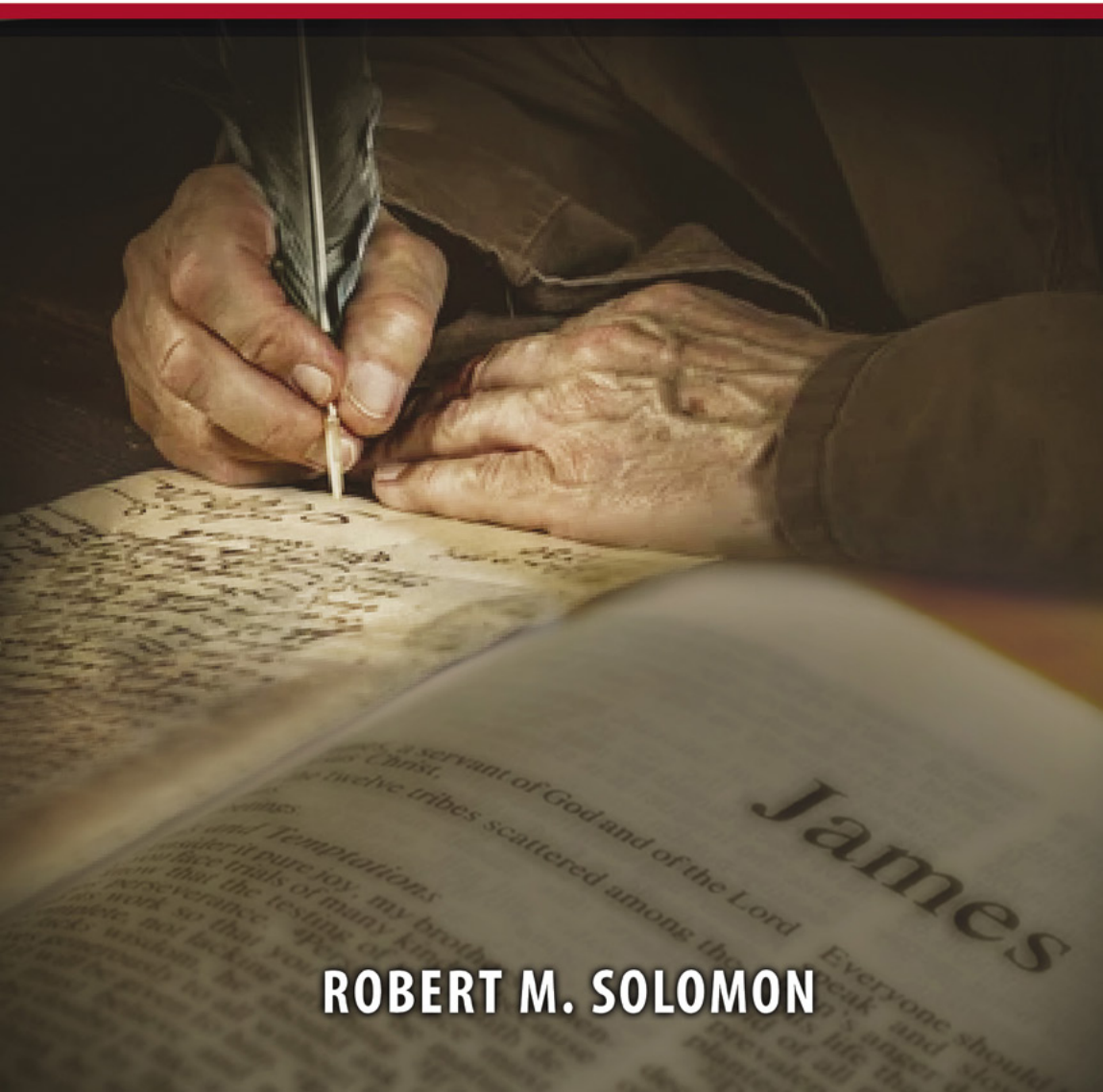
PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

THE BOOK OF JAMES AND ITS RELEVANCE TODAY



ROBERT M. SOLOMON

ENDORSEMENTS

To encounter the richness of the sermons of the Book of James you need not only a skilled biblical scholar but also a skilful and passionate preacher. Robert Solomon is one such person and in this book we encounter sermons which allow us to encounter Jesus today.

