

## Was “James the Brother of the Lord” the same Person as the “Apostle James Son of Alphaeus”?

I was challenged by a courteous and studious man who will remain anonymous.

He wrote:

Dear Steve, I was just watching you with Matt Frad on a video on his channel that premiered on 25 May 2020:

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcP\\_XzPopY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcP_XzPopY)

At the 47.10 mark **you said that James the bishop of Jerusalem was not "James the apostle" but James the cousin of Jesus.**

I think you misspoke. As you surely know, there were two apostles named "James": James son of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus.

You may already know this, but in case you don't:

The Papias fragment c.100-163 says (but without the subscripts):

- "Mary<sub>1</sub> the mother of the Lord; Mary<sub>2</sub> the wife of Cleophas or Alphaeus, who was the mother of **James<sub>2</sub>** the bishop and apostle, and of **Simon** and **Thaddeus** , and of one **Joseph**; Mary<sub>3</sub> Salome, wife of Zebedee, mother of John the evangelist and **James<sub>1</sub>**; Mary<sub>4</sub> Magdalene. These four are found in the Gospel."

The fragment appears in

- Coxe, C., ed. The Ante-Nicene Fathers, volume 1, page 151. Michigan: Eerdman's publishing company, reprint 1993
- also at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/early-church-fathers/ante-nicene/vol-1-apostolic-with-justin-martyr-irenaeus/barnabas/fragments-of-papias.html>

The names **James, Simon, Thaddeus** and **Joseph** correspond to the "brothers" of Jesus identified in Matt 13:55 ("James and Joseph and Simon and Judas") since Thaddeus = Judas (as appears from comparing the lists of apostles in Matthew 10:1-4, Mark 3:16-19, Luke 6:14-16).

So assuming that the Papias fragment is genuine, James the bishop of Jerusalem was probably not only Jesus's brother/cousin (cf. Matt 13:55) but also the apostle identified as James the son of Alphaeus.

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I responded:

Thanks for writing and for the info, but I did not misspeak though I often do :-)

When I said "James the bishop of Jerusalem was not the bishop of Jerusalem", I was referring to James the brother of John and son of Zebedee and Salome. He was killed by the sword in Acts 12:2. He is the well-known James and I did not take the time (which I didn't have) to spend time explaining that in detail.

There are four Jameses in the NT and it is not always easy keeping them straight. Matthew tells us of four of Jesus' "brothers" which could be step brothers if Joseph was a widower with other kids, or cousins if Joseph was a younger man.

We know that Jesus' "brothers" did not believe in him and mocked him during his ministry (John 7:3-5) so it is doubtful that James the son of Alphaeus could be one of the Twelve disciples—soon to be apostles.

Tradition informs us that James, the bishop of Jerusalem, was one of Jesus's brothers who became a believer after the

resurrection. Even though many consider James the son of Alphaeus is seems unlikely to me. That would make him the stepbrother or cousin of Jesus and there is nothing to imply that in the Gospels or Acts as far as I can see.

But there is the possibility. There are various opinions on the identify of the Jameses in the New Testament.

But again, my point was that the writer of the Epistle of James, and the James at the Council in Jerusalem, was not the well known James the son of Zebedee.

Thanks again for writing and God bless you. Merry Christmas.

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My friend responded:

Dear Stephen,

Thanks for taking the trouble to reply to me.

I was not taking issue with your main point, namely that James the bishop of Jerusalem was not James son of Zebedee but James the "brother" of Jesus. I agree with that.

I was taking issue with the assertion that James the bishop of Jerusalem was not also an apostle.

You seem to incline to the view that Jesus' "brothers" were related to him through Joseph. I incline to the view that they were related to him through Mary's "sister" mentioned in John 19:25

- "standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene."

I was persuaded by Jerome's argument in *Against Helvidius*.

I would deal with John 7:3-5 by saying that it might only be referring to those of Jesus' brothers who were present during the incident it refers to.

You wrote that "Tradition informs us that James, the bishop of Jerusalem, was one of Jesus's brothers who became a believer after the resurrection". Where is that tradition recorded and why is it more reliable than Papias?

