

# JAMES

## FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

J.K. MCKEE



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by John Kimball McKee

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## ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by TNN Press. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

AB: <i>Anchor Bible Commentary</i>	IVPBBC: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old &amp; New Testament)</i>
ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	KJV: King James Version
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	LITV: <i>Literal Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Lidell & Scott)
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	LXX: Septuagint
b. Babylonian Talmud ( <i>Talmud Bavli</i> )	m. Mishnah
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	MT: Masoretic Text
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	NBCR: <i>New Bible Commentary: Revised</i>
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	Nelson: <i>Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words</i>
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	NIDB: <i>New International Dictionary of the Bible</i>
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	NIV: New International Version (1984)
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>	NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
Ger: German	RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
GNT: Greek New Testament	Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Grk: Greek	Thayer: <i>Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
HALOT: <i>Hebrew &amp; Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)	TDNT: <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2001)	TWOT: <i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i>
Heb: Hebrew	UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition
IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>	v(s). verse(s)
IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>	Vine: <i>Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words</i>
ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>	Vul: Latin Vulgate
	WBC: <i>Word Biblical Commentary</i>
	YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

# THE GENERAL EPISTLES

The General Epistles or General Letters, comprising the Biblical texts of James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, and Jude, are some of the most important letters of instruction to today's Messianic community. As the Messianic movement matures into the people that our Heavenly Father wants us to be, and we return to the First Century Torah obedient walk of faith adhered to by both Yeshua (Jesus) and the Apostles, we have the responsibility to consult their writings which speak volumes to our present status and situation in the Twenty-First Century. The Torah and the Tanach, or the Old Testament, establish a strong foundation for who we are as the people of God. Upon that foundation is built the Gospel narratives, which give testimony to the life of Yeshua, and the Book of Acts, recording the development of the early Messianic community. After the Book of Acts come the General Epistles, also commonly referred to as the "Catholic Epistles,"<sup>i</sup> in that they are letters written to broad groups of First Century saints.

Some of you immediately might be questioning the placement of the General Epistles before the Pauline Epistles, or the letters of the Apostle Paul. Indeed, many in the early Christian movement of the Second and Third Centuries had some issues with these texts as well. The Fourth Century Church historian Eusebius acknowledged the difficulty of these writings attaining canonical status, writing in his *Ecclesiastical History* that "These accounts were given respecting James, who is said to have written the first of the epistles general (catholic) but it is to be observed that it is considered spurious. Not many indeed of the ancients have mentioned it and not even that called the epistle of Jude, which is also one of the seven called catholic epistles. Nevertheless, we know, that these with the rest, are publicly used in most of the churches" (2.23.25).<sup>ii</sup>

It seems likely that rather than doubting the inspired status of these texts because of some theological reasons, the Christians of the Second and Third Centuries disputed their status because there was no set tradition regarding their composition. Unlike Paul's letters, which were written to specific cities or locations such as Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, Corinth, or Rome, or individuals such as Timothy or Titus, the General Epistles cannot be readily associated with any specific group as the term "general" would imply. The early Believers receiving one of Paul's letters in Corinth, for example, would have had a tradition of the letter being sent by him to address their congregational needs and issues, and would have been faithfully copying it and later disseminating it to other Believers. The General Epistles in contrast, as their name suggests, would not have been written to specific congregations, but rather broad groups of people. Various reasons have been posed concerning their designation as "catholic," meaning "universal epistles," including: "(1) that it was intended to indicate a common apostolic authorship (only a few support this view); (2) that it signifies that the seven Epistles were universally received as genuine; (3) that it refers to the catholicity of their doctrine, i.e., orthodox and authoritative *v.* heretical epistles" (*ISBE*).<sup>iii</sup>

Another possible reason that is sometimes given regarding the late acceptance of the General Epistles is that some of them had a later composition date than the epistles of Paul. "The gradual and rather late acceptance of the seven letters in the church indicates rather clearly that they belonged to a time subsequent to Paul's career and to the publication of his letters as a corpus. Paul's letters, e.g., were approaching recognition as scripture when II Peter was written (cf. 3:15-16)" (*IDB*).<sup>iv</sup>

Already in the early Second Century, the texts comprising the General Epistles were widely used for the instruction of Believers. Over time as Christianity grew in the Second and Third Centuries, so were the General Epistles accepted as canonical along with the Pauline Epistles.<sup>v</sup>

Regarding the importance of these letters, "As a collection, the Catholic Epistles were not always listed or placed in the same location in the NT canon...except for Codex Sinaiticus, all uncial mss which have both Paul's epistles and the Catholic Epistles place the Catholic epistles first. Westcott and Hort attempted to restore this order because of its

<sup>i</sup> "Catholic" in this context means "universal," not the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>ii</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. C.F. Cruse (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 62.