Rev Professor David Wilkinson
Principal, St John's College, Durham University, UK

This book demonstrates how relevant the book of James is to contemporary Christians. It shows how the study of the Word can result in life lessons that challenge and inspire us and motivate us to follow the path of obedience. The fruit of careful and devout study of the Word is presented in language that lay persons can read and understand.

Ajith Fernando
Teaching Director, Youth for Christ
Author, Discipling in a Multicultural World

Here is a collection of expository sermons from a master of the craft. Clear, concise and captivating, they provide quick and helpful pointers for harried pastors to construct sermons for their flock, but the full benefit will come only to those who can devote time to mull over them. Such readers will find themselves being moulded by the same majestic Wisdom that James wrote about, and which a Solomon now teaches us.

Dr Tan Kim Huat
Chen Su Lan Professor of New Testament, Trinity Theological College, Singapore
Chairman, Board of Trustees, Association for Theological Education in South East Asia

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Bishop Solomon is an excellent verbal communicator of God's Word and in a similar manner, he shows in this work that he can communicate both deeply and simply at the same time in a written format. Solomon writes for that church layman who would enjoy some self-study of Scripture for himself or herself. That being said, this book is not shallow, but James' deep and perhaps confusing material is presented in an easy manner. In other words, Solomon has "placed the cookies on the lower shelf."

Solomon presents "Reflection Questions" in such a manner that one can use them to help those who are studying on their own or for use in a small group Bible study. He also uses enlightening illustrations and examples, such as Colonel Sanders (KFC) and Walt Disney. Yet his footnotes would direct the reader for a more in-depth discussion on a particular area of interest.

Bishop Solomon's book is a substantial introduction to this, the first of the epistles written in our New Testament.

Rev Dr Keith Schubert
Lecturer, Biblical Studies, East Asia School of Theology, Singapore

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Sometimes we think James and Paul were opposed to each other in their views on justification by faith. With that misconception, the Letter of James is intentionally or unintentionally neglected. But with the New Perspective on Paul, we come to a fresh understanding of Paul's theology, and to a better appreciation of James. For example, Galatians 5:6, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." We are called to keep saving faith and good godly actions together. It's always refreshing to read Bishop Robert Solomon's exposition on the Bible. I enthusiastically recommend this book to you.

Rev Dr Ezra Kok
Honorary Research Fellow, Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (STM)
Former Chinese Annual Conference President, The Methodist Church in Malaysia
Former Principal of STM, Malaysia

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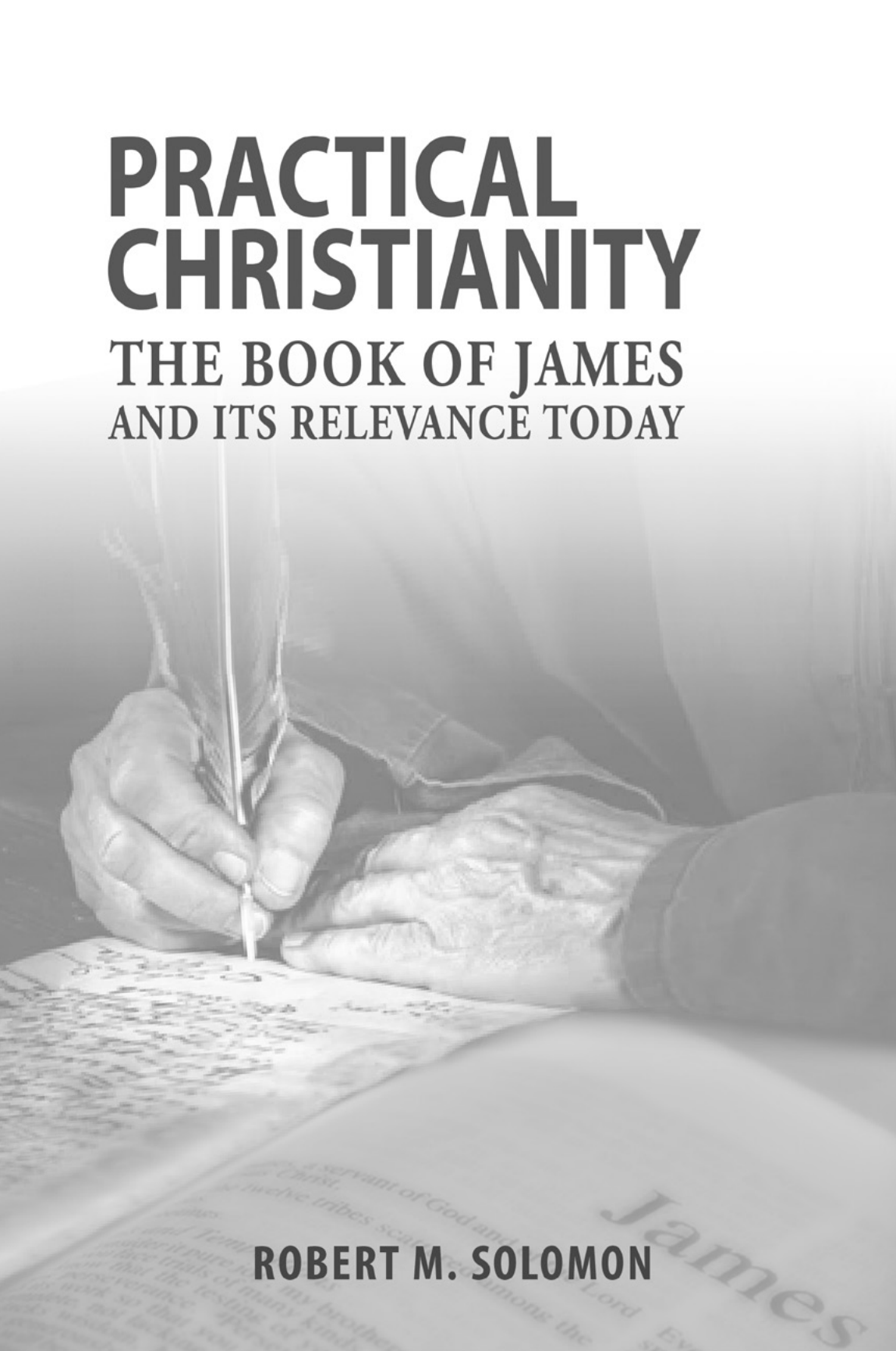