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My final response to his second e-mail where I think we put the issue to rest.

Friend:

My main point in my talk with Matt was that James the son of Zebedee was not the author of the epistle. Most people do not realize that. That was my point. It was not the Apostle James who wrote the epistle. I was not trying to make a case for or against whether James the Less was a brother of Jesus or not or whether he was the brother of Jesus was one and the same with James the Less (or son of Alphaeus).

There are good men and good arguments on both sides of this issue and I doubt that what has not been conclusively proven one way or the other over the centuries will be resolved without question here either.

Having said that, I do not believe that the James the brother of the Lord is one and the same with James the son of Alphaeus. However, at the same time, since it presumed to be so by other good men, I do not deny it is a possibility. I could leave it there, but I do love these kind of discussions so here I go. I do refer here

to the Catholic Jerome's Biblical Commentary and the UBS Handbook on Galatians from a series which gives linguistic assistance for Bible translators. Both are excellent sources but I could have multiplied them many fold but chose not to do so for the sake of time and space.

## THE WORD "APOSTLE" NOT EXCLUSIVE OF THE TWELVE

First let's deal with fact James the brother of the Lord is referred to as an apostle in Galatians 1:9. This was not an exclusive title for the Twelve. They were of course witnesses to the resurrection and held that title in a unique way (Acts 1:21-26). Granted. But others were also known as apostle who were not of the band of Twelve.

Acts 14:4, 14 "But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles (referring to Paul and Barnabas) ... But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd."

Romans 16:7 "Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me."

*("They are well known among the apostles has been understood by some to mean "the apostles know them well," but a far more acceptable interpretation would imply that these men were counted as apostles and were well known, for example, "as apostles they are well known." (Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene Albert Nida, A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1973), 292.)*

2 Corinthians 8:23 "As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, they are messengers (Greek "apostle, ἀπόστολος) of the churches, a glory to Christ."

Philippians 2:25 "But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger (Greek "apostle, ἀπόστολος) and minister to my need."

Thus, calling James the brother of the Lord an "apostle" does not prove he was one of the Twelve.

"In any case, it is most doubtful that James and Judas (Jude) or any of "the brothers of Jesus" were members of the Twelve. "The brothers" did not believe in Jesus during the ministry (Jn 7:5; Mk 3:21, 31 —if the "friends" are "the brothers") and were not among his most intimate followers. Passages like Acts 1:13-14; 1 Cor 15:5-7 distinguish between the Twelve and "the brothers," and this distinction is implied in Mk 3:13-19 compared with 3:31. In particular, James the brother of Jesus, if he is the son of Clopas, is clearly not that member of the Twelve identified as James the son of Alphaeus (of whom we know nothing), despite Jerome's attempt to identify Clopas and Alphaeus.

"Thus, among Jesus' acquaintances we seem to have three men named James: (1) James son of Zebedee, "the Greater," one of the Twelve (→ 164 above); (2) James son of Alphaeus, one of the Twelve; (3) James, presumably son of Clopas, "the Less" (Mk 15:40 = the smaller or younger), a "brother" of Jesus, later "bishop" of Jerusalem, traditional author of an epistle, an apostle in the broad sense of the word (Gal 1:19?), but not one of the Twelve. (Raymond Edward Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland Edmund Murphy, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 796.)

## HIS BROTHERS DID NOT BELIEVE IN HIM, THUS WERE NOT APOSTLES

It was also my point that the brothers did not believe in him. I know you dismissed that argument, but it is a solid one. If Galatians 1:19 is the only biblical verse that one uses to argue James was one of the Twelve, it is a very weak peg to hang a hat upon.

In John 7:3-5 it doesn't differentiate James out of the "band of brothers." Nowhere in the gospels or Acts is it ever implied that the son of Alphaeus was the brother of our Lord. That would have been a much better designation by the gospel writers to make him known or to describe his family if at least once it said in the list of the Twelve that the second James son of Alphaeus was the brother of the Lord. It never says "the brothers of the Lord, except James who was one of the Twelve" or "most of the brothers of the Lord." It seems pretty clear that these band of "brothers" were not followers, disciples or apostles.

