

James

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James – Introduction

- Poor James has always come with a bit of a question mark. First, there is the confusion as to *which* James was the author. Was it James the brother of John or James the son of Alphaeus or James the head of the church in Jerusalem said to be the half-brother of Jesus? Then, there has long been the question as to whether the author was one of the James or just someone claiming to be a James to give the letter authority. The first collection of books deemed to be Scriptural was called the Muratorian Canon, which came out around 170 AD. James is not included. Later, around 350 AD there was a collection of tracts from the early church Fathers known as the Codex Corbeiensis. James is included here, but not in any of the 7,258 New testament quotations by Tertullian, who was the church's leading theologian in the mid-200's. Humanly speaking how James made it into the Bible was that the book had two important advocates. The first was Jerome, who translated the Bible from Greek to Latin (the Old Testament was translated previously from Hebrew to Greek in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC). Jerome stated that it was the brother of the Lord who wrote the epistle, but that he was aware that some believed that it was written by another using James' name. The issue was settled by the other big advocate, Augustine. He presided over the Synod of Hippo in 393 AD and the Council of Carthage in 397 AD where the final form of the Bible was set. At those two meetings the Book of James was locked in with James the Just, the brother of Christ and the head of the Jerusalem church, as the author. It took about the same time for the Eastern Orthodox Church to include James in its final Bible and here too it was largely because the book had two big advocates, Origen and Eusebius (who wrote the history of the early church). Oddly, the Bible that was the last to include James was the Syriac Bible. Assuming that James was writing in Palestine, this would have been under the authority of the Syrian church based in Damascus. The debate on James there went all the way into the 8th century. After that there was no real question as to the authorship or validity of James until the Protestant Reformation. John Calvin believed that James the son of Alphaeus was the author. Martin Luther objected to the legalistic theology of the book and the way it was misused by the Catholic Church at the time, calling it an "epistle full of straw". He didn't exclude James from his German translation but he did move it (along with Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation) to the end of the Bible.
- We know from the gospels that the brothers of Jesus were not part of his followers (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3; John 7:3-9). John 7:5 plainly says, "For not even his brothers were believing in Him". But between the crucifixion and the book of Acts, something significant happened, for we find in Acts 1:14 that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and His brothers were there gathered with church immediately after the Lord's ascension into Heaven. We find in 1 Corinthians 15:7, where Paul is giving a chronological order of the appearances of the resurrected Christ, that the Lord appeared to James. No other comment is given anywhere in scripture about that appearance. In an early non-biblical writing known as "The Gospel

According to the Hebrews”, there is the strange story of James having a Thomas-like encounter with the Risen Christ. Having had stated he would not eat bread again until he should see Jesus risen and alive, James is confronted by the Risen Christ who commands that a table and bread be brought. “He took bread and blessed and broke it and gave it unto James the Just and said unto him, 'My brother, eat thy bread, for the Son of Man is risen from among them that sleep.’” We are never told the names of the two Jesus walked with on the road to Emmaus, but that it was when Jesus broke the bread in their home that they recognized Him. Perhaps James was one of the two?

- Whatever it was that happened, the appearance of Jesus to James changed everything. James went from a non-believing enemy of Jesus to one of the pillars of the church (Galatians 2:9). It was to James that Peter sent news of his escape from prison in Acts 12:17. It is only Peter and James that the newly converted Paul meets with in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19). And it is to James that Paul is bringing the offering from the European churches for the relief of the Jerusalem church in Acts 21:18-25. It is James, acting as head of the Jerusalem church, who settles the question of how to incorporate the Gentiles into the church at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15.
- There are no less than two ancient accounts of how James died. Both Eusebius and the Jewish historian Josephus tell the story of how the Roman procurator Festus (Acts 25 and 26) had died and before a new procurator could arrive, the High priest Ananus took advantage of the opportunity and had James arrested and ordered him to be stoned to death just as Stephen had been killed. When James wouldn't die as he should he was clubbed to death and buried on the spot where he died just outside the Temple. Josephus' story puts James' death in 62 AD. Eusebius' story, taken from an earlier historian known as Hegesippus, places the death in 66 AD and makes it the pretext for the siege of Jerusalem by Vespasian who saw the murder as one more disregard of Roman law by the Jewish leaders.
- Hegesippus' story is lengthy but consistent with the New testament view that James never waived from his Jewish orthodoxy (Acts 21:18-25). It is this same sort of legalism that we do see in the Epistle of James and that Martin Luther so strenuously objected to.
- As the head of the Jerusalem church any epistle from James would be very general, given out to the whole church, just as this epistle is. Further, there would be nothing in the letter that a good Jew would not accept and this certainly meets that criteria. This epistle is the perfect word for the Jewish Christians of the mid-first century and the Word of us to God in terms of our ethics and how we are to live our day to day lives as believers.