ROBERT M. SOLOMON

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DEDICATION

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To my siblings

George, Charles, Helen,

Florence, Catherine,

and Anita

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

THE BOOK OF JAMES AND ITS RELEVANCE TODAY

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PREFACE

The epistle of James is arguably the earliest writing in the New Testament. As such, it has an importance that must not escape us, for it gives the earliest picture of the church and its teachings and practice. Some Christians may consider its contents to be dated and archaic in terms of its ancient context, and its practical prescriptions to be irrelevant to us today.

But that would be true only if we consider the teachings of Jesus to be irrelevant today. A significant part of James is an echoing and reiteration of the teachings of the Lord as we shall note in this book. The author, believed to be James, the brother of Jesus, takes pain to repeat the teachings of Jesus and apply them in the beliefs and practices of the church. In James, we clearly hear the voice of Jesus, and are therefore encouraged to listen carefully and take heed.

The epistle of James is like a series of sermons based on the sermons and teachings of Jesus. As such, many Bible scholars consider it as a collection of sermons intended to encourage, warn, inspire, and transform the readers (and hearers too, for the epistles were read publicly in the early church). This book will explore the epistle by looking at its different sections as sermons. I have preached on several of the passages in James on various occasions, in church services and at a retreat. I have collected these sermons and wrote a few more – these form the basic contents of this book.

This book will be useful to those who wish to read, study, and meditate on the epistle of James. It may be useful to pastors and preachers, Bible study leaders, small group leaders, and others who teach the Bible. I have included in each chapter a conclusion to emphasise the key points and reflection questions to aid further reflection and application, in both individual and group study.

May this book help us to understand the epistle and apply its truths in our daily lives. Faith must be discovered, valued, and must be actively practised – this is God's will for us. May He assist us to understand His truth and to do His will for His glory.

Robert M. Solomon

Chapter 1

The History of the Epistle of James

The word "canon" is a relatively unfamiliar one but is essential for Christians to understand what it means. The word *kanon* in Greek means a straight rod used to measure (because it had markings) and to ensure conformity to a standard. The word, with this meaning, was carried into Latin and eventually English. When we refer to the Canon of Scripture, we mean the biblical standard for our Christian faith as contained in the Bible. It also refers to the recognised list of books in the Bible considered to be authoritative, and together comprising the Word of God. The canon is historically and theologically closed, and no other literature can be added to this authoritative list. No other book or piece of literature outside this list can claim to have the same authority as any in the canonical list.

