

James and Other Brothers of Jesus

The Synoptic Gospels report that Jesus had four brothers—James, Joses, Judas, and Simon—plus an unknown number of sisters whose names are also unknown (Mark 6:3). Since James is listed first, he is often thought to be the oldest of these brothers, although perhaps he is listed first simply because he was the one who became best known.

The Gospels indicate that the brothers of Jesus did not “believe in him” during the time of his ministry (John 7:5). At one point they attempt to seize him and take him home for a forced retirement from doing and saying things that are leading people to think he is “beside himself” (Mark 3:21, 31–35). The Gospel of John even presents Jesus on the cross choosing one of his disciples to care for his mother after his death, which seems like an affront to James and his other brothers (John 19:25–27).

After Easter, things changed. Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians that the risen Jesus appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7). The book of Acts indicates that the brothers of Jesus (all of them?) were part of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14) and, apparently, were present for the great event on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). A short while later, James appears to be the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 21:18). He presides over the apostolic council described in Acts 15 and offers a final authoritative ruling that he expects to be disseminated and accepted by Christians everywhere (Acts 15:19–29; 21:25).

James's importance as a leader in the church is also acknowledged by Paul in Galatians, albeit somewhat grudgingly (Gal. 1:19; 2:6, 9). Paul disagreed sharply with James's policies regarding the continued relevance of certain markers of Jewish identity within the Christian community (Gal. 2:11–14). Still, he devoted a considerable portion of his ministry to supervising a collection for Christians in Jerusalem, where James was the recognized leader (Rom. 15:25–29; 2 Cor. 8–9).

The Jewish historian Josephus reports that James was murdered in 62 (see *Jewish Antiquities* 20.199–201). During an interim between on-site Roman rulers (when “Festus was dead and Albinus was still on the way”), the high priest Ananus II seized the opportunity to move against those whom he considered to be “lawbreakers.” He convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and delivered James and certain others to be stoned. Josephus notes that “the inhabitants of the city who were considered to be the most fair-minded and who were strict in their observance of the law were offended at this.” Furthermore, Josephus maintains that the action was judged to be illegal, and Ananus II subsequently was deposed by the new procurator on this account. A later Christian tradition, reported by Clement of Alexandria (third century), says that James was killed by being thrown off the pinnacle of the temple, but this account is generally regarded as legendary.

Other traditions about James emphasize his traditional Jewish piety and his devotion to the law. Eusebius (fourth century) reports that he received his nickname “the Just” because he lived as a Nazirite, an ascetic who was especially devoted to God. Another oft-repeated tradition (reported by Eusebius) holds that James spent so much time praying in the temple that his knees became as calloused as those of a camel.

The apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* (first or second century) contains an overwhelmingly positive affirmation of James. In one curious passage, Jesus’s disciples ask him who their leader will be after he departs; he answers, “You are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being” (*Gospel of Thomas* 12).

We have only a little information about the other brothers of Jesus. Paul refers to them as Christian missionaries, noting specifically that (unlike him) they were married and often accompanied by their wives (1 Cor. 9:5). Judas (= Jude) is the putative author of another New Testament letter.