

The Three James

<http://www.learnthebible.org/the-three-james.html>

James is the given name for three prominent men in the New Testament. They include two of the twelve apostles and one of the brothers of Jesus. This has caused much confusion as to the identity of the Book of James. We will look at the three men named James and then consider the author of the book.

JAMES THE SON OF ZEBEDEE

The greatest number of Bible references (at least 21) refers to James the son of Zebedee and the brother of the Apostle John ([Matthew 10:2](#)). He is almost certainly the older brother of John since he is mentioned first in 17 of the 18 verses where the two of them are listed together (the exception is in [Luke 9:28](#)). James worked with his brother John, with his father Zebedee ([Matthew 4:21](#)), and with Simon Peter ([Luke 5:10](#)), in the fishing business in the Sea of Galilee ([Mark 1:16](#)). He had certainly been a follower of John the Baptist as were all the early disciples ([Acts 1:21-22](#)). He immediately answered the call to follow Christ when he received it ([Matthew 4:18-22](#)).

When Jesus prayed all night and chose twelve of His disciples to be apostles the next morning ([Luke 15:12-16](#)), James is the third man mentioned (after Peter and his brother Andrew and immediately before John). Jesus called James and his brother John Boanerges, which means the sons of thunder ([Mark 3:17](#)). Both brothers evidently had fiery tempers. They proved this when they sought permission to call fire down on a village of Samaritans who did not receive Jesus ([Luke 9:51-56](#)). They also had the audacity to approach Christ (with their mother – [Matthew 20:20](#)) and ask Him that they might sit on His right hand and left hand in His kingdom ([Matthew 20:20-28](#); [Mark 10:35-44](#)).

Yet, this aggressive tendency did not keep Christ from drawing James into His inner circle. The inner circle of disciples included Peter, James, and John. Only those three went up with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration ([Matthew 17:1](#); [Mark 9:2](#); [Luke 9:28](#)). The same three were taken in to see the raising of the daughter of Jairus from the dead ([Mark 5:37](#); [Luke 8:51](#)). In the Garden of Gethsemane, these three were taken further than the other disciples to pray with the Saviour ([Mark 14:33](#)). On a couple of occasions ([Mark 1:29](#); [Mark 13:3](#)), Andrew was included in a slightly larger inner circle.

But though he knew the intimacy of the Saviour, James was not destined to the visible recognition given to Peter and John. His life for His Lord was to be a short one. In [Acts 12:1-2](#), probably about a dozen years after the death of Christ on the cross, James suffered as the first of the apostles to die of martyrdom. Herod had James executed with the sword. As such, he entered into the presence of God sooner than all the rest.

JAMES THE SON OF ALPHEUS

Though mentioned ten times in the New Testament, we know very little about this James. His father was Alphaeus ([Matthew 10:3](#)) and his mother was evidently Mary ([Mark 16:1](#)). He is called “James the less” ([Mark 15:40](#)). This could mean that he was either younger or shorter than the other apostle by that name.

James the son of Alphaeus is one of the unknown apostles. We know nothing of his particular character and none of his individual actions are recorded in scripture. He is mentioned as being in the upper room as the disciples pray for the promise of the Father ([Acts 1:12-13](#)). Then, he disappears from the divine record. Some have tried to identify him as the same James who is the brother of Jesus. But, since the brethren of Christ did not believe in Him during His lifetime ([John 7:5](#)), this is impossible. Yet, his disappearance from scripture does not mean that he accomplished nothing further for God. Several of the apostles are not mentioned by name after [Acts 1:13](#).

JAMES THE BROTHER OF OUR LORD

This James was not one of the twelve, but was a brother of Jesus in the flesh (being born of Mary and Joseph). He is one of four brothers of Jesus mentioned by the Jews in Nazareth ([Matthew 13:54-55](#); [Mark 6:3](#)). These later sons of Mary explain why Jesus was called her “firstborn son” ([Matthew 1:25](#); [Luke 2:7](#)). The attempts by some to make these cousins and not brothers of Jesus are ill-advised attempts to deny scripture.