The Old Testament (OT) has 39 books and the New Testament (NT) 27 books. This is the closed Canon of Scripture. How this canon was determined is an interesting story. The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) took shape gradually through a process of oral (word of mouth) tradition, carefully reproduced writings by scribes and a general consensus by the religious community as to what constituted Scripture. This often was a case of recognising what was already believed to be Scripture rather than a committee sitting down to decide on the matter.

By the time of Jesus, there was a recognised body of Scripture (the Hebrew Bible, which was also translated into Greek as the Septuagint). Jesus is shown in the Gospels to quote from 24 of the OT books, while the

apostolic writings of the New Testament quote from 34 of the 39 Old Testament books.

Why James is in the New Testament

Our specific interest here is the New Testament canon.[1] How did the church decide on the 27 books as authoritative Scripture? After the resurrection of Christ, the early Christians thought that He was returning soon; therefore, the need to have a canon beyond the OT was not so urgent. But as time went on, with new generations of believers emerging and the need to write down Christian teaching both to nurture Christian faith as well as to contend with emerging heresies, the process of the formation of the NT canon began. How the New Testament canon was formed has been well documented by highly respected scholars such as F. F. Bruce, Bruce Metzger and Martin Hengel.[2]

As early as the first century, lists of documents were circulated in the churches that were considered as having apostolic authority (an important criterion to determine canonicity). The writings of Paul and the Gospels were quickly and widely recognised as scripture. We can trace how this process took shape.

Irenaeus (130–200 AD), Bishop of Lyons, was influenced by Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna), who personally knew the apostle John. He recognised as authoritative all the New Testament books except Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 3 John and Jude.

Clement of Alexandria (150–215 AD) mentioned the two sections of the Bible (both the Old and New Testaments) and quoted in his writings 22

1 I deal with this subject in greater detail in my book, *The Enduring Word: The Authority and Reliability of the Bible* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2011), 53–60.

2 F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000).

James the brother of Jesus has thus been traditionally accepted as the author of the Epistle of James, which means that its authenticity as an apostolic work and its place in Scripture has also been accepted.

This traditional view of the authorship of James continues to be accepted by scholars today.[18] James was the brother (or half-brother) of Jesus. That is, he is the natural son of Joseph and Mary, born after Jesus.[19] Some traditions consider him to be an older sibling, born to an older Joseph who was widowed when he was betrothed to Mary.

Following this, we can then determine the date this epistle was written, and therefore also the context. James was killed in 62 AD in Jerusalem. This means that the epistle was written before this year. Scholars believe that it was written sometime between the mid-40s and 50 AD.[20] If indeed James was written in the mid-40s, it would be the earliest NT writing. The early date of the epistle indicates also that James was not trying to correct a misunderstanding of Paul's letters,[21] the earliest of which (Galatians) was written no earlier than 49 AD, while the others were written later (Romans in 57 AD, the prison epistles in 60–61 AD, and the pastoral epistles after 64 AD).

Reflection Questions

1. Read and reflect on how we received the Bible as we have today. What evidence is there that the Old Testament as we have today was

18 See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 9–22 for a thorough discussion on the authorship issues and his conclusion that the author was James, the brother of Jesus. See also Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 121; T. C. Penner, *The Epistle of James and Eschatology: Re-Reading an Ancient Christian Letter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 35–103; R. Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Routledge, 1999), 11–25.

19 See Donald Guthrie, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 723–46.

20 Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, 5 (mid-40s); Leon Morris and Donald W. Burdick, *Hebrews and James*, Expositor's Bible Commentary with the NIV (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 162.

21 George M. Stulac, *James*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 16–17.

recognised by Jesus and the apostles? How did the church decide on the apostolic authority of the 27 NT books? What assurance do you have that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God?

2. The Book of James is a part of the NT canon. What should our attitude be towards this book? Why did Luther call it an "epistle of straw"? How did Calvin consider the book and how can his view be helpful to us today?

3. What evidence is there that the author of the book is James, the brother of Jesus? If this is the case, what memories do you think James would have of his brother Jesus with whom he would have grown up at home? Initially, he did not seem to have accepted the identity of Jesus as the Messianic Son of God. What do you think of his change in mind after encountering the risen Christ?

4. James may be the earliest NT book – Why do you think this may be significant, including the idea proposed by some that James wrote to oppose Paul?