

# Introduction of James

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## Authorship, Date, and recipients of James' epistle

### Summary

It is believed that James' epistle is one of the earliest writings of the New Testament. Likely it was written before the Jerusalem Council of 50 AD to Jewish Christians dispersed throughout the Roman Empire in response to an increase of Jewish persecution of Christians. Scripture tells us that after the death of Stephen at the hands of Jews, *"That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria .... Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word"* (Acts 8:1,4). This dispersion happened around 35 AD<sup>1</sup>. As the Jewish Christians settled in various places they shared the gospel wherever they went establishing Jewish Christian communities in Rome, Alexandria, Cyprus, Greece and Asia Minor. These early Christian believers did not have the support of established churches to help and encourage them through difficult times. James, a leader in the Jerusalem church, filled the role as shepherd to the Jewish Christians abroad. Quite possibly when Peter departed Jerusalem, leaving the Church in the hands of James<sup>2</sup> in approximately 44 AD<sup>3</sup>, Peter traveled to some of these communities.

### Author

So, which James is the writer of this epistle? Our author must fill several criteria. First, the epistle speaks with authority and spiritual maturity. The author of the epistle had to be someone with the authority to advise, counsel and rebuke other Christians. Acts 15 refers to a James who appears to be a leader or pillar of the Jerusalem church. He speaks wisely and is deferred to by the apostles. It is believed that the James of Acts 15 is the one who wrote the epistle as the language and style are similar. One last clue we have to the identity of James is Paul's reference in Galatians 1:19, where he calls the James in Jerusalem "James the Lord's brother". The New Testament mentions a number of James's. There are five men by the name of James to whom this letter could be attributed. With a little careful research it can be narrowed down to one.

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<sup>1</sup> NIV Life Application Bible (NIV LAB)

<sup>2</sup> Acts 12:17

<sup>3</sup> NIV LAB

The first James mentioned in the gospels is of course James, the brother of John, the son of Zebedee. Later he becomes known as “James the Great”. This James is one of the 12 disciples, later apostles, and close friend and follower of Jesus. It was to these brothers that Jesus gave the name “Sons of Thunder”<sup>4</sup>. He was also counted as one of the four members of the inner circle of friends of the Lord. Unfortunately James the Apostle was killed by Herod Agrippa in 44 AD at the same time as Peter’s arrest according to Acts 12:1-3:

*About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.*

Upon Peter’s escape he instructs the believers to relate all that has happened to him to James (12:17). This must be another James as certainly he knows that his fellow apostle has been killed by Herod Agrippa. James the Apostle does not appear to figure prominently in the book of Acts which records the growth of the early church. It is not likely that he is the author of the epistle.

The next James to consider is James the son of Alphaeus mentioned in Mark 3:18 as one of the disciples:

*So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and **James son of Alphaeus**, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.*

Little is known about this James and little is mentioned of him in Scripture. He becomes known as “James the Less” to differentiate him from James the brother of John, a much more prominent figure in the early church. He does not appear again in the Gospels, the book of Acts or any other New Testament scripture.

Our third James is “James the father of Judas” (not Iscariot). He is mentioned in Luke 6:16. He is not mentioned in the New Testament other than in this listing of the twelve disciples of which his son is one, but not himself. He does not figure prominently in the early church.

James number four is James a son of Mary who married Cleopas, and is the brother of Joseph (or Joses, depending on your translation). He is mentioned in Matthew 27:56 by way of his mother who stood at the foot of the cross: “*Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee*”. Again, little is mentioned of this James in scripture nor does he appear to figure prominently in the records of the early church. Some have linked him with “James the Less”, son of Alphaeus,

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 3:17 “James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder)”

although there is no certainty. He is not likely to have been the author of the epistle. Although, there is one point in his favor: it is believed that Mary the wife of Cleopas is Jesus' aunt, making this James and his brother Joseph (or Joses) Jesus' cousins. While a translation of the Greek term for 'brother' also allows for the term 'relation', it is not the primary translation of *adelphos*<sup>5</sup>.

Finally we have James the (half or step) brother of the Lord mentioned repeatedly in the gospels, the book of Acts and other New Testament scriptures.<sup>6</sup> In your homework you will delve more deeply into multiple scripture references that appear to support the idea that this James is the one who became the leader of the Jerusalem church after Peter. This conclusion is further supported by similarities in use of Greek in both the epistle and the speech and letter of James mentioned in Acts 15. The strongest evidence outside scripture for this James to be the author of the epistle and leader of the church comes from church tradition. Origen, Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, Augustine, and many other early writers support this view.<sup>7</sup> Origen was the first to identify the author of this epistle as James the Lord's brother.<sup>8</sup>

Taking both sacred scripture and tradition into consideration we come to the conclusion that the author of this epistle was James the leader of the church in Jerusalem as recorded in the book of Acts. He was called "James, the brother of the Lord" by Paul. He was given the names "James the Just", "James the Righteous", "James of Jerusalem" and "James *Adelphotheos*" (translation: James the brother of God). He was the first bishop of Jerusalem. He died a martyr's death either in 62 or 69 AD depending upon whose history you read.

