

Overview: My Brother God

Written by Bob Stone

Imagine you grew up in the same house as Jesus. He was your older brother. You played games with Him—like kick the dirt clod, and hide and seek. What a frustration it would be to play hide and seek with Him—He would always win, because He always knew where you were!

At dinner you would listen to Him converse with your father and mother and just be amazed at what He knew. Even from an early age, He would ask profound questions and have amazing understanding and answers to the questions of others—see Matt. 2:41-48. Though He was your older brother, He would never pick a fight with you nor put you down.

Always respectful and submissive to your parents, when you would try to make Him mad, He would only smile at you. Living with Jesus could tick you off. He would be just too perfect to be around. These may have been some of the frustrations of our Lord's brothers and sisters.

In reality Jesus had only half brothers and sisters, because though they had the same mother, they didn't have the same father. (Joseph was only the legal father of Jesus; Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit—Matt. 1:20.) At the time they were growing up, however, they certainly didn't recognize Jesus as their half brother.

How did they react? What did they think of Him? Let's look at the biblical record. It is a fascinating study filled with turns and twists and an amazing outcome.

The Existence of Jesus' Family—Matt. 13:54-56a

The first point of discussion has to be whether Jesus even had any brothers or sisters. Many believe Jesus was the only child of Mary and no other brothers or sisters even existed. For many centuries there has been the erroneous idea that Mary and Joseph had no other children besides Jesus. Some say he had cousins, but not siblings. According to Matt. 13:54-56a, however, there were several.

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54] "Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?' they asked. 55] 'Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? 56] Aren't all his sisters with us?'" (See also Gal. 1:19; Acts 12:2; Mk. 6:3; 15:40; Lk. 2:7.)

Look at the first name on the list:

The Enlightenment of James

How did he accept Jesus? If this list of names in Matthew 13:55 is given in order of birth, Mary's second oldest son was James. How do you think James reacted when he heard his older brother was claiming to be the Messiah? ("There he goes again!")

How did the other family members react? Mark 3:21 tells us. 21] "*When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'*" The Living Bible says, "He's out of His mind." The Berkeley says, "He is deranged." Phillips New Testament says, "He must be mad." The decided opinion of the family apparently, including James was, "He's a nut!"

John 7:5 says bluntly, "*For even his own brothers did not believe in him.*" During Jesus' earthly ministry, then, James was numbered among his opponents. Something happened to James that was quite remarkable, however. It is recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:7— "*Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles...*"

The turning point for James' doubts was obviously the resurrection of Jesus. When he saw his "crazy brother" raised from the dead, he was convinced!

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With the opening of Acts comes a sudden change, as Jesus' mother and brothers were there with the little group of Christians. Acts 1:14—*"They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."* James saw his resurrected brother and prayed in the upper room with the other disciples and the rest of his family, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. This experience with the Holy Spirit should also be noted as key to the development of the faith and ministry of James—and everyone else as well.

After awhile it became clear that James had become the leader of the Jerusalem church, although how that came about is never explained. For example:

- It was to James that Peter sent the news of his escape from prison—Acts 12:17.
- James presided over the Council of Jerusalem which agreed to the entry of the Gentiles into the Christian Church—Acts 15.
- It was with James and Peter that Paul met when he first went to Jerusalem; and it is with Peter, James and John—the pillars of the Church—that Paul settles what his sphere of work will be—Gal. 1:19; 2:9.
- It was to James that Paul came with his collection from the Gentile Churches on the visit to Jerusalem, which was destined to be his last and led to his imprisonment—Acts 21:18-25. This last episode is important, for it shows James very sympathetic to the Jews who will observe the Jewish law, and so eager that their scruples should not be offended, that he actually persuades Paul to demonstrate his loyalty to the law by assuming responsibility for the expenses of certain Jews who are fulfilling a Nazirite vow.
- In fact, as one of the early church's most significant leaders, he served the Lord until his martyrdom by stoning in the year 62 A.D., according to historical sources.

In summary, something remarkable had happened. The effect of Jesus' family on the church was not what it started out to be—particularly as it related to James and later to Jude. James had great authority and leadership in the Jerusalem church, but that wasn't the end of his impact—it continues to grow, especially as it relates to his writing.

Did the man we have been studying write the book of James?

The Evidence For Who Wrote James

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This is an important area of study, for it affects how we interpret the book and helps us to answer the questions, why was this book written? Why was it written in this style? The writer identifies himself in James 1:1 as simply: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings."

But which James? The author of this letter gives us practically no information about himself. The New Testament mentions five men living in the first century who bore this same name.

1. There is the **James** who was the father of the member of the Twelve called Judas, not Iscariot (Lk. 6:16). He is no more than a name and cannot have had any connection with this letter.

