# Authorship of James: Who He Was and Why He Matters

So, before we get into the text of the letter itself, I want to take a step back and spend some time on a question I think is genuinely worth sitting with. And the question is simply this: who wrote this letter, and does it actually matter who wrote it?
I want to make the case that it does matter. Quite a lot, actually. So stay with me.

The letter opens simply. Just four words in the original language. James. A servant. God. Lord Jesus Christ.
No titles. No credentials. No 'apostle by the will of God' like Paul tends to open with. No long description of who he is or why you should listen. Just a name.

Which immediately raises a question. Which James?

Because there are a few of them in the New Testament. James the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' inner circle. James the son of Alphaeus, who gets a mention in a list and then essentially disappears from the record. And then there is James, the brother of Jesus, who led the church in Jerusalem and who the early Christians called James the Just.

The first James was executed by Herod Agrippa around AD 44. That rules him out almost entirely, given when we think this letter was written.

The second James we know almost nothing about.

So the weight of evidence, and the view held by most scholars who take this letter seriously, is that we are looking at James the brother of Jesus. And when you understand who that actually was, everything in this letter takes on a different kind of weight.
Let me tell you a little about this man, because I think he deserves more attention than he often gets.

James grew up in the same household as Jesus. Mark chapter 6 names him, alongside three other brothers, Joses, Judas, and Simon. He would have shared meals with Jesus. Worked alongside him. Watched him grow up.

And yet, from what the Gospel of John tells us, the brothers of Jesus did not believe in him during his lifetime. Whatever that looked like in practice, James was not among the followers.
Something changed that.

Paul, in First Corinthians chapter 15, lists the appearances of the risen Jesus. And in that list he says: 'Then he appeared to James.' Not just to the twelve. To James, specifically. By name.

Think about what that means. The brother who grew up with Jesus. Who saw his whole life. Who, for whatever reason, had not believed. And then he encounters the risen Christ, face to face. From that point on, James was all in.

By the time we reach the book of Acts, he is at the centre of the early church. When Peter escapes from prison and needs to get word out, the instruction is: go and tell James. When Paul visits Jerusalem, James is who he meets. When the whole church gathers for the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 to settle the most pressing theological question of the movement, it is James who speaks the final word. The decisive one.

Paul, writing to the Galatians, calls him one of the pillars of the church. Alongside Peter and John. And James is the first name on that list.

Now, the early sources that describe James as a person paint a portrait that is, to put it plainly, remarkable. The second-century historian Hegesippus, whose accounts were preserved by Eusebius, gives us the most detailed picture we have. He describes James as holy from birth. He says James drank no wine, ate no meat, never cut his hair, never anointed himself with oil, and took no baths. He entered the sanctuary alone to pray for the people. And Hegesippus says that James prayed so constantly, and spent so many hours on his knees, that the skin of his knees had become calloused like those of a camel.

Now, Hegesippus was writing about a century after James's death, and accounts of revered figures tend to gather detail over time. Scot McKnight is careful about this, noting that the more dramatic elements likely represent ornamental elaboration around a core of genuine memory. But McKnight also concludes that the portrait holds up. We have a James who is pious, focused on righteousness, identified as a man of prayer across multiple independent sources, including the First and Second Apocalypse of James, and whose life of self-denial is consistent across traditions that had no obvious reason to coordinate. The core is credible. And it coheres with the letter itself in striking ways. The letter's emphasis on prayer, on purity, on concern for the poor, on the danger of divided loyalties, all of it maps onto the James that history remembers.

There is also the account of his death. Josephus, who was not a Christian and had no stake in making James look good, records that in AD 62 the high priest Ananus convened the Sanhedrin and had James stoned. The Pharisees were so offended by the illegality of it that they complained to the Roman governor. And Hegesippus adds this detail: that as the crowd turned on James, someone cried out, "Stop. The just one is praying for you."

Whether or not that specific moment is precisely as described, the fact that this was the kind of thing people said about him tells you something about the reputation he had built.
This was a man for whom faith was not theoretical. It had cost him everything.

And here is why that matters for reading the letter.
When James writes about trials, he is not writing from a comfortable distance. When he talks about wisdom, he is not offering principles he read somewhere. When he talks about prayer in chapter 5, about Elijah being a man of like nature to us, he is writing as someone whose own knees knew what intercession felt like.

That is the voice behind these words.
Not every scholar lands in the same place on who wrote this letter in its final form. So let me walk you through where the serious conversation actually sits, because it is more interesting than a simple yes or no.
The question that tends to create the most friction is the Greek. This letter is written in polished, rhetorically sophisticated prose. Some scholars find it difficult to reconcile that with what they imagine a Galilean craftsman's son could have produced.

