

# **The Book of James**

## **James, the Lord's Brother**

Lesson #1 for October 4, 2014

Scriptures: John 7:2-5; 1 Corinthians 15:5-7; James 1:3; 2:5; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Matthew 7:24-27.

1. It would be informative if we could be transported back in time and spend at least a few weeks living under the conditions in Judea and Galilee in the 1<sup>st</sup> century as Jesus and His disciples did. However, that is not possible. The next best thing is to do our best to try to understand their situation. During the first one or two decades after the death of Jesus, the Christian church was limited almost exclusively to Jewish Christians and especially those living in Palestine. But, eventually, a very remarkable thing happened in Antioch of Syria. Read Acts 11:19-21. For the first time, the gospel was intentionally preached to Gentiles. Soon, Barnabas came from Jerusalem; and later, with the help of Paul, the church at Antioch grew by leaps and bounds.
2. Not long thereafter, Barnabas and Paul were anointed by the church at Antioch and sent out to evangelize both Jews and Gentiles. During that first two decades or so, the Christian church with its headquarters at Jerusalem was going through some very tough growing pains. After persecution began immediately after the stoning of Stephen, (Acts 8:1) most of the Christians in Judea scattered. But, wherever they went, they preached the gospel to Jews only. During this turbulent time, a man by the name of James rose to a prominent position in the Christian church. What do we know about that James? Was he the one who wrote the letter in the New Testament named after him?
3. It seems clear that this James was well-known by Christians because at the beginning of his book, he simply mentioned his name and assumed that everyone knew who he was.

The English name James is derived from the Latin "Jacobus," coming from the Greek 'Ἰάκωβος, which is a transliteration of the Hebrew name "Jacob" (יַעֲקֹב). Although James identifies himself as the author of his epistle, we do not have the specific identity of this individual within the Epistle, but must rely upon Church history. There were at least four men by the name of James in the New Testament: (1) James the father of Judas [Judas the disciple of Jesus but not Judas Iscariot; this disciple was also known as Thaddaeus] (Luke 6:16), (2) James the apostle, the son of Alphaeus (Luke 6:15), (3) James, the apostle, son of Zebedee and brother to John the apostle, who was martyred in A.D. 44 (see Acts 12:1-2), and (4) James the brother of the Lord (Matt 13:55).—Everett, G. H. (2011). *The Epistle of James* (p. 9). Gary Everett. [Content in brackets is added.]

4. For some reason, the early English translators of the Bible decided that in order to distinguish the "Jacobs" of the New Testament from the "Jacobs" of the Old Testament, every Jacob in the New Testament would be called James instead of Jacob. So, the James that we are talking about in this series of lessons never heard the name James; his real name was Jacob.
5. Of the four people in the New Testament by the name of James, almost all scholars agree that the James who is mentioned in the book of Acts and also the author of the book by that name was the older brother of Jesus, apparently a son of Joseph by a former marriage. He was probably the firstborn son of Joseph because in both Matthew 13:55 and

Mark 6:3, he is mentioned first in the list of names although it could be that he is mentioned first because he had become so prominent in the church before those Gospels were written. Do we know anything about the other brothers of Jesus besides James (really Jacob) and Jude (really Judah)?

6. There are two common reasons why we believe that James and His brothers and sisters were older than Jesus. 1) While on the cross, Jesus entrusted the care of His mother to John His beloved disciple. (John 19:26-27) This would have been very unlikely if Mary had other children. 2) In Mark 3:21,31, Jesus's mother and brothers acted as if it was their responsibility to tell Him what to do. In an oriental setting, this would be virtually impossible if Jesus's brothers were younger than He was.
7. It is quite clear from these passages (Compare John 7:2-5.) that His own family did not accept Him as the Messiah during His early life or even during His ministry. Why do you think that was?

It was a false conception of the Messiah's work, and a lack of faith in the divine character of Jesus, that had led His brothers to urge Him to present Himself publicly to the people at the Feast of Tabernacles.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 485.4-486.0.

8. It was and is very difficult for people to change the paradigm in which they have come to believe.
9. Read 1 Corinthians 15:5-7 and Acts 1:14. Incredibly, following His death and resurrection, the brothers of Jesus seemed to have been convinced about His Messiahship. What do you think could have brought about such a change? Jesus died one of the most despised kinds of death that one can possibly imagine. Why would His brothers accept Him as a result of that rather than denouncing or disowning Him? In any case, James—apparently the oldest of His brothers—had a real change of heart. Read Acts 12:16-17; 15:13-14,19; 21:17-19; Galatians 1:18-19; 2:9. Based on these verses, it seems clear that James was regarded as the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem.
10. Assuming that this James was the older brother of Jesus, what evidence is there that he was the author of the book we call James?
  1. The author identified himself only by the name of James. (James 1:1) He expected everyone to know who he was. He did not need to further identify himself.
  2. The author declined to call himself an apostle of Jesus Christ. If he had been one of the disciples, he would probably have used that title as Peter did in his letters.
  3. There are striking similarities between the vocabulary in the epistle of James and the vocabulary of the letter ascribed to him. See Acts 15:13-21. (The letter is recorded in Acts 15:23-29.)
  4. The emphasis of the letter of James seems to be on religious piety and living the religious life. This is consistent with extra-biblical materials talking about James the Bishop of Jerusalem. See, for example, Eusebius. (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.1-25)
  5. In this letter the author spoke with an authoritative tone which would be appropriate for the Bishop of Jerusalem.

