

## JAMES THE JUST & SALVATION VIA WORKS

In the first century, two concepts of Christian salvation contended for acceptance by a nascent church. One viewpoint was championed by none other than the official leader of the first century Christian church, James the brother of Jesus. This is the James who was also known to the early church as “the Righteous” or “the Just.”

In a short New Testament epistle bearing his name, James asks: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ... *faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*”

James is writing to refute an alternative viewpoint – expressed by Paul the apostle. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul had declared that: “... we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”

To churches of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the debate remains as fresh as it was almost two thousand years ago. Fundamentalist, evangelical Christians typically put their doctrinal eggs in the basket of faith; mainstream churches including Roman Catholics emphasize works – often in the form of social action.

In the pantheon of Christian nobility, the role of James (and his one little book) often goes virtually unnoticed. Yet his influence at one time pervaded the early Jewish church. Even today, the perspective of James lives on, prompting a more careful look at what we know about the man and his mission.

### BACKGROUND OF JAMES

Given the paucity of information that has been preserved, it is vitally important both to look to the tradition of James and to the New Testament book commonly attributed to his authorship.

***The Tradition of James:*** The person of James is mentioned several times in the New Testament gospels, then in the Acts of the Apostles. In his hometown of Nazareth, Matthew identifies James as first in a list of four brothers and a group of unnamed, unnumbered sisters to Jesus:

Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not *his brothers* James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?

Mark’s gospel also records that his family tried to restrain Jesus early in his ministry. After all, as Mark says, “... people were saying, ‘He (Jesus) has gone out of his mind.’ ” Shortly thereafter, his “mother and his brothers” again come calling. After Jesus is notified, he asks the crowd: “*Who are my mother and my brothers?*”

After Jesus death and resurrection, James moves into a position of early post-Easter leadership within the nascent Christian movement. James ascendance is clearly in place by the time Peter is imprisoned and then released. Peter shows up at the house of John Mark’s mother Mary,

recounts the story of his deliverance from prison, then requests: “*Tell this to James and to the believers.*”

The late first century writer Clement describes James ascendancy this way:

Peter, James, and John, after the ascension of the Savior, did not claim pre-eminence because the Savior had specially honoured them, but chose James the Righteous as Bishop of Jerusalem.

When and how did James achieve this pre-eminence? The New Testament does not directly say. One theory is that James came over to Jesus side toward the end of Jesus’ ministry – when Jesus began to focus on sacrifice and purity of the Temple in Jerusalem – as evidenced by his overturning the tables of the money changers.

Another option is that James did not embrace his brother until after Jesus’ resurrection. As the apostle Paul would write, Jesus appeared to James, and then *after that* to all the disciples. This could have occurred if there was a post-resurrection reconciliation between the two brothers, much as there was when Jesus forgave Peter for his three denials.

By the time of the first Council of Jerusalem, when Paul and Barnabas are brought before “the apostles and the elders,” James is the one who replies to them. His response is authoritative: “My brothers, *listen to me ...*”

Much later, Paul returns one last time to Jerusalem. The writer of Acts comments that the day after his arrival, “... Paul went with us *to visit James*; and all the elders were present.”

Later patriarchs of the early church corroborate James’ preeminent position. For example, the fourth century church historian Eusebius maintained on the authority of the later first/early second century Clement of Rome that James had served as bishop of Jerusalem. He quotes Clement as saying:

Control of the Church passed to the apostles, together with *the Lord’s brother James*, whom everyone from the Lord’s time till our own has called the righteous, for there were many James, but this one was holy from his birth; he drank no wine or intoxicating liquor and ate no animal food; no razor came near his head; he did not smear himself with oil, and took no baths.

He alone was permitted to enter the Holy Place, for his garments were not of wool but of linen. He used to enter the Sanctuary alone, and was often found on his knees beseeching forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel’s from continually bending them in worship of God and beseeching forgiveness for the people. Because of his unsurpassable righteousness he was called the Righteous and *Oblias* – in our own language ‘Bulwark of the People, and Righteousness’ – fulfilling the declaration of the prophets regarding him.

Not only was James clearly in charge of the early Christian movement, but he also appeared to have had the respect of other non-Christian Jewish leadership. In sharp contrast to his brother who was accused of gluttony, James lived the life of an ascetic.