The normal way of reading, "*Even his brothers did not believe in him*" implies them all. Otherwise it would have stated "some of his brothers."

The brothers of the Lord are also differentiated from the listed Twelve in the Upper Room at Pentecost. Acts 1:13–14 "They went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, **James the son of Alphaeus** and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women **and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.**" Notice it does not say, "the rest of his brothers" thereby excluding James.

They are also differentiated in 1 Corinthians 9:5 "Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brethren of the Lord and Cephas?"

The implication in 1 Corinthians 15 also seems to segregate James from the Twelve: 1 Corinthians 15:5–9 "and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James (not with the appellation: "son of Alphaeus"), then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God."

## REGARDING GALATIANS 1:19 AND THE REFERENCE TO APOSTLE

There are good commentators that are convinced that James is the son of Alphaeus. I grant that. Here is an example from Cornelius à Lapide, though he reveals that St. Jerome holds a position contrary to his:

"S. Jerome hints both here and in his book on Ecclesiastical Writers, when writing of James, that this James was not of the twelve Apostles, but was called an Apostle, only because he had seen Christ and preached Him. In this case we have three of the name of James—the brother of John, slain by Herod; the son of Alphæus, both of whom were Apostles; and this brother of the Lord. But since this brother of the Lord is called an Apostle, and there is no cogent reason for distinguishing him from James the Apostle and son of Alphæus, when, indeed, there are many reasons why we should identify them, the first opinion seems the better one."



Cornelius à Lapide, *The Great Commentary of Cornelius À Lapide: II Corinthians and Galatians*, trans. W. F. Cobb, vol. 8 (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1908), 233–234.

I would agree with St. Jerome and disagree with Lapide that there are cogent arguments against it, that he “is called an Apostle” in Galatians, only if you maintain that less likely interpretation.

I would suggest that since Galatians 1:19 could be interpreted in two legitimate ways and which most scholars I’ve found suggest the interpretation that James was important, but the wording excludes him from the Twelve. See the last quote I provide in this letter for more on that.

To use this passage as the main argument for James the brother of the Lord being one of the Twelve is very wobbly. First, its’ translation and interpretation are not clear and second, because the word apostle here could refer to one of the Twelve or to an apostle in general since the word was used of others outside the Twelve as demonstrated above.

Regarding Gal 1:19: *but only James*: Or possibly, “except James.” The conj. *ei mē* can be either adversative (“but,” as in Gal 2:16; Mt 12:4), or exceptive. If the first meaning is correct (and it seems preferable), then James is distinguished from the apostles. If the second is used, then James is said to be an apostle; but this does not mean that he is to be identified either with James, son of Zebedee, or James, son of Alphaeus. James, the “brother” of the Lord, was the first “bishop” of Jerusalem, but not one of the Twelve.” (Raymond Edward Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland Edmund Murphy, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 239.)

"Not only did Paul stay in Jerusalem for only a brief time; but also he did not see anyone except Peter and James. As *TEV* indicates, the phrase *except James* presents a problem of interpretation. Does Paul mean to include James with the apostles? If that is the case, he is saying that he saw no other apostle except James. Or does Paul exclude James from the apostolic group? In that case he is saying "I did not see any of the other apostles; I only saw James" (as in the *TEV* footnote and in *JB*). Either interpretation of the Greek is possible.

"*James* is probably the same person mentioned in Mark 6:3 as Jesus' brother and is referred to simply as James in Galatians 2:9, 12; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Acts 15:13; 21:18. He was known in later tradition as the first bishop of the church in p 25 Jerusalem. He should be distinguished from James the Son of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus, who were two of the Twelve (Matt 10:2–3).

"Depending upon the interpretation which is adopted, the exception of *James* may be introduced as "I saw only James," or "the only other apostle was James." One may then introduce the apposition as a separate sentence: "He is the brother of our Lord." In this rendering *the Lord* is often expressed as "our Lord," since in many languages the relation of people to the Lord must be indicated." (Daniel C. Arichea and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1976), 24–25.)

