



Model of Jerusalem's Temple complex in the first century. Early church tradition states that James regularly prayed in the Temple.

JAMES: ALL WE KNOW

By Robert E. Jones

The name “James” occurs forty times in the New Testament and identifies three prominent men. One of these men is “James, the Lord’s brother” (Gal. 1:19).¹ While scholars have debated the relationship of James and Jesus,² the total body of evidence appears to identify this James as the writer of the letter bearing his name. Indeed, what we see

of James in the Book of Acts and read from him in his letter shows significant similarity.

James initially grew up in Nazareth and then later lived in Capernaum. Until shortly after Jesus’s resurrection, James, along with his siblings, was an unbeliever. Initially, James and his brothers demonstrated a degree of opposition to Jesus’s ministry (John 7:1-5), possibly because of their misunderstanding of Jesus’s teachings. James’s conversion to

belief in Jesus as the promised Messiah took place after experiencing the Lord's personal appearance to him after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7). This post-resurrection appearance then placed James among the earliest witnesses to Jesus's resurrection.

THE PROMINENCE OF JAMES

James stands tall as a person of influence in the New Testament church. Our first encounter with him in the Book of Acts finds James and his brothers identified as part of the group awaiting the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost (Acts 1:14). The picture we find here describes a spirit of oneness among Mary and her sons as they joined those gathered for prayer.

Four subsequent events paint a clear picture of James's influence in the early church. First, by around AD 44, and during the time of Peter's imprisonment and deliverance (Acts 12:6-19), James seems to have become head of the Jerusalem church. After Peter's miraculous release from prison, he instructed those who had been praying for him

to, "Tell these things to James and the brothers" (Acts 12:17). This statement naming James in particular, certainly implies that by this time James had become a recognized authority in the Jerusalem church.

Paul recorded in Galatians 1:18-20 the second event demonstrating James's influence. There Paul stated that three years after his conversion, he went to Jerusalem to see Peter (Acts 9:26-30). During that visit Paul indicated he saw none of the other apostles except James. Once again James is singled out as having an important leadership role among the apostles.

A third, and significant, event that chronicles James's influence in the early church occurred during the critical Acts 15 conference (15:6-29). The position James took at the conference placed him in a mediating role between Paul and the Judaizers who insisted on imposing Jewish law on all Gentile believers. At James's initiative, the counsel drafted a letter to the Gentile believers

placing minimal requirements on them. By siding with Paul in the controversy, James exerted influence upon the council that effectively defeated the Judaizers.

Acts 21:17-25 records a fourth and final event supporting James's influence. When Paul returned to Jerusalem at the conclusion of his third missionary journey, he met with "James, and all the elders" (v. 18), who rejoiced after hearing of Paul's work among the Gentiles (v. 20). Because of a common view among the Jews that Paul was a law-breaker (v. 21), James and the elders suggested that Paul should demonstrate his attention to ritual matters. He could do so by paying for the sacrifices of four men who had completed their Nazirite vows. James brought up the idea, not because he thought Paul was a law-breaker, but because others who were zealous for the law believed it. We can conclude from this event that James possessed a zeal for the law and a consideration for not offending the many thousands of believing

Jews (v. 20). This position did not necessarily put James in conflict with Paul, however. In his letter James made clear that faith was a fundamental aspect of the Christian life. But he also believed that faith should be active, that one's lifestyle should correspond to one's faith. In this sense, James saw works as an essential means for demonstrating genuine faith.

A concluding summary statement of James's prominence in the New Testament church is in Galatians 2:9, where Paul listed James first among Cephas and John as "pillars" of the church. The Greek word *stulos* referred to "a column supporting the weight of the building."³ In a metaphorical sense, the term denoted "those who bear responsibility in the churches,"⁴ in essence making James a pillar in the church. By extending the right hand of fellowship to Paul and Barnabas, James demonstrated his approval of these men's missionary work to the Gentiles. For Paul no other James played such a recognized part in his ministry.

EXTRA-BIBLICAL SOURCES

For a deeper understanding of James's character, we turn to an extra-biblical source. Hegesippus, a writer from early in the second century, preserved a description of James by the early church father, Eusebius. According to Eusebius, those who knew James referred to him as "James the Just," the bishop of Jerusalem. The description goes on to indicate that James regularly entered the temple alone and often prayed on his knees. This resulted in his knees becoming callused as a camel's knees because of his constant kneeling before God. While reasons exist for not taking this account literally, it still may have some basis in fact. At the heart it demonstrates the respect and honor the early church gave to James.

The historian, Josephus, provides information about James's death. He stated that James died after the death of the Roman governor Festus, who sent Paul to Rome in AD 62 (Acts 25), and before the arrival of Albinus, his successor.

According to the account, the high priest Ananus, taking advantage of a perceived opportunity, called James and others before a council of judges where James was found guilty of breaking the Jewish law and was subsequently stoned to death.⁵ This would place James's death around AD 62, bringing to an end his life of powerful influence in the New Testament church.

1. The two other prominent men names are James, the son of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21) and James, the son of Alphaeus (10:3).

2. For further information on this subject, see James B. Adamson, *James: The Man & His Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 19, footnote 89.

3. W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, vol. 3, in *Vine's Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1981), 184.

4. Ibid.

5. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1. Hegesippus added that James was thrown down from the temple and then beaten to death with clubs. These details seem too improbable to believe, however. See Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.

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