LIFE FOR GOD

THE SECRET BOOK OF JAMES

The Apocryphon of James

EARLY CHRISTIAN APOCRYPHA

English translation
Mark M. Mattison

Reading edition · Life for God



2026

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About this edition

A dialogue between the risen Jesus, James, and Peter, framed as a letter. The work survives in a single fourth-century Coptic manuscript, Nag Hammadi Codex I, pages 1–16; its composition is commonly placed in the latter part of the second century. The manuscript has no title, and the narrative attribution to James does not establish historical authorship. This is distinct from the New Testament Epistle of James and the Infancy Gospel of James.

The English text is Mark M. Mattison's translation, explicitly dedicated to the public domain. Russian is a new translation based on it, checked sequentially against the Coptic transcription of all pages 1–16 in the Marcion corpus (text 102). This is a check of a published transcription, not a new decipherment of the manuscript; disputed readings and editorial restorations are identified in the notes.

The twelve thematic sections follow the headings of the English edition. Section and paragraph numbers are editorial aids for reading and linking, not ancient numbering. Coptic manuscript pages are shown separately. Square brackets retain gaps and proposed restorations, parentheses mark explanatory insertions, and angle brackets mark editorial additions or corrections.

English translation: Mark M. Mattison, Gospels.net. The translator expressly dedicated the translation to the public domain for unrestricted use and modification.

The Russian translation was prepared by Priest Sergey Koudy for Life for God.

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Sources

1. Mark M. Mattison — The Secret Book of James
Complete English translation; the author explicitly permits free use and adaptation.

2. Milan Konvicka — Marcion, Nag Hammadi Coptic corpus
Coptic transcription: text 102, pages 1–16, 612 lines. Used for the sequential check of the Russian translation.

3. Julia Lindenlaub — Apocryphon of James, NASSCAL
Manuscript, genre, dating, and bibliography.

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Section 1 · Salutation

Manuscript pages 1

1. [James writes] to […]: Peace [to you from] peace, [love from] love, [grace] from grace, [faith] from faith, life from holy life! [1]

Section 2 · Prologue

Manuscript pages 1–2

Manuscript pages 1

1. Since you asked me to send you a secret book revealed to Peter and me by the Lord, and I could neither turn you down nor talk to you (directly), [I've written] it in Hebrew letters and have sent it to you – and to you alone. But as a minister of the salvation of the saints, take care not to tell too many people about this book, which the Savior didn't want to tell all twelve of us, the disciples. But blessed are those who will be saved through the faith of this message. [2]

2. Ten months ago, I sent you another secret book that the Savior revealed to me. But think of that one as revealed to me, James. And this one […] [3]

Section 3 · The Savior Appears

Manuscript pages 2

1. Now all twelve disciples [were] sitting together [at the same time] recalling what the Savior had told each of them, whether privately or publicly, and organizing it in books. [But I] was writing what went into [my book]. Look! The Savior appeared, [after] he had left [us, while we were watching] for him. Five hundred and fifty days after he had risen from the dead, we told him, “You went away and left us!”

2. But Jesus said, “No, but I’ll return to the place from which I came. If you want to come with me, come on!” [4]

3. They all replied and said, “We’ll come if you tell us to.”

4. He said, “Truly I tell you, no one will ever enter the kingdom of heaven because I ordered it, but because you yourselves are full. Leave James and Peter to me so that I may fill them.”

5. After he called these two, he took them aside and told the rest to keep doing what they were doing.

Section 4 · Being Filled

Manuscript pages 2–4

Manuscript pages 2–3

1. The Savior said, “You’ve received mercy. […] they [haven’t] understood. Don’t you want to be filled? Your hearts are drunk. Don’t you, then, want to be sober? Then be ashamed! From now on, awake or asleep, remember that you’ve seen the Son of Humanity, and have talked to him in person, and have heard him in person.

Manuscript pages 3

2. Woe to those who've seen the Son of Humanity! Blessed are those who haven't seen that man, mingled with him, spoken to him, or heard a thing he's said. Yours is life! Know, then, that he healed you when you were sick, so that you might reign.

Manuscript pages 3

3. Woe to those who've found relief from their sickness, because they'll relapse into sickness. Blessed are those who haven't been sick and have found relief before getting sick. Yours is the kingdom of God! So I tell you, be full and leave no space within you empty, because the one who is coming will be able to mock you."