Peter Davids, whose 1982 commentary remains one of the most careful treatments of the letter, proposes what he calls a two-stage composition. His suggestion is that James the Just provided the original material, probably in the form of homilies and teaching, and that a later editor with strong Greek ability compiled and shaped those into the letter form we now have. On this reading, the voice and the theology are genuinely James's. The literary polish may belong to someone working with his material, either with his knowledge or after his death. Davids is comfortable saying the letter belongs to James in every meaningful sense, regardless of who held the pen at the final stage.

Scot McKnight, writing in 2011, comes to a similar conclusion from a slightly different angle. He is frank that the arguments against traditional authorship are real but not conclusive. He leans toward James the brother of Jesus as the genuine author, places the letter in the 50s AD, and makes a point worth sitting with: the simplicity of the opening, just a name, no titles, no 'brother of the Lord' or 'elder in Jerusalem' or 'apostle of Christ', actually works against the idea of pseudonymity. A writer inventing an authoritative James would almost certainly have dressed the opening with more credentials, not fewer. The restraint is itself a mark of authenticity.

Ralph Martin, writing with Andrew Chester, takes a broadly similar position to Davids. He allows for the possibility of a Jamesian tradition that was later shaped into letter form, but keeps James the Just as the source and authority behind the content.
Dale Allison, in his 2013 critical commentary, takes the most sceptical position of the four scholars I have been drawing on for this series. He argues that the letter is pseudonymous, written in James's name around AD 100 to 120, by someone who wanted to represent the kind of faith James was remembered for. Allison is rigorous and his arguments deserve serious engagement. But it is worth noting that even he acknowledges the letter's content is remarkably consistent with what we know of James. The piety, the prayer life, the concern for the poor, the Torah observance, the appeal to all the tribes. He concludes that whoever wrote this letter knew the tradition around James deeply, and wrote from inside it.

Whether or not James held the pen, the letter carries his imprint. Where does that leave us? We cannot prove with absolute certainty who wrote this letter in its final form. What we can say is that the weight of the evidence points toward James the Just as at minimum the source and the authority behind everything in it. The simplicity of the greeting, the Palestinian texture of the content, the saturation with Jesus' own teaching, the early stage of theological development the letter reflects, all of it points in the same direction. That is where I land. And I think that is enough to take the letter seriously on its own terms.

The letter is addressed to 'the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.' That phrase is doing something important. It reaches out to Jewish followers of Jesus who were scattered across the Mediterranean world, outside the land of Israel. Communities in cities across Asia Minor, North Africa, Syria. People living as minorities in environments that often did not welcome them.

And the pressures they were under were not abstract. Economic hardship was real and constant. Many of these communities were poor, at the mercy of wealthier landowners and merchants. Social status determined almost everything about how you were treated, who listened to you, what opportunities you had. And spiritually, they were trying to hold a living faith together in the middle of ordinary life, with all the friction and temptation and the pull toward simply blending in and making it easier.

James writes into that world. That is why so much of this letter is direct and practical. He is not writing to people with leisure for abstract theology. He is writing to people who need to know: how do I hold my faith together when life is hard? How do I treat the poor person who walks into our gathering? How do I use my words without destroying the people around me? How do I pray when nothing seems to be happening?

Does any of that sound familiar?

Because I think that is exactly why this letter still has teeth. It was not written for a comfortable, settled community. It was written for people navigating difficulty in real time. People like us. Let me bring this home, because I am aware some of you might be wondering why we are spending a whole episode on background before we have even opened the letter properly.

Here is why.

Knowing who is speaking changes how you hear what they say. If a stranger tells you to trust God in the middle of suffering, it lands differently than if the person saying it has been through the fire themselves and is still standing. Context is not just academic housekeeping. It is the thing that gives a text its full weight. James is not offering us tidy principles from a safe distance. He is writing as a man who grew up sceptical of his own brother's claims, who encountered the risen Jesus, who led the mother church of the Christian movement for decades, who prayed until his knees wore out, and who in the end was killed for what he believed.

When a person like that tells you that trials produce endurance, you listen differently. When he tells you that wisdom is available to anyone who asks for it, that God gives generously without reproach, you feel the weight of someone who had personally tested that and found it to be true.

The Letter of James is not a relic. It is a living word from a man who paid everything for it. And I hope and pray that as we go through it together, that becomes more and more clear.
In the next episode, we will go deeper into the tradition James is writing from. The Jewish wisdom world that shaped him, and what that means for how we hear what he says.

But for now, I want to leave you with just this.

James came to faith because he encountered the risen Jesus. Not because someone made a compelling argument. Not because he grew up in the right environment. Because he came face to face with his brother, risen from the dead.

That is the man writing to us. It is worth taking seriously.