<sup>iii</sup> D.M. Pratt, "Catholic Epistles," in G.W. Bromiley, ed. et. al., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:622-623.

<sup>iv</sup> A.E. Barnett, "Catholic Letters," in George Buttrick, ed. et. al., *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:543.

<sup>v</sup> Perhaps the only major exception to this is that the Syrian Church excluded the General Epistles of 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and Jude from its canon. It likewise only accepts the Aramaic translation of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures, the Peshitta, as being inspired.

## THE GENERAL EPISTLES

ancient attestation. However, the order still used today demonstrates the dominant influence of the canonical order found in Jerome's Vulgate" (*ABD*).<sup>vi</sup> In the order of the majority of extant Greek codices of the Apostolic Scriptures, the General Epistles are actually placed *before the Pauline Epistles*, meaning that James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, and Jude appear after the Book of Acts and before Paul's letter to the Romans. The order that is used in virtually all Bibles today is the order that is used in the Fourth Century Latin Vulgate translation by Jerome. Textual critic Caspar René Gregory has the following observations in his book *Canon and Text of the New Testament*:

"The order in which we place the books of the New Testament is not a matter of indifference. Every Christian should be familiar with these books, and should know precisely where to find each book. Every New Testament should have the books in precisely the same order, the order of the Greek Church, which in this case is of right the guardian of this ancient literature. The proper order is, I think: First, the Four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Second, the Book of Acts. Third, the Catholic Epistles: James, First and Second Peter, First, Second, and Third John, and Jude. Fourth, the Epistles of Paul: Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, First and Second Thessalonians, Hebrews, First and Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon. And fifth, the Book of Revelation."<sup>vii</sup>

In almost all Bibles the Pauline Epistles and the Epistle to the Hebrews are placed before the General Epistles. But this is not the priority that these letters had in antiquity. In most ancient Greek manuscripts the General Epistles are placed before the Pauline Epistles. The Biblical reason as to why this should be the case, given by the Apostle Paul himself, is obvious. In Galatians 2:9, upon his visit to Jerusalem to discuss the inclusion of non-Jews in the assembly of faith, he writes that "James and Cephas [Peter] and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me" (NRSV). Paul discusses the mission that God had for him among the nations and their conversion of faith, and that they "gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we *might go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised." Paul willfully submitted to the authority of the Jerusalem assembly in the matters of his missionary journeys to the nations. Paul submitted to the authority of the "pillars" of that assembly: James, Peter, and John.

The General Epistles make up the writings of James the Just, the half-brother of Yeshua (Galatians 1:19); Simon Peter or Cephas, the Galilean fisherman who was the first to acknowledge Yeshua's Messiahship (Matthew 16:16-17); and John the Beloved or "the disciple whom Yeshua loved" (John 21:20).<sup>viii</sup> Jude identifies himself as "a bond-servant of Yeshua the Messiah, and brother of James" (Jude 1), which would make him another half-brother of Yeshua, who was undoubtedly younger than James. James, Peter, and John were the "pillars" of the early Messianic community. *BDAG* defines the word *stulos* (στῦλος) as "**a pers. or community recognized for spiritual leadership, pillar, support.**"<sup>ix</sup> *Stulos* is used frequently in the LXX to render the Hebrew word *amud* (עַמֻּדָה), defined by *HALOT* as "**tent-pole, upright support,**" or "**pillar, a support for a building,**"<sup>x</sup> employed in the Torah to describe both the supports of the Tabernacle and the pillars of cloud and fire that led the Israelites through the desert. When Paul uses this description of James, Peter, and John in Galatians 2:9, he is describing the important status that they have as leaders of the community of faith at large. They are the leaders that Paul must submit to. They are Jewish men who remained Torah observant all throughout their lives. As James plainly attested to Paul in Acts 21:20, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law." Today, the same is true of many non-Jews as they enter into the Messianic community of faith and are seeking sound instruction regarding the totality of the Word of God and how our Messiah Yeshua conducted Himself. Just like Paul submitted to James, Peter, and John, so must we now consult their wisdom.