## RELATIVE OF JOSEPH OR OF MARY

I think James could very well be the one mentioned in John 19:25. The *Catechism* refers to a James and Joseph as sons of "another Mary" in Matthew's gospel.

**500** Against this doctrine the objection is sometimes raised that the Bible mentions brothers and sisters of Jesus. The Church has always understood these passages as not referring to other children of the Virgin Mary. In fact James and Joseph, “brothers of Jesus,” are the sons of another Mary, a disciple of Christ, whom St. Matthew significantly calls “the other Mary.” They are close relations of Jesus, according to an Old Testament expression.

If it is true that Joseph was an older man with children from a previous marriage, as the *Protoevangelium of James* (purported author is the same as James the Bishop of Jerusalem and brother of the Lord), says, then James could and might be a step brother of Jesus. This document was highly regarded in the early Church, the source of the names Joachim and Anna, and why most artwork portrays Joseph as an older man.

My wife and I were also very impressed with St. Jerome’s *Treatise Against Helvidius* which helped us over the hurdles we had on May during our conversion.

Regarding the proper identity of “the other Mary” at the foot of the cross, I have copied an article I had read a while back at <https://aleteia.org/2019/07/18/did-the-virgin-mary-have-a-sister> The following indented paragraphs are the text of that article. I don’t think John 19:25 does anything to suggest that James the brother of the Lord was James the son of Alphaeus. This would seem very speculative and weak.

Regarding the parents of The New Testament contains relatively little information about the the Virgin Mary, not even mentioning her parents by name. Most of the information we have is from extra-biblical writings from the first few centuries of the Church, and is not completely reliable. However, the Bible does give us a passing reference to a potential sibling of the Virgin Mary.

Among those standing next to Jesus' cross on Mt. Calvary is a "Mary of Clopas," whom St. John identifies as Mary's sister. *[S]tanding by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. (John: 19:25)*. This is the only mention of her in the entire Bible and biblical scholars have had differing views as to the correct interpretation.

For example, according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "St. Jerome would identify this Alpheus with Cleophas who, according to Hegesippus, was brother to St. Joseph. In this case Mary of Cleophas, or Alpheus, would be the sister-in-law of the Blessed Virgin, and the term 'sister,' *adelphē*, in [John 19:25](#), would cover this."

Others have tried to identify Mary of Clopas as the mother of St. James the apostle. This would be consistent with the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, who identify a different Mary at the foot of the cross. *'There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.'* ([Mark 15:40](#))

This doesn't rule out that these two Marys are the same person, both the sister (or sister-in-law) of the Virgin Mary and the mother of St. James.

Whether the Virgin Mary had other siblings is not known. Tradition claims that Sts. Joachim and Anne experienced infertility before conceiving the Virgin Mary, though it does not comment on whether they had other children after giving birth for the first time.

The Bible doesn't give us all the details regarding the Virgin Mary's family, but that wasn't necessary at the time it was written. Many in Israel knew her family and didn't need every detail laid out. It is a good question, one that won't be fully revealed to us until the end of our short lives here on earth."

## REGARDING EARLY TRADITION AND PAPIAS

Regarding early tradition suggesting that James the Righteous, brother of the Lord and bishop of Jerusalem was not James the son of Alphaeus and one of the Twelve — and that purportedly Papias declares him to be one of the Twelve. Just a side note, the citation for Papias's quote is on page 155 in my Eerdman's edition.

**First, and this really ends this part of the discussion, that quote from Papias is not from Papias.**

I have six editions of the Fathers of the Church in both software form and book sets. This quote purportedly from Papias exists in none of the editions except the Eerdmans Vol. 1 published in 1885. Subsequent research has not included this quote because it was determined not to be genuine.

In fact, if you read the footnote 6 next to the large X (No. 10) on page 155 you will see it says, "This fragment was found by Grabe in a ms. of the Bodleian Library, with the inscription on the margin, "Papia." Westcott states that it forms part of a dictionary written by **"a mediæval Papias.** [He seems to have added the words, "Maria is called *Illuminatrix*, or *Star of the Sea*," etc, a middle-age device.] The dictionary exists in ms. both at Oxford and Cambridge." (Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885).