Most scholars accept that these reasons are sufficient enough to believe that James, the step-brother of Jesus and the Bishop or Elder of Jerusalem, was the author.

11. What about the external evidence for the book of James? First, we should note that James was the first of the so-called "catholic epistles" of the New Testament. By *catholic* we do

not mean that it was associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, we mean that it was a “general” epistle or letter addressed to all churches and not just to an individual or an individual church. These small catholic epistles did not receive the wide circulation that the letters of Paul and the Gospels received in early church history. This probably explains why they were not as often quoted by the early church fathers.

12. However, by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the book of James was generally accepted by Christian churches. Iranaeus (A.D. 130-200) clearly quoted from James 2:23. Tertullian (A.D. 160-225) called Abraham “a friend of God” a phrase which is found only in the book of James in the New Testament and in one or two places in the Old Testament. (See 2 Chronicles 20:7, and compare Isaiah 41:8.) Origen (A.D. 185-254) referred to the epistle of James on a number of occasions making some of the clearest, earliest, and direct quotations from the book of James. On one occasion, Origen actually mentioned the phrase, *the book of James*.
13. However, some other early church leaders mentioned the fact that the authenticity of the book of James and its authorship was still disputed. Gregory Nazianzen (A.D. 329-389) actually called James “the brother of God.” Finally, in 397 A.D., the Council of Carthage gave its approval to the book of James, ratifying it as a canonical book of the New Testament. That cemented its place in Scripture.
14. Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37-100) mentioned that James was the Bishop of Jerusalem and that he was later stoned to death, probably around A.D. 62-63.

Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned. (*Antiquities* 20.9.1, see also Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.21–24) [Note that brackets are present in the original.]

15. Eusebius also preserved the narrative of Hegesippus, which gives us the lengthy story of the martyrdom of James. (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.4–18) Eusebius tells us that the death of James took place just before Vespasian besieged the city of Jerusalem.

So they went up and threw down the just man, and said to each other, ‘Let us stone James the Just.’ And they began to stone him, for he was not killed by the fall; but he turned and knelt down and said, ‘I entreat thee, Lord God our Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ And while they were thus stoning him one of the priests of the sons of Rechab, the son of the Rechabites, who are mentioned by Jeremiah the prophet, cried out, saying, ‘Cease, what do ye? The just one prayeth for you.’ And one of them, who was a fuller, took the club with which he beat out clothes and struck the just man on the head. And thus he suffered martyrdom. And they buried him on the spot, by the temple, and his monument still remains by the temple. He became a true witness, both to Jews and Greeks, that Jesus is the Christ. And immediately Vespasian besieged them. (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.15–18)

Vespasian, general and later emperor of Rome, first besieged Jerusalem in A.D. 66. His son Titus destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

16. Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate (A.D. 342 to 420), wrote about the holy manner

of James's life and the history of his death as a martyr. He is said to have been the leader of the church in Jerusalem for thirty years up until the time of his death.

[He was] "cast down from a pinnacle of the temple, his legs broken, but still half alive, raising his hands to heaven he said, 'Lord forgive them for they know not what they do.' Then struck on the head by the club of a fuller such a club as fullers are accustomed to wring out garments with—he died." (*Lives of Illustrious Men* 2)—Everett, G. H. (2011). *The Epistle of James* (pp. 22–25). Gary Everett.

A fuller's club is similar to a baseball bat.

17. It seems clear that James was chosen by the Christians as the Bishop or Elder of Jerusalem. Was that simply because he was the stepbrother of Jesus? Could it have been because he was older in age? Could it have been because of his close association over his life with Jesus? Did they believe that he should have that position for that reason? Or, could it have been because he was less well-known to the Jewish leaders and would be able to move around Jerusalem without calling as much attention to himself?
18. While we applaud James for standing firmly for the right as recorded in Acts 15, how do we explain his apparent capitulation to the Jewish believers when Paul and his group arrived in Jerusalem in A.D. 58 with that enormous offering? Shouldn't James have prevented them from encouraging Paul to take on that ceremonial task which led to his arrest and, eventually, his death? See *Acts of the Apostles* 403-406.
19. Unfortunately, many modern Christians look down on the book of James because of the statements made by Martin Luther. But, we cannot depend on Martin Luther for all our understanding of Christianity.

Luther and his co-laborers accomplished a noble work for God; but, coming as they did from the Roman Church, having themselves believed and advocated her doctrines, it was not to be expected that they would discern all these errors. It was their work to break the fetters of Rome, and to give the Bible to the world; yet there were important truths which they failed to discover, and grave errors which they did not renounce. Most of them continued to observe the Sunday with other papal festivals. They did not, indeed, regard it as possessing divine authority, but believed that it should be observed as a generally accepted day of worship.—Ellen G. White, *4 Spirit of Prophecy* 180.1; SR 353.2.