The Messianic community today largely lacks a solid examination of the Pauline Epistles, as many congregational leaders and Bible teachers fail to consider each of Paul's letters in their entirety, the historical background behind his writings, and mistranslations into English that have occurred as a result of translating the Greek source text from an anti-Torah bias. Perhaps even more importantly, as a movement we have failed to consider the fact that theologically the General Epistles have priority over the Pauline Epistles. The General Epistles are more broad in their approach and readership, when compared to Paul's letters that are often written to specific congregations and situations. In order to properly understand the Apostle Paul we must build upon the foundation of the General Epistles. The Apostle Peter himself wrote, "in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to

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<sup>vi</sup> Robert L. Webb, "Epistles, Catholic," in David Noel Freedman, ed. et. al., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:570.

<sup>vii</sup> Caspar René Gregory, *The Canon and Text of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 467.

<sup>viii</sup> Cf. John 19:26; 20:2; 21:7.

<sup>ix</sup> Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 949.

<sup>x</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1:843.

understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). Peter recognized Paul's letters as valid instruction, but identified that there were "some things in them hard to understand" (RSV). This applies to people today every bit as much as it did to those in the First Century.

**Is it possible that the reason why the Messianic movement as a whole lacks a coherent, pro-Torah examination of Paul's letters, is because we do not understand the scope and priority of the General Epistles?**

As a Messianic Bible teacher, I have certainly been blessed to be able to exposit on the Scriptures from an Hebraic viewpoint starting in the Torah with the Book of Genesis and moving forward. I see Scripture as a composite whole, which each piece of writing building successively upon the other. We cannot understand the histories contained in Joshua, Judges, and 1 & 2 Samuel without first understanding the Torah. We cannot understand the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel without first understanding the dispersion of Israel recorded in 1 & 2 Kings. We cannot understand the coming of the Messiah without understanding the Prophets. Likewise, I believe that we cannot understand the writings of Paul without first understanding the General Epistles, the writings of the "pillars" of the First Century community of faith.

In this series of Bible studies, you will be challenged from the General Epistles. These are seven, relatively short books of the Apostolic Scriptures that have largely gone unaddressed from a Messianic viewpoint. I trust that each of these studies will give you a good handling of these texts. I recommend that before each study begins that you sit down and read the book examined in a single sitting. Remember that each one of these Biblical texts is a letter, a specific type of literary genre. It is important that when you begin reading, you approach these texts as letters. Just as you would not read a personal letter written to you in parts or portions, similarly, plan to sit down and read each of these Biblical letters all the way through.<sup>xi</sup>

There are some important objectives that I wish to see accomplished in our examination of the General Epistles:

1. We will examine the background of each of the letters, including: (a) who the author was, (b) his location when writing his letter, (c) the approximate date of when he was writing the letter, and (d) who the target audience of the letter was.
2. We will examine the theological purpose(s) behind the writing of each of the letters, and what the letters meant to those who originally received them in the First Century.
3. We will compare and contrast the First Century context and meaning of the letters to where we are as the Messianic community today, and how these writings relate to our situation in the Twenty-First Century.

These studies attempt to be, as is humanly possible, both scholastic and practical. On the one hand, there is a lack of scholastic handling with many of theological subjects in the still-developing Messianic community among both congregational leaders and teachers. Time has been taken to consult multiple English Bible versions, Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, commentaries, and Hebrew and Greek lexicons. Likewise, consideration has also been made for those who do not want to be overwhelmed with technical references, and instead want to know how these texts apply to their lives today. Being for "the practical Messianic," careful attention has also been given to where we are as a movement today, and how we all must grow spiritually and mature from learning the meanings of these letters.

On the technical side I have purposefully refrained from overly using Hebraic terminology, other than the name "Yeshua the Messiah" for Jesus Christ, and on occasion "Torah" instead of Law, for the familiarity of most readers, and those who can be easily confused by unfamiliar words. The 1995 New American Standard, Updated Edition is the base English translation used in these studies, because of its literalness and widespread usage among many conservative evangelical Christians. Other major English versions I consult include the Revised Standard Version and New International Version. I also consult David H. Stern's Complete Jewish Bible.