Manuscript pages 3–4

4. Then Peter replied, "Three times you've told us to be [full, but] we are full."

Manuscript pages 4

5. In [response the Savior] said, "That's why I [told] you ['be full'] – so that you won't [be lacking. Those who are lacking] won't [be saved]. It's good to be full [and] bad [to be lacking]. So just as it's good for you to be lacking and bad for you to be full, whoever is full is also lacking. One who's lacking isn't filled the same way that someone who's lacking is filled, and anyone who's full gets everything they need. So it's right to be lacking while it's possible to fill you, and to be filled while it's possible to be lacking, so that you can [fill] yourselves more. So [be] full of the Spirit but lacking in reason, because reason is of the soul – in fact, it is soul." [5]

Section 5 · The Cross and Death

Manuscript pages 4–6

Manuscript pages 4

1. In response I told him, “Lord, we can obey you if you want us to, because we’ve abandoned our fathers, our mothers, and our villages, and have followed you. So help us not to be tempted by the devil, the evil one.”

Manuscript pages 4–5

2. In response the Lord said, “What good is it to you if you do the will of the Father, and he doesn’t give it to you as a gift when you’re tempted by Satan? But if you’re oppressed by Satan and persecuted and do (God’s) will, I [say] that he’ll love you, make you my equal, and regard [you] as having become beloved through his forethought by your own choice. So won’t you stop loving the flesh and being afraid of sufferings? Or don’t you know that you haven’t yet been abused, unjustly accused, locked up in prison, illegally condemned, crucified by reason, nor buried in the sand as I myself was by the evil one? Do you dare to spare the flesh, you for whom the Spirit is a surrounding wall? If you consider how long the world existed <before> you, and how long it will exist after you, you’ll find that your life is a single day and your sufferings a single hour. For the good won’t come into the world. So scorn death and take thought for life! Remember my cross and my death, and you’ll live!” [6] [7]

Manuscript pages 5–6

3. But in response I told him, “Lord, don’t teach us about the cross and death, because they’re far from you.”

Manuscript pages 6

4. In response the Lord said, “Truly I tell you, no one will be saved unless they [believe] in my cross, [because] the kingdom of God belongs to those who’ve believed in my cross. So become those who seek death, like the dead who seek life; because what they seek is revealed to them. So what do they have to worry about? When you turn to the subject of death, it will teach you about election. Truly I tell you, no one who’s afraid of death will be saved, because the kingdom of <God> belongs to those who are put to death. Become better than I; be like the child of the Holy Spirit.” [8]

Section 6 · Prophecies and Parables

Manuscript pages 6–8

Manuscript pages 6

1. Then I asked him, “Lord, how can we prophesy to those who ask us to prophesy to them? Because there are many who ask us, and who look to us to hear a message from us.”

Manuscript pages 6

2. In response the Lord said, “Don’t you know that the head of prophecy was cut off with John?”

Manuscript pages 6

3. But I said, “Lord, is it possible to remove the head of prophecy?

Manuscript pages 6–7

4. The Lord told me, “When you realize what ‘head’ means, and that prophecy comes from the head, understand what ‘its head was removed’ means. At first I spoke to you in parables, and you didn’t understand. Now I speak to you openly, and you still don’t perceive. But to me you were a parable among parables and something visible out in the open.

Manuscript pages 7

5. “Be eager to be saved without being urged. Rather, be ready on your own and, if possible, get there before me, because the Father will love you.

Manuscript pages 7

6. “Come to hate hypocrisy and evil intention, because intention is what produces hypocrisy, and hypocrisy is far from the truth.

Manuscript pages 7

7. “Don’t let the kingdom of heaven wither, because it’s like a date palm shoot whose fruit has poured down around it. It sent out some leaves, and after they sprouted, they made their productivity dry up. This is also what happened with the fruit that came from this single root; when it was picked, many acquired fruit. Wouldn’t it truly be good if you could produce the new plants now? <You> would find it. [9]

Manuscript pages 7–8

8. “Since I’ve already been glorified like this, why do you hold me back in my eagerness to go? For after the [labor], you’ve made me stay with you another eighteen days because of the parables. For some people, it was enough <to listen> to the teaching and understand ‘The Shepherds,’ ‘The Seed,’ ‘The Building,’ ‘The Lamps of the Young Women,’ ‘The Wage of the Workers,’ and ‘The Silver Coins and the Woman.’ [10]

Manuscript pages 8

9. “Be eager about the message! The first stage of the message is faith, the second is love, and the third is works, because from these comes life.