James would be included in the brethren of Christ who did not believe in Him during His earthly ministry ([John 7:5](#)). However, something happened around the time of the Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. For one thing, Jesus made a special appearance to James after His resurrection ([1Corinthians 15:7](#)). Then, we see that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and “his brethren” prayed in the upper room before the day of Pentecost ([Acts 1:14](#)). James is now a believer and a disciple.

We do not read about James again until after the death of James the son of Zebedee in Acts, chapter twelve. When the angel of the Lord released Peter from prison, he interrupted the prayer meeting being held for him and told them, "Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren" ([Acts 12:17](#)). By this time, James had a prominent place in the church at Jerusalem.

Paul confirms that this same James was the brother of Jesus. After his salvation, he went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and while there, saw also "James the Lord's brother" ([Galatians 1:18-19](#)). In this same passage, James is now considered one of the apostles. In the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, James gave the conclusion of the conference ([Acts 15:13-21](#)). We see his authority in the statement, "Wherefore my sentence is" ([Acts 15:19](#)). James, so to speak, cast the deciding vote.

James continued to be a force in the church at Jerusalem and by all accounts would be considered its senior pastor. Paul recognized James, along with Cephas (Peter) and John, to be "pillars" in the church ([Galatians 2:9](#)). He also speaks of receiving certain men who "came from James" ([Galatians 2:12](#)).

The last personal reference to James comes late in the book of Acts when Paul came to Jerusalem. Paul was received of James who encouraged him to take a vow with the Jews to demonstrate his continuation in Jewish practices ([Acts 21:18-26](#)). This ended in disaster for Paul, but it shows the character of the Christianity of James. James never left his Jewish practices. Traditionally, he is known for his extreme strictness to the law and is called James the Just. God truly used him in the church at Jerusalem.

THE AUTHOR OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

The question arises, "Who is the author of the book of James?" It begins simply, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting." A "servant of God" could be any of the men known as James. Here are several possible solutions that have been given:

- James, the son of Zebedee
- James, the son of Alphaeus
- James, the brother of Jesus (the most popular choice)
- Both James the son of Alphaeus and the brother of Jesus (by those who think they are the same)
- An unknown James
- Someone who wanted us to think it was written by James (by those who deny scriptural authority)

How are we to make our way through so many choices? In truth, an absolute answer is impossible to determine. Most lean toward James the brother of Jesus. He is prominent in the early church. He is very Jewish in his Christianity and James is the most Jewish of all the epistles. All of this points to James the Lord's brother. But what about the others?

James, the son of Alphaeus, has nothing else written about him. It is just difficult to believe that he would be the author of the book of James. Yet, the book of Jude is written by "the brother of James" ([Jude 1:1](#)). Jude is another form of Judas. And, not only does James the brother of Jesus have a brother named Judas ([Matthew 13:55](#)), so does James the son of Alphaeus ([Luke 6:16](#)).

James, the son of Zebedee, is an interesting possibility. He was in the inner circle. The others in the inner circle, Peter and John, both wrote books in the New Testament. Though he died very early, the book of James was obviously written quite early. He is usually opposed as a choice because of his early death.

Some deny him as a possibility because he writes to the "twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" ([James 1:1](#)); therefore, he must have died too early for believers to be all over. But what happened at Pentecost? Jews came in from all over the world and heard of Jesus in their own tongues. They went back to their own lands, but they believed in Jesus. They were all over. And, as concerning his early death, by most counts he was killed about twelve years after the death of Jesus. Was this not long enough to write a book to the Jews that were scattered abroad? Certainly, this James must be included in the short list.

In conclusion, either James the brother of Jesus or James the son of Zebedee could have written the book of James. Even James the son of Alphaeus cannot be totally discounted. Perhaps, as with other books in the Bible, God did not deem it important that we know for certain the human author. We need only to be certain that the words written are the words of God.

- by David Reagan