But we do have ancient tradition in the words of St. Jerome I provided earlier.

Also St. John Chrysostom, commenting on John 7:1-5 and the brothers who did not believe, "What unbelief, saith some one, is here [with the unbelieving brothers]? They exhort Him to work miracles. It is great deed; for of unbelief come their words, and their insolence, and their unseasonable freedom of speech. For they thought, that owing to their relationship, it was lawful for them to address Him boldly. ... But observe, I pray you, the power of Christ. Of those who said these things, one became first Bishop of Jerusalem, the blessed James, of whom Paul saith, "Other of the Apostles saw I none, save James, the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:19). (John Chrysostom, "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. John," in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of St. John and Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. G. T. Stupart, vol. 14, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 173–174.)

From Eusebius, "The chair of James, who first received the episcopate of the church at Jerusalem from the Saviour himself and the apostles, and who, as the divine records show, was called a brother of Christ, has been preserved until now." (Eusebius of Caesaria, "The Church History of Eusebius," in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, vol. 1, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 305.)

Comments on the writings of Augustine and others with no suggestion of James being one of the Twelve. "The interpretation by Augustine of this important encyclical authored by St. James would be of special interest, for St. James held an eminent place among early Christians. He was a relative of Christ (cf. Matt.

10:3), was sometimes referred to as His brother (cf. Gal. 1:19; Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3), was a witness of the Resurrection according to St. Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 15:7), the first Bishop of Jerusalem according to tradition, and a martyr (62) according to Eusebius and Hegesippus. (Augustine of Hippo, *The Retractations*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Mary Inez Bogan, vol. 60, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 187.)

Jerome: "after our Lord's passion at once ordained **by the apostles** bishop of Jerusalem (my note: [never suggesting that he himself was actually ONE of the apostles]), wrote a single epistle, which is reckoned among the seven Catholic Epistles and even this is claimed by some to have been published by some one else under his name, and gradually, as time went on, to have gained authority. Hegesippus who lived near the apostolic age, in the fifth book of his Commentaries, writing of James, says "**After the apostles, James the brother of the Lord** surnamed the Just was made head of the Church at Jerusalem. Many indeed are called James. This one was holy from his mother's womb." NOTICE, "after the apostles" which excludes him from their band of Twelve." (Jerome, "Lives of Illustrious Men," in *Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, Rufinus: Historical Writings, Etc.*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Ernest Cushing Richardson, vol. 3, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), 361.)

There is a wonderful new set entitled *The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture* published by Baker Academic and edited by two good friends of mine and very orthodox scripture scholars — Dr. Peter Williamson and Dr. Mary Healy. I conclude with their comments on Galatians 1:19:

**Galatians 1:19** Verse 19 is a bit ambiguous: **But I did not see any other of the apostles, only James.** This sentence could imply that James was one of the apostles or that James was *not* one of the apostles but nevertheless someone important. The second meaning is preferable since the Gospels do not list this particular James among the Twelve. This James also appears in the list of appearances of the risen Christ, where Paul distinguishes between Jesus' appearing "to the Twelve" and his later appearing to James (1 Cor 15:5, 7). Paul specifies that the James he is speaking about was **the brother of the Lord.** By saying "*the* brother," Paul distinguishes this James from others who were not part of Jesus' family. The Gospels name two: "James, the son of Zebedee" and "James, the son of Alphaeus" (Matt 10:2–3). The use of the article "the" does not mean that James was the only brother of Jesus, since the Gospels indicate that Jesus had other "brothers" and "sisters." Paul himself speaks in the plural about "the brothers of the Lord," distinguishing this category from that of "the apostles" (1 Cor 9:5). In Palestinian Judaism, "brother" could refer to many different kinds of relatives, including cousins. Paul's word choice suggests that the expression had become a title of honor; he says not merely "the brother of Jesus" but "the brother of the Lord," pointing to the relationship of James with the glorified Christ. Acts speaks of this James as a leader of the Jerusalem church (see Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18).

Albert Vanhoye and Peter S. Williamson, *Galatians*, ed. Peter S. Williamson and Mary Healy, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 55.

At this point I signed off with greetings, thanks and warm regards.