## Date

The 1<sup>st</sup> Century historian Flavius Josephus records James' death in 62 AD. The epistle then would have had to be written prior to that date. Also no mention of the Jerusalem Council of 49/50AD is made in the epistle. It seems most likely the epistle was written sometime between 45 and 48, which coincides with James leadership in Jerusalem. James' epistle is thought to be one of the earliest writings of the New Testament, pre-dating Paul's letters. Taking into consideration scriptural evidence of Acts and Galatians, Paul held James in high respect giving no credence to the idea that there was animosity between the two men. Romans is not a refutation of the epistle as some have thought. Paul writes about salvation by faith from God's perspective while James writes about faith revealed in good deeds from man's perspective.

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<sup>5</sup> *Adelphos*, meaning literally "a brother of the womb", but also as a more distant relation in a more figurative sense, similar to the way "father" can be applied as a "fore-father". Can also be applied figuratively as "brothers" in Christ or "brethren". Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 13:58; Mark 3:21, 3:32; John 7:1-9; Acts 1: 12-14, 12:17; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19, 2:9.

<sup>7</sup> Bible Knowledge Commentary (BKC)

<sup>8</sup> New American Commentary (NAC)

## Recipients

This epistle is thoroughly Jewish in its use of language and imagery. It pulls its authority from the Prophets, beauty from the Psalms, concepts and terminology from the Torah. This letter, although written in Greek, was meant for a Jewish audience. It is directed to the “*To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*” (James 1:1), Jewish Christians scattered across the Roman Empire.

## James’ teaching based on the teachings of Jesus – Sermon on the Mount

James’ teaching recorded in this epistle are drawn straight from the teachings of Jesus more than any other NT writer. His language, use of imagery and descriptions all reflect the stories and teachings of his brother and drawn from the daily life of fishing and agriculture prominent in the upbringing of both men. Jesus constantly taught and lived the concept of loving his neighbor – meeting his neighbor’s needs.

# A Public Messiah

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## *Feeding of the 5000: Jews anticipate a public Messiah*

John 6:1-15 and Mark 6: 30-44 record the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 with slightly different details. When we look at the two records side by side an interesting sub-context arises. Take a few minutes to read each passage, and make a mental note of their slight differences. A weary Jesus pulls ashore along the Sea of Galilee to throngs of people following him. Men, women and children who had all assembled to hear him preach and see him perform miracles. But just before this miraculous event, Mark tells us something else happened: “*As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd...*”<sup>9</sup> He had compassion because they were like the lost sheep of Ezekiel 34:1-11:

*The word of the Lord came to me: <sup>2</sup> Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup> You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup> You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up*

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 6:34

*the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. <sup>5</sup> So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. <sup>6</sup> My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them... I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.<sup>10</sup>*

Jesus looked out upon the lost and hungry children of Israel and saw his Father's beloved possession, his flock untended, unloved, unprotected. The shepherds of Israel, the Temple leaders, the scribes, the Pharisees neglected the people of Israel who were starved for a word from the Lord, starved for a true man of God. He looked out upon them with heartfelt compassion *"and he began to teach them many things...."*<sup>11</sup> What do you think he started teaching? He began teaching them about the Kingdom of God. He fed their souls. And when he had finished, he fed them. But before doing so *"he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties."* (Mark 6:39-40). The crowds were seated in groups of 100s and 50s like military cohorts, and then he fed more than 5000 people on five barley loaves and two small fish.

The lesson learned by the people was not the lesson Jesus had intended. They learned Jesus will miraculously feed them, heal them, lead them (and according to John 6:15) he will be their King. They want a Moses who will provide them with Manna and defeat the Egyptians who oppressed them and enslaved them for 400 years. They want a David who will defeat the Philistines and provide for them when their own King Saul wouldn't. They wanted a Messiah who would stand up against Rome and lead them to a victorious new kingdom of self-rule, a new golden age. They knew the promise of ages ago when the Lord promised Moses to do just such a thing. It says in Deuteronomy 18:15, *"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet."* The only kind of Messiah they knew to expect would be in the likes of a Moses or David, defeating a physical, political oppressor. Jesus was a type of Messiah beyond their expectation and experience. And that is what he was trying to teach. He wasn't a messiah sent to lead Israel against Rome, he is a different kind of King – one opening the gates to the eternal promise land, the Kingdom of Heaven.