2. There is **James**, the son of Alphaeus, who was a member of the Twelve—Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Lk. 6:5; Acts 1:13.

3. There is the **James** who is called James the Younger and is mentioned in Mark 15:40—Matt. 27:56; John 19:25. Again, nothing is known of him, and he cannot have had any connection with this letter.

4. There is **James** the brother of John, and the son of Zebedee—a member of the Twelve—Matt. 10:2; Mark 3:17; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13. In the gospels, James never appears independently of his brother John—Matt. 4:21; 17:1; Mark 1:19,29; 5:37; 9:2; 10:35,41; 13:3; 14:33; Luke 5:10; 8:51; 9:28,54. He was the first of the apostolic band to be martyred, beheaded on the orders of Herod Agrippa the First in the year A.D.44.

But the martyrdom of James came too early for him to have written the letter, and in any event there is nothing beyond the Codex Corbeiensis to connect him with it.

1. Finally, there is **James**, who is called the brother of Jesus.

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Although the first definite connection of him with this letter does not emerge until Origen in the first half of the third century, it is to him that it has always been traditionally ascribed. The Roman Catholic Church agrees with this ascription, for in 1546 the Council of Trent laid it down that James is canonical and is written by an apostle. Most conservative New Testament scholars agree that this James was Jesus' half brother, born and raised in the same family even though James does not identify himself by saying "I am Jesus' brother."

The fact that he didn't make a big deal of who he was may have been because it was so obvious and because the couriers of the letter would have made it clear who wrote the letter. Also, to begin with the phrase, "I am the Lord's brother," would have been name-dropping, something James condemns later in his letter as being a phony and empty practice. Instead, he simply identifies himself as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" and in so doing recognizes that his real relationship to Jesus is not physical, but spiritual, made possible by the grace of God alone.

What's the purpose of all this study on who wrote the book? This was the first piece of biblical literature written in the New Testament era, and it is more than interesting to know who the author is. His identity helps us a great deal to understand why he wrote this book and why he wrote it to this audience.

The Empathy of James with His Readers

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. 2] Consider it pure joy, my brothers. . . "

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In James 1:2, as well as throughout the letter, James identifies his readers as being "brothers." He uses this word in a way that means more than just "my fellow Jews." The term used was specifically designed for the Jewish believer of the New Testament. James refers to these people as being "scattered among the nations" as one might scatter seed. There's a reason for this.

The date was about 45 A.D. and Claudius was emperor of Rome. Under his rule, the Jews had been persecuted and driven out of Rome and their homeland, Palestine. Jewish businesses were boycotted, Jewish children were mocked and thrown out of schools. Life was grim, threatening and unsafe. Someone has said that persecution purifies, but constant suffering crushes, and that's exactly what was happening to many of those early Jews—especially the Christian Jews who were scattered. They were buckling under the pressure of constant persecution.

The result was that with their words they professed to believe, but with their actions they denied ever having known the Savior. Into this kind of suffering and defection James scattered a seed of his own—a powerful letter of exhortation and encouragement not about doctrines and precepts, but about maintaining a faithful practice of the Christian faith.

Now with that spiritual environment in mind, let's try to get a look at the whole of this book. Where will it take us and what will we learn?

The Emphasis of James

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In essence, the emphasis is on living out our faith with practicality. When it comes to the subject of Christian living, James is one of the saltiest books of the New Testament. Its feisty emphasis on living out our faith is laced with practicality. You won't hear any mysterious, stained-glass theological discussions within this letter—only grass-stained advice from someone following Christ in the grass roots of life. Generally speaking, the book of James is not a great book on doctrine. The name of the Lord Jesus Christ appears only twice. The author never mentions the cross, the resurrection, or the Holy Spirit.

But this letter wasn't written for the purpose of establishing the doctrines of the faith. It isn't even a defense of the truth. It is simply a practical book that assumes you already know the basics of the faith. Its intention is to drive home the importance of living out the truth—hearing and obeying. In essence, the main issue that prompted James to write was this: If you say you believe, why do you act like you don't?

So let's turn our attention from the author to the book itself. We'll glimpse at its unique features and get a brief overview of its contents.

The Entire Book At a Glance

The Main Theme: The heart of James' message can be summed up in these words:

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Real faith produces genuine works.

If you say you've come to know the Lord Jesus, then that should be reflected by your life.

The Main Thoughts—An Overview

The following outline of the book's seven sections, together with the chart of James, gives us an idea of the progression of James.

James 1:2-18. In this first section, James asserts how faith is developed and matured. When real faith is stretched, it doesn't break. Rather, it produces genuine stability and maturity.

James 1:19-4:12. The consistent encouragement in this main section is how our faith is to be expressed in our words and in our actions. In 1:17-27 he explains that when the true believer is faced with Scripture, the response is to change according to what it teaches and to do what it says.

