

29.9

Which Jude? Jude Confusion in the Bible and in the Church

The Letter of Jude identifies its author as “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James” (v. 1). Two people are known to us who might fit that designation.

Jude the Brother of Jesus

Jesus had four brothers: James, Simon, Joseph, and Jude (Matt. 13:55). While Jesus was alive on earth, Jude probably would not have been referred to as “Jude, the brother of James”; he would have been called “Jude, the brother of Jesus” (out of respect for the eldest sibling). But after Jesus’s death, it would have been natural for him to be called “Jude the brother of James,” since James would now be his oldest living brother. This would be especially likely in view of his brother James becoming widely known throughout the Christian world as the leader of the Christian church.

As a Christian, Jude may also have thought it inappropriate to refer to himself as “Jude, the brother of Jesus” because, like other Christians, he thought of himself as “a servant of Jesus.” But he may have continued to identify himself as a “brother of James” even after that sibling was martyred (ca. 62).

Jude the Disciple of Jesus

One of Jesus's twelve disciples was named Jude (Luke 6:16; John 14:22; Acts 1:13), and, by coincidence, this Jude was also related to someone named "James." The Greek expression used to identify him in Luke 6:16 (literally, "Jude of James") probably means "Jude the son of James," but it was translated "Jude the brother of James" in the KJV. Thus, in that particular translation of the Bible, Jesus has both a brother who could be called "Jude the brother of James" and a disciple who could be called "Jude the brother of James," though these are clearly two different people.

Throughout the centuries, almost all biblical interpreters have thought that the "Jude the brother of James" identified as the author of the Letter of Jude is the first of these two figures—the Jude who was one of Jesus's four siblings, not the Jude who was one of his twelve disciples. Not surprisingly, however, there has been considerable "Jude confusion" over the years; the two Judes often are mixed up, and sometimes they are morphed together into one person, such that Jesus ends up calling one of his four siblings to be one of his twelve disciples.