Manuscript pages 8

10. “The message is like a grain of wheat. When someone sowed it, they believed in it, and when it sprouted, they loved it, because they saw many grains in place of one. And after they worked, they were saved because they prepared it as food, then kept enough left over to be sown. This is also how you yourselves can receive the kingdom of heaven. Unless you receive it through knowledge, you won’t be able to find it.

Section 7 · Be Saved

Manuscript pages 8–11

Manuscript pages 8

1. “So I tell you, be sober! Don’t be deceived. And many times I told you all together – and also to you alone, James, I’ve said – ‘Be saved!’ And I’ve commanded you to follow me, and I’ve taught you what to do in the face of the rulers.

Manuscript pages 8–9

2. “See that I’ve come down, spoken, been torn, and taken my crown when I saved you, because I came down to dwell with you so that you’ll dwell with me. And when I found your houses without ceilings, I lived in the houses that could receive me at the time I came down.

Manuscript pages 9

3. “Trust me about this, my brothers (i.e., Peter and James). Understand what the great light is. The Father doesn’t need me, because a father doesn’t need a son, but it’s the son who needs the father. I’m going to him, because the Father of the Son doesn’t need you.

Manuscript pages 9

4. “Listen to the message, understand knowledge, love life, and no one will persecute or oppress you other than you yourselves.

Manuscript pages 9

5. “You wretches! You poor devils! You hypocrites of the truth! You falsifiers of knowledge! You sinners against the Spirit! Can you still bear to listen, when you should’ve been speaking from the beginning? Can you still bear to sleep, when you should’ve been awake from the beginning so that the kingdom of heaven might receive you?

Manuscript pages 9–10

6. “Truly I tell you, it’s easier for a holy person to fall into defilement, and for an enlightened person to fall into darkness, than for you to reign – or not reign. [11]

Manuscript pages 10

7. “I’ve remembered your tears, your grief, and your pain. They’re far from us. But now, you who are outside of the Father’s inheritance, weep where it’s necessary, grieve, and proclaim what’s good as the Son is ascending as he should.

Manuscript pages 10

8. “Truly I tell you, if I had been sent (only) to those who would listen to me and had spoken to them (alone), I wouldn’t ever have gone up from the earth. Now, then, be ashamed for these things! [12]

Manuscript pages 10

9. “Look, I’ll leave you and go away. I don’t want to continue with you anymore, just as you yourselves don’t want that. Now, then, follow me eagerly. That’s why I tell you that I came down for you. You’re beloved; you’ll bring life for many. Call on the Father. Pray to God often, and (God) will be generous with you.

Manuscript pages 10–11

10. “Blessed is the one who has seen you with (God) when (God) was proclaimed among the angels and given glory among the holy ones; yours is life. Rejoice and be glad as children of God. Keep (God’s) will so that you may be saved. Accept my warning and save yourselves. I’m pleading for you with the Father, who will forgive you much.” [13]

Section 8 · Few Have Found the Kingdom

Manuscript pages 11–12

Manuscript pages 11

1. And when we heard these things, we were delighted, because we had been depressed about the things we mentioned before.

Manuscript pages 11

2. But when he saw us rejoicing, he said, “Woe to you who need an advocate! Woe to you who need grace! Blessed will be those who’ve spoken out and acquired grace for themselves! [14]

Manuscript pages 11

3. “Be like foreigners. How are they viewed in your city? Why are you disturbed when you cast yourselves out on your own and separate yourselves from your city? Why do you leave your dwelling on your own and make it available for those who want to live in it? You outcasts and runaways! Woe to you, because you’ll be caught!

Manuscript pages 11

4. “Or do you think that the Father is a lover of humanity, or is persuaded by prayers, or grants grace to one on behalf of another, or puts up with one who seeks? [15]

5. “(God) knows about desire and what the flesh needs. It’s not this (flesh) which desires the soul, because without the soul, the body doesn’t sin, just as the soul isn’t saved without the spirit. But if the soul is saved without evil, and the spirit is also saved, then the body becomes sinless. For it’s the spirit that raises the soul, but the body that kills it; that is, (the soul) kills itself.

Manuscript pages 12

6. “Truly I tell you, (God) won’t ever forgive the sin of the soul or the guilt of the flesh, because no one who’s worn the flesh will be saved. Do you think that many have found the kingdom of heaven? Blessed is the one who’s seen oneself (at) the fourth (stage) in heaven.” [16]

Section 9 · Know Yourselves

Manuscript pages 12–13

Manuscript pages 12

1. When we heard these things, we felt depressed. But when he saw that we were depressed, he said, “I’m telling you this so that you may know yourselves. For the kingdom of heaven is like an ear of grain after it had sprouted in a field. And when it had ripened, it scattered its fruit, and again it filled the field with ears of grain for another year. You, too, be eager to reap an ear of the grain of life for yourselves so that you may be filled with the kingdom!