In **2:1-13**, when faced with the temptation to show prejudice and favoritism, show love and mercy.

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In **2:14-26**, the book's major thrust is contained. The key verse of this section and the whole verse is v. 14] *"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?"* Anyone can claim to be a Christian, but James points out that a person who has genuinely found faith will also walk in it, and he illustrates this principle with a down-to-earth example.

15] *"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16] If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?"*

James is not advocating a salvation by works, as some have accused him. Rather, he's advocating a salvation accompanied by works. Faith is the root; works are the fruit. Without fruit, words of faith are empty and lifeless.

17] *"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18] But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."*

In **3:1-4:12** James goes on to say that we express our faith in two different ways: verbally—3:1-12, and emotionally—3:13-4:12.

James **4:12-17**. The emphasis in this section is to show how faith impacts our present and our future.

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James **5:1-6**. The emphasis of these verses is on how wealth can impact our present and our future in a negative way if we don't operate in faith.

James **5:7-12**. This section reminds us in no uncertain terms how our patience, or lack thereof in suffering, can impact our present and our future.

James **5:13-20** encourages us with the importance of prayer and how it can impact our present life and ministry in profound ways in such circumstances as sickness (vv. 13-18) and in dealing with a brother or sister who isn't walking with the Lord (vv. 19-20).

Conclusion: How does the message of James apply to present day Christians?

Those first-century Christians were struggling, and they needed straight talk from someone who could help them cope. Today many of us need that same help—those of us whose vocabularies are bulging with all the right words, but whose lifestyles are shriveled for lack of spiritual substance. Martin Luther called the book of James a "right strawy epistle."

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But as one commentator notes,

It is only "strawy" to the degree it is "sticky." There are enough needles in this haystack to prick the conscience of every dull, defeated, and degenerated Christian in the world. Here is a "right stirring epistle" designed to exhort and encourage, to challenge and convict, to rebuke and revive, to describe practical holiness and drive believers toward the goal of a faith that works. James is severely ethical and refreshingly practical.

—J. Ronald Blue, "James," in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT ed., ed. John F. Walvoord and B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill. SP Publications, Victor Books, 1983), p. 815.

Application Questions

1. James and the rest of his family did not believe in Jesus as Savior and Messiah during the three years of Jesus' public ministry. Does John 7:2-8 suggest what hindered the brothers of Jesus from believing?
2. How do you account for this unbelief in light of the fact they all received a very godly upbringing from Mary and Joseph? Why is a prophet not honored at home—Mk. 6:4?
3. Why was the resurrection so key to our Lord's family's understanding of who Jesus was? What does that say to us who may have family members who think we are a little nuts, too—that we are religious weirdos?
4. Why has it always been a part of the church's ministry to go to those who are scattered because of persecution, economic conditions, poverty, loneliness, etc?
5. In what ways has the church traditionally ministered to those who have been scattered or separated from their church or family, either because of persecution, or whatever reason? Is James doing that? How will his letter help?
6. What problems usually emerge when Christians are under pressure—e.g., experiencing a trial or difficulty, being persecuted, lonely or poor? (Share your own story.)
7. What themes in the book of James do you believe are written specifically because the recipients might be under pressure—e.g., experiencing a trial or difficulty, being persecuted, lonely, or poor?
8. How do you expect the study of James to challenge you?
9. How can we help one another actively respond to James?

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An Overview of James by Charles Swindoll

James 1

In this first section James asserts how faith is developed and matured. When real faith is stretched, it doesn't break. Rather, it produces genuine stability—to prove his point, James uses three examples.

1. In vv. 2-12 he shows us that life's trials cause real faith to emerge.
2. In vv. 13-16 he says that lust's temptations cause a work of resistance.
3. And in vv. 17-27 he explains that when the true believer is faced with Scripture, the response is to change according to what it teaches.

James 2

The consistent theme throughout this section is that when real faith is pressed, it doesn't fail. Instead, it shows genuine love. Prejudice (vv. 1-13), indifference (vv. 14-20), and dry intellectual belief (vv. 21-26)—all these things are fought by real faith.

James 3-4

Here James affirms that when genuine faith is expressed, it is with control and humility, not unbridled arrogance. He goes on to say that we express our faith in three different ways: verbally (3:1-12), emotionally (3:13-4:12), and volitionally (4:13-17).

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James 5

The final emphasis of this practicum on Christian living is that when real faith is distressed, it doesn't panic. Instead, it produced patience. James illustrates this message with everyday situations:

- not having enough money (vv. 1-12)
- sickness (vv. 13-18)
- and dealing with a brother or sister who isn't walking with the Lord (vv. 19-20).