



# OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

## Who Was James?

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The letter we are studying begins simply: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Jas 1.1). The lack of elaboration suggests that whoever James was, he was well known to his readers and confident in his standing. We may compare his self-identification with Jude who used James’s name in his greeting in an apparent effort to authenticate his authority (Jude 1).

But, however well-known the author was to his original readers, the task of determining his identity is more complicated 2,000 years later. In the Jewish culture that gave rise to Christianity, James was a common name. The NT itself mentions at least four men named James who were potentially prominent enough to have written a letter of this type. All are mentioned or alluded to in Acts 1.13-14 in the list of the disciples who had gathered in the upper room following Jesus’ ascension.

And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and *James* and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, *James* the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of *James*. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his *brothers*.

Other texts tell us that one of Jesus’ brothers was named *James* (cf. Matt 13.55; Mark 6.3). So, which of the men named James mentioned here wrote the letter? Or was it someone else?

Some have suggested that an unknown James wrote the letter or that the writer was another unknown Christian who used James's name to lend authority to the writing. Others contend the attribution to "James" in 1.1 may have been added at a later date. Given both the testimony of extra-biblical writings and the inferential evidence of the NT, it is more likely that one of the four men referred to in Acts 1 was the author (see Moo 2000, 9-14).

Evidence for two of them is slight. The son of Alphaeus, probably the same man as James the younger in Mark 15.40, was one of the twelve, but is mentioned only in texts that list the entire group (Matt 10.3; Mark 3.18; Luke 6.15; Acts 1.13). There is no record of his activities in service to Jesus and it's hard to imagine that he would have had the influence implied in James 1.1. The case for James, the father of the apostle Judas—referred to as Thaddaeus in Matthew 10.3 and Mark 3.18—is weaker still. He is mentioned only in passing in Luke 6.16 and Acts 1.13 to distinguish his son from Judas Iscariot.

The other two men were more prominent and so are more likely candidates to have written the letter. James, son of Zebedee and brother of John, was one of the twelve and, along with Peter and John, part of an inner circle of three who accompanied Jesus at some of the more significant events in his ministry (see Mark 5.37; 9.2; 14.33). Since Peter and John were prominent leaders in the early church, it is reasonable to expect the third member of their group would also be prominent. But in 44 AD, James of Zebedee was executed by King Herod Agrippa I who himself died shortly thereafter (Acts 12.2, 20-23; see Josephus *Antiquities* 19.343-352 for another account of Herod's death). James of Zebedee's death almost certainly excludes him as a possible author of the epistle.<sup>1</sup>

The most likely candidate for authorship, then, is James, the brother of Jesus. Extra-biblical testimony from the early centuries of the Christian era attributes the letter to him (see McCartney 2009, 20-24) and internal evidence from the NT aligns with that affirmation. Matthew 13.55 and Mark 6.3 say that Jesus had a brother named James. Though John 7.5 says Jesus' brothers did not believe in him during his ministry, Acts 1.14 includes them among the believers who had gathered in the upper room. The change in the brothers' thinking that had to have occurred between the events of John 7 and Acts 1 fits with Paul's inclusion of James as one of those who saw Jesus after his resurrection (1 Cor 15.7) and to his reference to a man of prominence named James three times in Galatians: (1) "James the Lord's brother," one of the leaders, along with Cephas,

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<sup>1</sup> References in James to cultural conditions—such as oppression of the poor and weather patterns—align with conditions in Judea and Syria prior to the destruction of Jerusalem (see Jas 5.1-11). Also, if the Dispersion (*διασπορά*, *diaspora*) in James 1.1 has in view the scattering (*διασπείρω*, *diaspeirō*) of Christians after Stephen's death (see Acts 8.1, 4; 11.19), that dispersion occurred before the death of James of Zebedee (see Davids 1982, 17-18, 28-34). So, chronologically, it is possible James of Zebedee could have written the letter. But those conditions also fit other settings; or they could be echoes of common prophetic themes in the OT and Jewish literature (see Johnson 2004, 37-38). James of Zebedee's early death, coupled with the evidence for the Lord's brother, make it virtually certain that Zebedee's son could not have been the author.

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whom Paul visited when he went to Jerusalem after his conversion from persecutor to apostle (Gal 1.19); (2) with Cephas and John as those “who seemed to be pillars” in the Jerusalem church (2.9); and (3) as the one from whom the men who were seeking to impose circumcision on Gentile believers had come (2.12).

These references align with the report by Eusebius (ca. 325 AD) that a man known as James the Just, “the brother of the Lord” and a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church, was martyred for his faith shortly after the death of the Roman governor Festus (ca. 62 AD) because the Jews were disappointed that their plot against Paul had failed (Eusebius, *Church History* 2.23).

It also aligns with the events in Acts 15 and 21. In the latter chapter, when Paul returned to Jerusalem following his third mission tour, James was the leader who welcomed him and advised him to purify himself and pay the expenses for the four men who were taking a vow. Their hope was that by doing so, Paul’s Jewish critics would know there was nothing to the charge that he was teaching Jews to abandon the practice of circumcision and their customs (Acts 21.17-26).

A few years before, when Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders concerning those who tried to impose Jewish customs on Gentile believers in Antioch, James was the leader who announced that Gentiles would not have to follow Jewish ways (Acts 15.13-21). And, though it is a small sample for comparison, the letter issued by the Jerusalem leaders to announce their conclusion about the Gentile matter (vv. 22-29) has several commonalities with the language and circumstances in the epistle of James, indicating that the same man may have written both (see McCartney 2009, 24-26; Moo 2000, 10, for details).

In conclusion, the sum of the evidence indicates that the letter bearing his name was written by James, the brother and servant of Jesus.

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