

# Introduction

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The Epistle of James is the first of the “general Epistles,”<sup>1</sup> so called because these epistles lack a specific address to a community within a given location. Since the “general Epistles” are not identified as being sent to a specific region or community of believers, it is more difficult to reconstruct the historical background and/or situations to which these epistles belong. Yet, when studied carefully, they bear the stamp of authenticity and of being the work of divine inspiration.

That the general Epistles do not contain information as to their specific recipients, this gave rise to speculation of some of the early church fathers as to whether they should be received as Scripture or not. This was true of the Epistle of James, for besides having no designated destination to which the epistle was sent, there were questions about who the author actually was.

Though Origen (184–253 CE) is sometimes interpreted as having some doubt about the canonicity of James because of a comment he made in his Commentary on John,<sup>2</sup> such doubt seems ill-founded since on numerous occasions he cites the Epistle of James as Scripture and does so without hesitation.<sup>3</sup> The fact that James is not listed in the Muratorian Canon should not be given too much weight, for neither are Hebrews or the Petrine Epistles, but this may well be simply because the text of the Muratorian Canon, as we now have it, is in a corrupt state itself.<sup>4</sup>

Eusebius (263–339 CE) does class James among the *Antilegomena* (“spoken against”), those writings which were considered by some as “disputed books,” but he also cites it as though it is genuine Scripture.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, even though there were strong debates about the canonicity

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- 1 The “general Epistles” are also referred to as the “Catholic Epistles,” but this is not to be confused with the “Roman Catholic Church” but rather utilizing the word “catholic” in its primary sense, that is, “universal.” The General Epistles include: James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1 John, and Jude. (Some would also include 2 & 3 John.)
  - 2 *ως εν τη φερομενη Ιακωβου επιστολη ενεγνωμεν* “...as in the supposed epistle of James we inquire...” (Commentary on John 19:6)
  - 3 Cf. *Ad Rom.* 4.1 and *Hom. in Lev.* 2.4. See also *Hom. in Josh.* 7.1. (Taken from Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (IVP, 1970), p. 737, n. 2.)
  - 4 *Ibid.*
  - 5 *Ibid.*, note 3.

of some of the general epistles, including James, the reality is that those epistles which unmistakably bore the essence of inspiration were, by God's sovereign providence, widely accepted by the believing community as having the true marks of the inspired word of God. We most certainly must hold the Epistle of James as being divinely inspired scripture.

### *Authorship*

One of the issues that caused the Epistle of James to be questioned was the sure identity of the author, for James (Ἰάκωβον, *iakōbon*) was a common name among the Jewish people of the 1st century. Most scholars take the author of our epistle to be "James the brother of Yeshua," on the basis of Paul's words in Galatians 1:18–19.

Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Gal 1:18–19)

One might wonder why he did not see the rest of the Twelve. The answer may be either that they were not in Jerusalem at the time, or that they avoided him, still fearing that he was intent upon persecuting The Way (cf. Acts 9:26). On the other hand, Paul may have been "sheepish" about meeting the rest, for his former actions against them were still too current in the memory of the sect, and he may have purposefully avoided them.

That James is referred to as "the Lord's brother" is a clear indication that this had become a well used adjective describing James. A recent ossuary was discovered on which is inscribed "Ya'acov, son of Yosef, brother of Yeshua" and may therefore offer additional credibility that "James the brother of Yeshua" had become a common way of identifying the author of our epistle.<sup>1</sup> When Paul identifies James as "the Lord's brother," he uses the word "Lord," (κύριος, *kurios*) as a well-known title referring specifically to Yeshua.

Further, in Mark 6:3, when referring to the brothers of Yeshua, James

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1 See *Biblical Archaeological Review*, Nov/Dec 2002. Subsequent debate over the authenticity of this find has, for some, drawn a shadow over its usefulness. However, some scholars still maintain its authenticity, and have good reason to do so. See Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries* (Baylor Press, 2003), pp. 112–22.

is mentioned first in the list which might indicate that he was the next born after Yeshua. While some (particularly Roman Catholic scholars) would teach that James and the others mentioned were sons of Joseph from a previous marriage, there is no hint anywhere in the Apostolic Writings that James and the others in Mark 6:3 were anything other than legally full brothers of Yeshua, being the children of Joseph and Mary.

James apparently was unsympathetic to his brother's messianic claims in the years previous to Yeshua's crucifixion (Mark 3:21, 31-5; John 7:5), but the fact that he was among the first witnesses of the resurrection (1Cor 15:7) and named among the disciples following the resurrection (Acts 1:13) indicates that James had come to believe that Yeshua was, indeed, the Messiah promised by Israel's prophets. And by the time of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), James occupied the office of one of the primary leaders in the Jerusalem community of The Way.

Even though the identity of the author of our epistle has been hotly debated down through the centuries and even continues to be debated by some, the majority of evangelical scholars agree that the author of our Epistle is James the brother of Yeshua. After exploring the issue in depth (nearly 20 pages), Guthrie gives this conclusion:

It would seem preferable to incline to the traditional view on the principle that the tradition has a right to stand until proved wrong. Although some of the arguments for alternative views are strong, yet none of these views has any better claim to credibility than the tradition. In these circumstances the authorship of James, the Lord's brother, must still be considered more probable than any rival.<sup>1</sup>

And Tasker agrees:

The tradition that became established in the Church that the Epistle was not only apostolic but should be attributed to James, the head of the Early Church at Jerusalem, ought undoubtedly to be accepted as true. Not only is it incapable of being scientifically disproved, but it has much intrinsic probability.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 758.

2 R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James in Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 21.

The English name “James” is not a direct transliteration of the Greek, *Ἰάκωβ*, *Iakōb*, which is itself a transliteration of Hebrew *יַעֲקֹב*, *ya’aqob*, “Jacob.” How, then, did the author of our Epistle come to be called “James” rather than “Jacob.” While there are many answers one can find to this question, the answer almost certainly lies in the various ways the Hebrew “Jacob” was vocalized by early languages which are the ancestry languages of English. These languages, overlaid upon Latin as well as other base languages, vocalized the Hebrew name Ya’akov in various ways. According to some, “Jacob” and “James” come out of the matrix of these earlier languages, with “Jacob” following the French/Norman tradition (e.g., Jacobin) and “James” following the Anglo-Saxon tradition. So when the KJV translators did their work, it may well have been that “James” was already embedded as a traditional way to pronounce the name “Jacob.” The story that is often heard, that “James” was chosen to honor “King James,” is devoid of historical evidence.

The important thing to note is that our author’s name is originally derived from the Hebrew name Ya’akov, the name which became “Israel” and thus the “father” of the twelve tribes to which this epistle is addressed.