When completed, this series of studies should give you a good handling of the meaning of the General Epistles for us as Believers today, and should assist you in future examinations of Paul's letters. The General Epistles speak volumes to us today as Messianic Believers, and the positive, Torah-obedient conduct that we should be demonstrating to others in the world. The Apostle John writes, "These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete" (1 John 1:4). As the Messianic movement grows, and we examine more and more books of the Bible from a distinct Messianic perspective, this is what I want to see instilled into people. I want to see us grow and mature. I want to see us be able to impart words of life into others. I also want to see us be able to confront false teachings or misunderstandings about Scripture, and be able to do it in an adequate manner. I believe that these studies on the General Epistles are going to be able to help you see each one of these things accomplished.

*J.K. McKee*

*Editor, TNN Online*

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<sup>xi</sup> Some excellent suggestions for reading a Biblical epistle are listed by Moisés Silva in ch. 7 of *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* by Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), "The Meaning of the Epistles," pp 121-137.



## INTRODUCTION

The Epistle of James<sup>1</sup> has been one of the most debated books of the Bible among theologians for centuries. It is likely because this letter has the most substantial Jewish character of any of the writings in the Apostolic Scriptures. By the Third Century, Clement of Alexandria recognized James as being part of “the other general epistles” (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.1), as recorded by Eusebius,<sup>2</sup> but it was not universally accepted for instruction among all in early Christianity. This may have come about for several reasons, including the lack of “heavy theology” in James, what appears to be James’ emphasis of works over Divine grace, and perhaps even the fact that the name of Yeshua (Jesus) only appears twice in the letter (1:1; 2:1). These sentiments would even appear in the Reformation, as Martin Luther assigned James to an appendix in his German translation of the Bible, not really knowing what to do with it. However, these reasons surrounding James can all be easily explained today, especially as many Believers begin to examine their Hebraic Roots and adopt a lifestyle of Torah observance.

*IDB* notes, “Eusebius himself regarded James, the Lord’s brother, whom he calls an apostle, as the author, but he clearly knew the status of the letter was debatable because of uncertainly regarding its authorship” (*IDB*).<sup>3</sup> As Eusebius wrote, “These accounts were given respecting James, who is said to have written the first of the epistles general (catholic) but it is to be observed that it is considered spurious” (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.25).<sup>4</sup> The reason James was likely “considered spurious” by some Christians in the Third Century was because of its theological message, as opposed to its authorship.

With Luther, we need to understand that in the Sixteenth Century he was attempting to reform a Catholic system that considered works, specifically works defined by the Roman Catholic Church, as a means to justification and salvation. Douglas J. Moo remarks, “Luther, faced with forms of Roman Catholic medieval theology that placed great emphasis on works in salvation, naturally focused on Paul in his preaching.”<sup>5</sup> Luther considered James to have many good things to say, but had extreme difficulty reconciling it with the writings of Paul that emphasized the grace of God. Consequently, this has been the debate surrounding James for many centuries: How can James, and his emphasis on works, be reconciled to the words of Paul, which largely emphasize grace?

Moo makes some valid observations to this end, stating, “Works, claims Paul, have no role in getting us into relationship with God. Works, insists James, do have a role in securing God’s vindication in the judgment. Paul strikes at legalism; James at quietism. Each message needs to be heard.”<sup>6</sup>

Few may realize this, but James offers us some of the most practical theology that is well-needed for our times. James is one of the most frequently read letters in the Bible, but can be one of the most grossly misunderstood because of his high emphasis on the Torah or Law of Moses. Not only was an emphasis on works needed for the First Century Believers, who were unsure as to how to conduct themselves in the world, but a proper emphasis on works is needed today. The Twenty-First Century spectrum of Judeo-Christianity is largely one that is influenced by modern culture and society, and proper conduct is a message that is misunderstood among many Believers, Christian *and* Messianic alike. Messianic Believers need to understand James and what he says about the proper place of works.