In John 6:22-66, Jesus continues his teaching about the eternal kingdom and the bread of life. In feeding the 5000 he provided miraculous bread from heaven, much along the lines of the Manna the Israelites received from Heaven. While Moses was human intermediary between God and the Israelites providing bread so they don't physically die, Jesus is God truly providing the bread for physical nourishment, and offering himself as the

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<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel 34:1-6,10-11

<sup>11</sup> Mark 6:34b

true bread from heaven so that man may not *spiritually* die. In verses 25-27 we see the crowds again seek out Jesus looking for more signs and wonders, but mostly looking to be fed. Jesus tells them *“Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”* The people think they must find favor with God by *doing* his work, not understanding that the “doing” is “believing” in the one he sent (v.28). Then they ask for miraculous signs in order to believe that Jesus is the one God sent, they want him to provide this miraculous bread that will keep them alive (v.31). His followers think the bread is a supernatural bread like Manna that will keep them alive (v.34). Jesus attempts to teach that *he* is the Bread of Life (v.35-40). People grumble against him (v.41-42). How can he claim to come down from Heaven, he’s the son of Joseph, we know his family. He continues to teach that he is the bread of life – his teachings are spiritual food and his life is the ransom for eternal life. Horrified that they will have to eat his flesh, they think he must be crazy, and certainly not the Davidic or Mosaic Messiah they are looking for and abandon him (v.60-66). Only a small following of his disciples remain.

According to John 7:1 Jesus stays in Galilee avoiding Judea because the Jews there want to kill him. Which Jews and why are they trying to kill Jesus are the questions we must next address if we are to understand fully what happens next in John 7, a significant part of the homework this week. We must turn back to Jesus’ time in Jerusalem to find out what happened. John 5:16-47 records the story of Jesus healing a lame man by the Pool of Bethesda. At which time he gets into a debate with some of the religious leaders in Jerusalem<sup>12</sup>. Jesus claims to be the Son of Man<sup>13</sup> before those religious leaders after healing the man on the Sabbath. V. 18 tells us that Jesus was not only working miracles on the Sabbath (breaking the Law, and any holy man worth his salt wouldn’t break the Torah) and he is claiming equality with God – blasphemy to the Jewish leadership. Jesus defends his position by saying he could only accomplish the work (miracles) if the Father permitted it.<sup>14</sup> If the Father was against healing on the Sabbath, Jesus wouldn’t have done it. His next defense is citing two witnesses who testified on his behalf. (His own testimony would be invalid according to Jewish court proceedings). In verses 32-35, he claims John the Baptist testified on his behalf: *“There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.*

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<sup>12</sup> We must bear in mind that the religious leaders in Jerusalem were also the political leaders overseeing the people of Israel. Rome installed Herod as King and Pilate as governor, but the temple leaders – the High Priest and those in power around him were picked by the Romans and enjoyed their power and prestige at the behest of the Romans. They served not the Jewish people so much as they served themselves and Rome by keeping peace in Jerusalem and preventing any “religious” uprisings.

<sup>13</sup> A commonly known title associated or equated with Messiah

<sup>14</sup> John 7:19-23

While John lived and preached, they were willing to listen and except his words as coming from God. John prophesied about one coming after him who would be greater – Jesus.

Next Jesus cites his works as testimony proving that he is the Son of Man. He says, *“But I have a testimony greater than John’s. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form”* (v.36-37). He claims that through his works, or miracles, these religious leaders have both seen and heard God through him.

The Jews are further enraged when he tells them they don’t recognize his identity as the Son of Man because they don’t have the love of God in their hearts (v.42-44). He goes on to tell them they will stand accused by Moses, whom they claim they faithfully follow as the writer of the Torah. The Pharisees are outraged because they prided themselves on being the true followers of their ancestor Moses. They were trying to follow every one of his laws to the letter, and they even added some of their own. Jesus' warning that Moses would accuse them stung them to fury. Moses wrote about Jesus<sup>15</sup>, yet the religious leaders refused to believe Jesus when he came.<sup>16</sup>

The point of reviewing this discourse in John 5 is that it clearly tells us that Jesus is a known miracle worker, his words lift up the oppressed, and he calls himself the “Son of God/Man” which is a known Messianic title. For the crowd he is addressing in the Feeding of the 5000 incident he is the Messiah they are looking for, and he appears to be exactly the “political rebel” the leadership in Jerusalem fears. This is the reason they want him dead and want to kill him. After the “Bread of Life” incident he loses his following and would have no supports or protectors from the Jewish leadership. The very fact he had so many supports among the Jewish people is what protected him from the Jewish leaders. They feared the population would revolt if harm came to their leader. All of this is the background needed for understanding John 7:1-9 in our homework this week. Jesus’ brothers ridicule him. They tell him that if he is the messiah, a political figure or national hero, he should be in Jerusalem. And if Jesus doesn’t go then he isn’t who he claims to be, he must not be the messiah. They don’t understand that Jesus isn’t a political messiah, he is a personal savior come to lead Israel into the spiritual promise land – the kingdom of heaven.

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<sup>15</sup> Genesis 3:15; Numbers 21:9; 24:17; Deuteronomy 18:15

<sup>16</sup> Life Application Bible Notes