20. Read James 1:3; 2:5,22-23; 5:15. What is the correct understanding of the relationship between faith and works? Wouldn't it be correct to agree with Jesus that faith produces works? Didn't Jesus say that a tree is known by its fruits? (Matthew 12:33) In actual fact, the small book of James refers to faith many more times than it talks about works! So, in our day, how do we demonstrate that our faith works? Shouldn't it be shown by our faithful Bible study, prayer, witnessing, and loving and caring for others—especially family members but also other believers?
21. Read James 1:1; Acts 11:19-21; and 1 Peter 2:9-12. What do you think James was referring to when he talked about the "twelve tribes"? What tribes? The "ten" tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel were taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and were scattered throughout their empire and were never heard from again. We need to remember that James was writing at a time when virtually all Christians were Jewish Christians.
22. Why was it necessary for the council in Jerusalem to be called? (Acts 15:1-29) Remember

that this problem arose because the church at Antioch had anointed Paul and Barnabas to evangelize Gentiles without first requiring them to become Jews and following all the Jewish rites. This alarmed some of the believers (from the party of the Pharisees-Acts 15:5) who feared that the Christian church might become dominated by Gentile believers!

23. A number of scholars have noted how closely the teachings of the book of James parallel the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels and especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Read James 1:22 with Matthew 7:24-27. Compare James 3:12 with Matthew 7:16. And compare James 4:12 with Matthew 7:1. What do you see in these passages? The book of James was not focusing on how to become a Christian as Paul was when speaking to so many non-Christian Gentiles; James was focusing on how to live the Christian life.
24. What a contrast this was from his attitude toward Jesus during His childhood and youth.

His brothers often brought forward the philosophy of the Pharisees, which was threadbare and hoary with age, and presumed to think that they could teach Him who understood all truth, and comprehended all mysteries. They freely condemned that which they could not understand. Their reproaches probed Him to the quick, and His soul was wearied and distressed. They avowed faith in God, and thought they were vindicating God, when God was with them in the flesh, and they knew Him not.

These things made His path a thorny one to travel. So pained was Christ by the misapprehension in His own home that it was a relief to Him to go where it did not exist.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 326.

25. Have you ever wondered what it would have been like to be a brother or sister of Jesus? Would you have been embarrassed by Him? Would you have fought with Him? Would you have felt uneasy around Him? Do you think Jesus had a lot of sibling rivalry?
26. We believe that we know something about James the older brother of Jesus and a little about Judah, His second oldest brother, who also became a Christian and wrote the small book of Jude. But, what about His other two brothers and His sisters? Do we know anything about them? Did they become Christians?
27. In our daily lives, what is the relationship between our professed beliefs and our actions? Do our actions represent our real beliefs as opposed to our professed beliefs? The small book of James, which was written about a decade and a half after the death of Jesus, is important for Christians in its understanding and description of moving from doubt and disbelief to belief and faithful action.
28. One other aspect of the context in which Jesus and later James, His elder brother, ministered can be seen from the following paragraph from the *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, page 13.

Two thousand years ago when the Roman Empire ruled the Western world, pretenders to the Jewish throne, madmen, and false messiahs abounded. Simon of Peraea (also known as “the son of Joseph”), a former slave of Herod the Great, rebelled and claimed to be king, successfully burning and plundering a palace and several royal homes before he was captured and killed. Athronges, a tall, strong shepherd, led a temporarily successful rebellion against Herod Archelaus and the Romans. Although claiming to be the Messiah, Athronges was cruel to Romans and Jews alike. Then there was Judas of Galilee who preached that God alone was Israel’s ruler. He led a violent resistance against the Roman census, claiming that Jews should

not pay taxes to the Romans. Josephus, the well-known Jewish historian, links this group with the Zealots and blames them for the Great Jewish Revolt that led to the destruction of Herod's Temple (also known as the "The Second Temple"). Judas of Galilee is mentioned in the book of Acts, where he is identified as a failed Messianic leader (see Acts 5:37).

29. Didn't Jesus warn us in Matthew 24 to be aware of false prophets and false messiahs? Are the events of the first coming of Jesus being repeated in our day? Under the circumstances, is it any surprise that some people were skeptical about Jesus's claims about Himself?
30. Finally, notice this important point from the Dead Sea Scrolls as noted in the *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, page 14.

As a result of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now know that the phrase "works of the law" was a technical expression referring to specific works that distinguished "genuine" Jews from Gentiles. [Martin G. Abegg Jr., "4QMMT, Paul, and 'Works of the Law' " in *The Bible at Qumran: Text, Shape, and Interpretation*, ed. Peter W. Flint, Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 203-16. James D. G. Dunn, "4QMMT and Galatians," *New Testament Studies*, vol. 43 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 147-153.]

31. Paul talked much about the works of the law. (See Romans 3:20,28; Galatians 2:16; 3:2,5,10. Compare Deuteronomy 27:26.) Are these the works that James was focusing on? Apparently not. James was not talking about such details involving circumcision, etc., but rather about living a practical Christian life. In this series of lessons, we will see what James recommended. Do you think we have something to learn?

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