In contrast to what Luther could not understand concerning James, John Wesley took a different view in the Eighteenth Century, “confronting,” as Moo notes, “a church largely indifferent to the moral imperatives of the gospel.”<sup>7</sup> Wesley used James to tell his parishioners to attain “Christian perfection.”<sup>8</sup> He wrote in his book *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, “I tell you, as plain as I can speak, where and when I found this. I found it in the oracles of God, in

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that in spite of the common reference to James as “the Book of James,” I am going to purposefully refer to the text as either the Epistle of James or a letter of James, and not use this reference. By failing to forget that this text is a letter written to a specific audience in a specific setting, we can make the common error of thinking that this was a text written *directly to us*. Our goal as responsible interpreters is to try to reconstruct what this letter meant to *its original audience first*, before applying its message in a modern-day setting.

<sup>2</sup> *Ecclesiastical History*, 204.

<sup>3</sup> A.E. Barnett, “James, letter of,” in *IDB*, 2:794.

<sup>4</sup> *Ecclesiastical History*, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

the Old and New Testament; when I read them with no other view or desire but to save my own soul. But whosoever this doctrine is, I pray you, what harm is there in it? Look at it again; survey it on every side, and that with the closest attention. In one view, it is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is one desire and design ruling all our tempers. It is the devoting, not a part, but all our soul, body, and substance to God. In another view, it is all the mind which was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked. It is the circumcision of the heart from all filthiness, all inward as well as outward pollution. It is a renewal of the heart in the whole image of God, the full likeness of Him that created it. In yet another, it is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves.”<sup>9</sup>

This message remains the same for Messianic Believers in the Twenty-First Century as it did for Christians in the Eighteenth Century. As a Messianic movement that is still maturing, many people come from Christian backgrounds that have grown religiously stale and did not emphasize personal holiness and the works required of Believers. Paul A. Cedar validly writes, “I believe that James should be one of the first books read and mastered by the new Christian. Too often the church has mastered the art of informing people regarding what they *should* be doing, but has failed to teach them *how* to do it!”<sup>10</sup> How much more so does this apply to us as Messianic Believers who need to know how to properly live the Torah in modern society, positively impacting others with the truth?

Many of us have entered into the Messianic movement and have started a diligent pattern of Torah study, but we wonder where this Torah study and observance will lead us and how we are to practice it in the world. Furthermore, we deal with many friends and family who are in a Christian Church today that largely does not know how to relate to the world, while at the same time remaining separate from it. For Messianic Believers, the Epistle of James addresses all of these issues, the most important of which is how we are to have the right heart attitude toward one another in the community of faith.

## WHO WAS THE AUTHOR OF JAMES?

The English name “James” actually renders the Greek *Iakōbos* (Ἰάκωβος), which is one of two transliterations for the Hebrew name Jacob or *Ya’akov* (יַעֲקֹב). In the Septuagint, the name *Ya’akov*, in reference to the Patriarch Jacob, is rendered as *Iakōb* (Ἰακώβ), and this usage carries over into the Greek New Testament. However, a second form, *Iakōbos*, appears also in the Greek New Testament, likely to distinguish *Iakōb* or the Patriarch Jacob from others. Similarly, the English name James is a derivative of the name “Jacob,” and it is likely that for this reason it is rendered as such in our English Bibles. In the First Century Hebraic context of the letter, James would have been known as *Ya’akov*, even though when communicating with Greek-speakers he would have referred to himself as *Iakōbos*.

There are four specific individuals in the Apostolic Scriptures referred to as “James.” It is important that we examine who each one of these men was, to determine which of them wrote this letter:

1. **James the son of Zebedee** was one of Yeshua’s earliest Disciples (Matthew 4:21; Mark 1:19). He was the brother of John, and the two of them together were given the title of “Boanerges” or “B’nei-Regesh” (CJB), meaning “Sons of Thunder,” in Mark 3:17. Their mother’s name was Salome (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40), and the two of them, along with their father, and Peter and Andrew, were partners in a fishing business along the Sea of Galilee (Luke 5:10; Matthew 4:18-21). This James was in the inner circle of Yeshua’s Disciples along with his brother John and Peter, having witnessed both the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28) and Yeshua’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37; Mark 14:33). However, it is unlikely that James the son of Zebedee was the author of this epistle. Acts 12:2 tells us that Herod Agrippa “had James the brother of John put to death with a sword,” making him the first apostolic martyr.