For a period of more than a decade under James' direction, the church at Jerusalem was left essentially undisturbed. So long as Christians worshipped in the Temple and the synagogue with their unconverted countrymen, there was no reason to form a separate community of their own with an independent organization.

As the first century Jewish historian Josephus writes, this period of seeming comity changed with the death of the Roman procurator Festus. A portion of the Jewish leadership was clearly uncomfortable with the nascent Christian sect and its leader James. Before the new procurator Albinus could arrive, the high priest Ananus (a Sadducee) "assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, *whose name was James*, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned."

The illegal nature of this act was so blatantly apparent that other citizens of the city complained vociferously both to the Jewish king (Agrippa) and the new procurator (Albinus). The offense was deemed serious enough that the high priest Ananus was subsequently removed from office (after only a three-month term).

The death of James also set in motion a series of events eventually leading to the Jewish insurrection and subsequent Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The new Roman procurator Albinus began a campaign to destroy the revolutionary *sicarii*, leading to kidnapping of the scribe of the Temple governor and to internal fighting within the priesthood ("throwing stones at each other").

The result was a more disordered city and the subsequent removal of the next high priest (Jesus son of Gamaliel). The priesthood was then again transferred by King Agrippa to Matthias "under whom the Jews' war with the Romans took its beginning." The war would end with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

***James' New Testament Epistle:*** Scholars of all persuasions generally assign a relatively early date to James. The letter typically is viewed as having been written pre AD 70, possibly as early as the fifties.

In the first verse of the New Testament epistle, the author is self-identified as James. Some early Christian patriarchs, notably Origen, expressed doubts as to the authenticity of James' epistle. Eastern writers also voiced concern about the canonicity of the epistles ascribed to James (as well as Peter, John and Jude). And among the Latins of the western church, James (and 2 Peter) were relatively unknown and/or were rejected.

Even the noted 4<sup>th</sup> century church historian Eusebius expressed his doubts. After describing the manner of James' death, Eusebius went on to conclude:

Such is the story of James, to whom is attributed the first of the 'general' epistles. Admittedly its *authenticity is doubted*, since few early writers refer to it, any more than to 'Jude's', which is also one of the several called general. But the fact remains that these two, like the others, have been regularly used in very many churches.

Despite these suspicions, the letter of James was accepted as scripture by the church in Alexandria in the third century AD, by the western church from about the fourth century, and by the Syrian church in the fifth century.

In more recent times, the reformer Martin Luther questioned the authenticity of the epistle attributed to James because it contradicted writings of Paul that Luther found to be of greater importance.

## **SALVATION VIA WORKS**

Among New Testament writers, James is distinctive in his absolute insistence that salvation comes primarily via works, not faith. The distinctive perspective of James is really two-fold: (a) undeterred adherence to Torah law; and (b) consequent insistence that Paul's gospel of faith is dead (unless accompanied by works).

***Adherence to Torah Law:*** As the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church, James reflects a more traditional Jewish approach to upholding Torah law. The writer of Acts records that at the Council of Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were brought before the "apostles and the elders" to discuss the conflict Paul had with those who claimed that: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved..."

At this council, Peter speaks in Paul's behalf. However, James has the final word, referring to the remarks of Peter and to the prophets, then offering his own conclusion:

Therefore I have reached the decision that *we should not trouble those Gentiles* who are turning to God (with circumcision), but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, *Moses has had those who proclaim him*, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues."

Paul had won the victory, eliminating the Jewish rite of circumcision as a condition for Christian fellowship. However, James (at this point) retained the decision authority, including the appeal to Torah law.

Later, writing to the Galatians, Paul gives a somewhat different account of this encounter with the official church leadership, worth recounting in full:

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not in running, or had not run, in vain. But

even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.

But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us – we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. And from those who were *supposed to be acknowledged leaders* (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) – *these leaders contributed nothing to me.*

On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked throughout me in sending me to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, *I opposed him to his face*, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people *came from James*, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the *circumcision faction*. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like the Jews?’ ”

It is difficult to believe that the writer of Acts and Paul are remembering the same event. In Acts, Paul appears to defer to the judgement of Jerusalem; to the Galatians he evidences clear disdain for the supposed authority of the mother church.

Second, Acts records that, while circumcision was removed as a requirement, Paul was asked to have Gentile believers act by specified Jewish customs regarding foods; Paul’s epistle does not record this injunction but only a separate request of money for the Jerusalem poor.