2. “And as long as I’m with you, pay attention to me and trust in me, but when I leave you, remember me. And remember me because when I was with you, you didn’t know me. Blessed are those who’ve known me. Woe to those who’ve heard and haven’t believed! Blessed will be those who haven’t seen, [but …]! [17]

Manuscript pages 13

3. “And once again I [appeal to] you, because I’m revealed to you building a house very valuable to you when you take shelter under it, just as it will be able to support your neighbors’ house when it threatens to fall. Truly I tell you, woe to those for whom I was sent down to this place! Blessed will be those who go up to the Father. Again I warn you, you who are. Be like those who are not so that you may be with those who are not.

Manuscript pages 13

4. “Don’t let the kingdom of heaven become a desert within you. Don’t be haughty because of the light that enlightens, but behave toward yourselves the way that I’ve behaved toward you. I’ve put myself under the curse for you, so that you may be saved.”

Section 10 · Final Words

Manuscript pages 13–15

Manuscript pages 13

1. But in response to these comments Peter said, “Sometimes you urge us on to the kingdom of heaven, and again at other times you turn us away, Lord. Sometimes you persuade and draw us to faith and promise us life, and again at other times you cast us out of the kingdom of heaven.”

Manuscript pages 13–14

2. But in response the Lord told us, “I’ve given you faith many times. Moreover, I’ve revealed myself to you, James, and you haven’t known me. Now again, I see you rejoicing often. And when you’re delighted about the promise of life, nevertheless you’re sad and depressed when you’re taught about the kingdom. [18]

Manuscript pages 14

3. “But through faith and knowledge, you’ve received life. Despise rejection when you hear it, but when you hear the promise, rejoice all the more. Truly I tell you, whoever will receive life and believe the kingdom will never leave it – not even if the Father wants to banish them!

Manuscript pages 14

4. “This is all I’m going to tell you up to this point, but now I’ll go up to the place from which I came. But when I was eager to go, you cast me out, and instead of accompanying me, you’ve chased me away. But be attentive to the glory that awaits me, and when you’ve opened your hearts, listen to the hymns that await me up in heaven, because today I need to sit at the right hand of the Father.

Manuscript pages 14–15

5. “Now I’ve spoken (my) last word to you, and I’ll leave you, because a chariot of the Spirit has taken me up, and from now on I’ll strip myself so that I may clothe myself. But pay attention: Blessed are those who’ve proclaimed the Son before his coming down so that when I’ve come, I might go up. Blessed three times over are those who [were] proclaimed by the Son before they came to be, so that you may have a portion with them.”

Section 11 · Heavenly Ascent

Manuscript pages 15–16

Manuscript pages 15

1. When he said these things, he left. But Peter and I knelt down, gave thanks, and sent our hearts up to heaven. We heard with our ears, and saw with our eyes, the cacophony of wars and a trumpet blare and a great commotion. [19]

Manuscript pages 15

2. And when we passed beyond that place, we sent our minds up higher and heard with our ears hymns and angelic praises and angelic rejoicing. And heavenly majesties were singing hymns, and we rejoiced too. [20]

Manuscript pages 15

3. After this again, we wanted to send our spirit up to the Majesty. And after we went up, we weren’t allowed to see or hear anything, because the other disciples called us and asked us, “What did you hear from the Teacher?” And, “What did he tell you?” And, “Where did he go?”

4. But we responded, “He went up.” And, “He’s given us his right hand and promised us all life, and he revealed to us children who are to come after us, after telling [us] to love them, as we’d be [saved] because of them.”

Section 12 · Conclusion

Manuscript pages 16

1. And when they heard, they believed the revelation indeed, but were angry about those to be born. So, not wanting to give them a scandal, I sent each of them to a different place. But I myself went up to Jerusalem, praying to acquire a portion with the beloved ones who will be revealed.

2. And I pray that the beginning may come from you, because this is how I can be saved, since they'll be enlightened through me, by my faith – and through another (faith) that's even better than mine, because I want mine to be the lesser. [21]

3. So do your best to be like them, and pray that you acquire a portion with them. Apart from what I've said, the Savior didn't disclose a revelation to us for them. We do indeed proclaim a portion with those for whom the proclamation was made – those whom the Lord has (accepted as) children. [22]

Translation notes

1. 1:1 The opening is damaged. The sender's name is restored from later self-references; only the ending -thos survives for the recipient. Identification with Cerinthus remains conjectural, so the name is not supplied here.