2. **James the son of Alphaeus** was another of the Twelve Disciples of Yeshua (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). Other than a reference to him as one of the Disciples, no other information is given about him in the Gospels or the Book of Acts. Some believe that since Levi is described as being “the son of Alphaeus” in Mark 2:14 that the two of them were brothers.

3. **James the father of Judas** is listed in Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13. Whether or not this James was actually the father of an apostle, making there be a father-son combination in the list of Apostles, has been debated. It “depends on the interpretation of the genitive (Gk. *Ioudas Iakōbou*),” even though “Nothing of special import is said of this James in the Gospels” (*ISBE*).<sup>11</sup> We would expect that if this James were the author of this epistle there would be more said about him.

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<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1966), 117

<sup>10</sup> Paul A. Cedar, *The Preacher’s Commentary: James, 1&2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 9.

<sup>11</sup> R.L. Harris, “James,” in *ISBE*, 2:958.

4. **James the brother of the Lord** was presumably the oldest of the half-brothers of Yeshua (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). In John 7:3-5 it is actually attested that the Messiah's own brothers did not believe in Him. Later in 1 Corinthians 15:7 we see that Paul writes that Yeshua "appeared to James, then to all the apostles," indicating that He appeared to James first after His resurrection, before the Twelve. In Galatians 1:19, the Apostle Paul says that he visited "James, the Lord's brother" during his visit to Jerusalem, and in Galatians 2:9 he considers him to be one of the "pillars" of the Jerusalem congregation. This is the same James who in Acts 15 made the judgment concerning what to do about the non-Jews coming to faith in Yeshua and how they were to be properly trained. He is listed as the leader of the elders in Acts 21:18. According to early Christian tradition and most conservative evangelicals today, it is this James, the half-brother of Yeshua, who wrote the letter of James.

## WHO WAS JAMES?

Many do not realize the importance of James, the half-brother of Yeshua, in relationship to the development of the First Century *ekklēsia*. If we can correctly assume that James was a younger brother of Yeshua, and as such would have known Him only by growing up with Him in Nazareth, and quite possibly even in the carpentry or craftsman trade, then it would make sense as to why James had his doubts at first regarding his brother's ministry. James would have never really known His brother as a "Rabbi," but rather a sibling in the family business. John 7:3-5 attests,

"Therefore His brothers said to Him, 'Leave here and go into Judea, so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. For no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be *known* publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world.' For not even His brothers were believing in Him."

In both of the lists of Yeshua's half brothers, "James and Joseph and Simon and Judas" (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3), James is listed first. This is likely because he was the oldest of Yeshua's Earthly brothers, but was younger than Yeshua Himself. How much younger James was, we can only assume, but he was likely too young to have been one of the original Twelve. As James would have "stayed at home," as it were, it would not have been until a later date that he would gain prominence among Yeshua's followers. It may be that the reason Paul writes that Yeshua appeared to James first after His resurrection, was because He intended to see that James played an important role in the spiritual development of those who would come after He ascended to the Father.

The first instance where James the Lord's brother is mentioned in the Book of Acts is in Acts 12:17, in the context of Peter being broken out of Herod's imprisonment by the angels, and then his showing up at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, as those gathered prayed for his release. The text says, "But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, 'Report these things to James and the brethren.' Then he left and went to another place." This James is unlikely the James the son of Zebedee whose martyrdom at the hands of Herod is mentioned in Acts 12:2, and by default would have to be James the half-brother of Yeshua. This is a textual indication that James had already assumed, perhaps as Yeshua's half-brother, an important role in the Jerusalem assembly.

The second instance where James the Lord's brother is mentioned in the Book of Acts is in Acts 15, where the Jerusalem Council assembles to discuss the matter of including non-Jews, former Gentiles turning from their idolatrous ways, in the community of faith. Acts 15:1 records the position of a sect of Pharisees who believed in the Messiah, which was that "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." They were requiring that circumcision and Torah observance precede the salvation experience, and this caused quite a debate. The Apostles Peter and Paul brought testimony that those of the nations were saved through the same love and grace of God as Jewish Believers were saved. As Peter told the Council, "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:8-9).