Third, the account of Acts indicates that the emissaries from Jerusalem who accompanied Paul to Antioch were Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, not Peter. How Peter gets to Antioch (as a messenger for James?) to be confronted by Paul is not stated in Acts.

Finally, different reasons appear to be given for the split up of Barnabas and Paul that occurs in Antioch. The writer of Acts indicates that Barnabas wanted to take John Mark on the next missionary journey; Paul did not. To the Galatians, Paul does not identify Mark as a factor; rather, he suggests the split occurs because Barnabas sided with the circumcision faction.

Paul and James have one more in-person encounter at the time of Paul's final visit to Jerusalem. The writer of Acts records that: "When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us warmly. The next day Paul went with us to visit James, and all the elders were present."

The Jerusalem church elders remain concerned that Gentiles are not being directed "to circumcise their children or observe the customs." They then ask Paul to go through a rite of purification as a sign to Jewish believers in Jerusalem "that you yourself observe and guard the law." Paul complies with this request. However, before the seven days of purification rites are fully completed, Paul is seized in the temple area by Jews from Asia – the start of his confinement and eventual trip to Rome.

**Salvation via Works:** James' epistle makes up for the mildness of presentation on Torah law with a blistering attack on the notion of salvation through faith:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? *Can faith save you?* If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? *So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

To make sure the message is not lost, James uses four illustrations to make his point:

- To one who is without clothing and food, there is no value in wishing them well; the value is in offering the *person in need* clothing and food – meeting their material not just spiritual needs.
- *Even demons* have faith (or believe) in God – to the point of shuddering in fear; yet obviously this faith by itself is of little benefit.
- The *act* of Abraham offering his son Isaac on the altar as a sacrifice is seen as "faith brought to completion by the works." It was not enough to trust God in the abstract; Abraham had to actually raise the knife.
- To close out the argument, James reaches to the example of an Old Testament Gentile and prostitute, Rahab, who also *acted* at some personal risk by hiding Israeli spies and then helping them escape.

To James, actions speak louder than words. Belief in God alone does not cut it. Performance is of greater import than intent.

**Acceptance of James:** After a (brief) period of early post-resurrection leadership by Peter, James somehow becomes the acknowledged of an early Christian movement. But he loses out in his mission to keep this early movement within the folds of Judaism. His mission is sabotaged from three very different directions:

- A headstrong convert in Paul who is equally determined to break the bonds of Judaism by taking a new, separate Christian movement to the rest of the non-Jewish Roman empire.
- Leadership of the Jewish religious aristocracy (the high priest and Sadducees) deliberately undo James by ordering his execution despite the ensuing objection of other Jewish leaders.
- Any subsequent opportunity to revive James' approach to Christianity within Judaism is obliterated less than a decade later by the Roman destruction of Jerusalem.

Following in James' footsteps, the second bishop of the Jerusalem church has been identified as Simon (or Symeon), the son of Clopas (who was reputed to be Jesus' uncle) – and who also reportedly lived to the age of about 120. Control of the Jerusalem church then passed out of Jesus' family to a Jew named Justus.

After Simon, the legacy of James fared not much better with the post-Jerusalem church up through Constantine. His epistle (along with Revelation) was one of the last (and most bitterly contested) books to receive acceptance within the New Testament canon.

Any vindication that James may have received through the *practices* of the medieval Catholic church (which gravitated toward a theology of salvation through works ranging from crusades to indulgences) was brought back into question by Martin Luther.

If James has finally found a more favorable resting place, it is in the social theology of modern reform Catholicism and mainline Protestantism. James may be the true spiritual father, but credit often is attributed elsewhere – most notably to Luke's gospel of social activism.

## **JAMES IN SUMMARY**

James' God wants us as friends to draw near to the divine. Those whom he draws near will be the ones that interact with and show compassion on their neighbor – as God has with us. And, James represents a perspective on Jesus that:

- Says doing is more important than believing.
- Identifies personal behaviors of social acceptance and equality as the true test for anyone who purports to be a follower of Jesus.
- Suggests a path for rapprochement to bridge two millennia of mistrust, animosity and betrayal between Jew and Aryan.

James suffers obscurity, indifference and charges of heresy. James may yet have the last word.

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This excerpt is adapted from the "The Heresy of James: Salvation via Works," further detailed in the approximately 360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. For more, click [www.jesustheheresy.com](http://www.jesustheheresy.com)