2. 2:1 "In Hebrew letters" is the narrator's claim. The only surviving witness is Coptic; this phrase alone does not establish that a Hebrew original existed.

3. 2:2 Manuscript page 2, lines 1–7, is badly damaged. The gap before the gathered disciples is retained; no connecting narrative has been invented.

4. 3:2 The initial Coptic mpe (2.23) is rendered "No," following Mattison. His note also records the possibility of an asseverative, affirmative use of the particle.

5. 4:5 The paradoxes of fullness and lack are retained. At 4.19–22 pneuma is contrasted with logos, which is then associated with psychē. Russian renders logos as "reason"; "rational discourse" or "word" are also possible. The wording should not automatically be reduced to a modern faith-versus-science opposition.

6. 5:2 "Crucified by reason" follows Mattison's logos reading. An editorial reconstruction "crucified <without> reason" is also possible: Marcion uses special markup for a in mnt-[a]-logos (5.17–18). The separate difficult phrase "buried in the sand" is retained rather than harmonized with the canonical tomb narrative.

7. 5:2 Near the end of this paragraph "the good" is understood as good people, not an abstract good: the transcription at 5.29–30 has plural n-agathos and the third-person plural verbal prefix se-.

8. 5:4 At 6.17 the transcription reads "kingdom of death" (mou). Mattison adopts the emendation "kingdom of <God>," retained in both languages with angle brackets. This is an editorial decision, not an undisputed reading. The language of seeking death occurs in a discourse on suffering and martyrdom, alongside the reference to those "who are put to death."

9. 6:7 The palm-shoot image at 7.23–35 is difficult: the connection between leaves, fruit, and failing productivity admits different explanations. Russian

follows the English sequence without replacing the parable with a smoother invented paraphrase.

10. 6:8 The passage lists titles or brief labels for parables. Resemblances to individual Gospel stories do not securely identify every narrative mentioned. The number eighteen at 8.3 is retained.

11. 7:6 The odd ending “reign — or not reign” follows the surviving wording at 10.5–6. It has not been silently replaced with a more conventional statement.

12. 7:8 Mattison chooses “gone up from the earth” but notes “come down to the earth” as an alternative. The direction is disputed; Russian retains the first rendering.

13. 7:10 The parenthetical “God” identifies pronouns in the English translation; Coptic 10.35–38 uses third-person pronominal forms. Their referent affects the interpretation of the blessing. Russian follows Mattison’s choice and retains the parentheses.

14. 8:2 The abrupt move from promised forgiveness to a warning against needing an advocate belongs to the dialogue. Peter explicitly complains of such reversals later (section 10:1); Russian does not smooth them away.

15. 8:4 At 11.30–35 the text presents a series of rhetorical questions. For the phrase about prayers, Mattison notes “not persuaded by prayers” as an alternative. His main reading is retained here; no negation has been silently inserted.

16. 8:6 At 12.16–17 the ordinal “fourth” appears without the noun “stage.” Parentheses preserve the translator’s explanation. A connection with faith, love, and works (6:9; manuscript 8.11–15) is a possible interpretation, not an explicit manuscript gloss.

17. 9:2 The beginning of page 13 after “have not seen” is damaged. Marcion proposes “but believed”; following the English edition, “[but …]” is retained rather than presenting the full restoration as surviving text.

18. 10:2 After addressing James, the text shifts to plural “you have not known me” (14.1–2). Russian preserves this shift; it does not make James a plural referent.

19. 11:1 “Heard with our ears and saw with our eyes” retains the unusual combination of verbs and imagery. The sequence at 15.8–26 is heart, then

mind (nous), then spirit (pneuma); these are not collapsed into one generic term.

20. 11:2 Russian retains “saw with our eyes” from Coptic 15.17. Mattison’s English omits these words in this sentence, although it includes them in the preceding paragraph.

21. 12:2 In the closing address Coptic returns to the singular: the letter is directed to one recipient. Russian therefore returns to singular “you,” whereas the preceding discourse addressed the disciples in the plural.

22. 12:3 The final “made his children” directly follows the Coptic expression at 16.29–30. English explains it as “(accepted as) children”; its parentheses are the translator’s clarification, not a manuscript gap.

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