Peter considered that what these men were trying to do was unnecessary and tantamount to tempting God. He said, "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" (Acts 15:10). Any formal conversion to Judaism prior to salvation was not necessary. Peter clearly states, "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Yeshua, in the same way as they also are" (Acts 15:11). Because of this, "All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:12), as they were allowed to testify of the mighty deeds that the God of Israel had done in saving those of the nations. After these testimonies are delivered, James enters the scene and begins to make his ruling on the matter:

"After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, 'Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, "AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID

WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME, SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO” (Acts 15:13-18).

James recognizes the Biblical reality that the salvation of the nations is a part of the restoration of the Tabernacle of David, meaning the whole House of Israel. He makes a direct quotation from Amos 9:11-12, a prophecy detailing the restoration of all Israel:

“In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, and wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by My name,’ declares the LORD who does this.”

The difference between what James says and the Hebrew text in Amos, is that James follows the Septuagint rendering which reads with *hoi kataloipoi tōn anthrōpōn* (οἱ κατάλοιποι τῶν ἀνθρώπων) for the Hebrew *shearit Edom* (שְׂאִרֵי אֶדוֹם). The LXX Rabbis understood *Edom* (אֶדוֹם) to be connected to *adam* (אָדָם), also the Hebrew word for “**mankind, people**” (*HALOT*)<sup>12</sup> and rendered it in Greek as “the remnant of men” (Apostle’s Bible), referring to God’s faithful remnant that would come forth out of humanity’s masses. James makes the connection between the salvation of Israel and those of the nations coming to faith in Israel’s Messiah. James would have had to recognize that a critical part of Israel’s restoration would have been the keeping of the Torah by all coming into the fold. In Ezekiel 37:24, we are told that when all Israel is restored “they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them.” Jeremiah 31:33 says, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it” (cf. Hebrews 8:10). This is all reflected in James’ ruling regarding what the non-Jews were supposed to do upon entering the assembly:

“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:19-21).

The non-Jews coming to faith were required to do four things, deeply rooted in the Torah:

1. Abstain from idolatry and heathen worship (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7).
2. Abstain from fornication and sexual immorality (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 20:10-21; Deuteronomy 5:18).
3. Abstain from non-kosher meat (Deuteronomy 14:2-20).
4. Abstain from blood (Deuteronomy 12:25-35).

When we put ourselves back into the First Century, and we understand the Greco-Roman religious background that most of these non-Jews were coming out of, it makes perfect sense for them to begin their walk of faith by adopting these four things. Much of what we consider Greco-Roman “mythology” as demonstrated by literary works such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or Virgil’s *Aeneid*, had been the “theology” of these non-Jews entering into the assembly. The need for them to be properly disciplined and trained in the truths of the Scriptures cannot be overstated. They needed to be properly instructed in what the God of Israel considered acceptable and unacceptable, so they could cast off their former way of life in paganism.

The placement of the conjunction *gar* (γὰρ) in v. 21, *Mōusēs gar* (Μωϋσῆς γὰρ), “for Moses,” relates to the action to be performed after a series of qualifications is met. As *LS* notes, *gar* means “Conjunct. *for*... regularly placed after the first word of a sentence: *to introduce the reason*.”<sup>13</sup> The non-Jewish Believers were expected to observe God’s Law and given time assert their rightful place as citizens of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:12). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, and not a “forced conversion” or act of the flesh, they were to obey the Torah. James ruled that the new non-Jewish Believers were to go to the local synagogue on *Shabbat*, where the Scriptures would be kept, to hear the Torah taught.

The actions we see from James the Lord’s brother fully align with what is attested of him in early Christian tradition. Christians of the Second and Third Centuries saw James as a very pious and devout man, dedicated to the Torah, the Temple, and Judaism, but also one who was extremely kind, gentle, and loving. James, the brother of the Lord, unquestionably had a very high regard for the place of the Torah. *NIDB* states, “According to Hegesippus (c. A.D. 180), James’s faithful adherence to Jewish law and his austere lifestyle led to the designation ‘the just.’”<sup>14</sup> Referencing Hegesippus, Eusebius writes in his *Ecclesiastical History*,

“James, the brother of the Lord, who, as there were many of this name, was surnamed Just by all, from the days of our Lord until now, received the government of the church with the apostles. This apostle was consecrated from his

<sup>12</sup> *HALOT*, 1:14.

<sup>13</sup> H.G. Lidell, and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 160.

<sup>14</sup> J.D. Douglas, “James,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp 493-494.