

# The Story of Jacob

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*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:  
Greetings. (James 1:1)*

The name James is the anglicized version of Jacob, or Jacov. In Hebrew it is Ya‘aqōb<sup>1</sup>, in Greek it is Iakōbos<sup>2</sup>. His predecessor is none other than the Old Testament Patriarch Jacob, son of Issac, son of Abraham. In looking at some details from the life of the Patriarch Jacob, we will find insight into who God called to minister to the Jewish Christians of the Diaspora.

The story of Jacob takes up half of the book of Genesis – we’ll just look briefly at the story of Jacob and Esau, and then for a moment or two at the story of Jacob receiving his new name. The story of Jacob and Esau is found in Genesis 25: 21-34. Turn to this passage and read the story before we progress further.

Notice the birth story: The twins were born and Jacob comes out grasping Esau’s heel. The name Jacob means “One who supplants or undermines”<sup>3</sup>, “he grasps the heel” or “he cheats, supplants”<sup>4</sup>. In our story we have Jacob tricking Esau into give him his birthright. A birthright was a special honor or privilege given to the first born son. Its provision gave that son a double portion of the estate as his inheritance along with his father’s special blessing which included the promise from the Lord that began with Abraham. That promise was that Abraham would be the father of a great nation, and that nation would run through the family line through the first born son. Deuteronomy 21:15-17 protects the rights of the firstborn son; the father cannot give the inheritance away. Jacob extracts this special provision through deceit and trickery. It was something he desired and his brother did not esteem. Interesting to note both “Jacobs” had an issue with birth-rights....If Jacob was truly a “brother” (rather than cousin) of Jesus, it appears that he too had an issue of “birthright” in the gospel narrative. Jesus was the one chosen by God, and it appears that James’ actions and behavior was motivated by perhaps hurt pride, anger or jealousy in those gospel records.

Returning to the Patriarch Jacob, In Genesis 32:22-30 we have the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel of the Lord. (A possible theophany?<sup>5</sup>) The two struggle all night long until the angel gains victory by dislocating Jacob’s hip. Jacob further submits by giving the angel his name, and

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<sup>1</sup> Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary, also written as Yacob, Yacov, Jakob,

<sup>2</sup> Or the shortened, Iakōb, Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

<sup>3</sup> Hitchcock's Dictionary of Bible Names

<sup>4</sup> Holman Bible Dictionary

<sup>5</sup> “A physical appearance or personal manifestation of a god to a person” —Holman Bible Dictionary

notably the angel retains his superior position by withholding his name when Jacob asks for it. Because of his superior position he gives Jacob a new name: Israel. *"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."*<sup>6</sup> Jacob becomes the next patriarch in the line of Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel and from him are born the twelve sons who will be the fathers of the Twelve Tribes of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, who became the father of the tribes Ephraim and Manasseh, Benjamin, Gad, Asher, Dan and Naphtali.

James, here in the New Testament, addresses his letter to whom? To the 12 tribes scattered across the Roman Empire. *"To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion"* (James 1:1). According to Acts 8:1, after Stephen's death the believers in Jerusalem were scattered. *"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."* James – the second Jacob -- quite appropriately was writing to the Torah-keeping Christian Jews scattered throughout Judea, Samaria and beyond.

James' epistle begins humbly: *"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings."* There is no need to "name drop" or claim his authority through identifying himself the way others identify him as "James, the Lord's brother". Clearly an epistle coming from James in Jerusalem requires no other identification to be accepted abroad. This may point to the fact that everyone already knew who this James was and no introduction or list of credentials was necessary. He is James of Jerusalem, head of the church in Jerusalem. While his greetings appear humble, as we start reading and studying his epistle it becomes quite apparent that his authority is unquestionable.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 32:28 (NRSV)