

Ya'akov (Ya'akov) ~ Part 1

Background

I thought I would approach this series with a little more of the background information I have from some of my trusted commentaries.

Who Is Ya'akov?

Of all the persons named **Ya'akov** in the **Brit Hadashah** (**Ya'akov**, son of **Zebedee**: Mattityahu 4:21; **Ya'akov**, son of **Alphaeus**: Mattityahu 10:3; **Ya'akov** the father of the apostle **Judas** [not **Iscariot**]: **Luke** 6:16; **Ya'akov** the **Less** the son of **Mariam**: Mark 15:40), no one is as crucial to the development of the early church as **Ya'akov**, the **Lord's brother**. Yet, his name appears only eight times in the **Brit Hadasah** (Mattityahu 13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 12:17; 15:13–29; 21:17–26; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1–2; and Jude 1:1). His name is first mentioned in Mark 6:3 (see also Mattityahu 13:55), in the narrative of **Yeshua's** rejection in Nazareth. Nothing more can be inferred from the narrative other than **Ya'akov** was the **Lord's** brother. Earlier in **Mark**, the brothers of **Yeshua**, along with His mother, were looking for Him (Mark 3:31–35). The **Gospel of John** states that the brothers of **Yeshua** do not believe in **Him** (John 7:5), meaning that this **Ya'akov** does not at first believe in **His brother's messianic claims**. seems to imply **Ya'akov's** belief was a result of a resurrection appearance (1 Cor 15:7).¹

Historical Background

Ya'akov was probably written between 48 and 52 CE, though nothing in the epistle suggests a more precise date. **Ya'akov's** death in 62 or 66 CE means the epistle was written before this time. Similarities to **Gospel** traditions and **Sha'ul's** themes are suggestive. If **Mark** was written around 65 CE and time is allowed for the events of Acts 15 and 21 to have occurred between **Shaul's** first and second missionary journeys, a date between 48 and 52 CE seems most likely.

The reference to "**the 12 tribes in the Dispersion**" (1:1) suggests the letter was written to **Jewish Believers** living in or around **Palestine**. **Ya'akov** led the **Yerushalayim Kehilah**, so it is likely that the audience lived in that area (including Antioch). The reference to a synagogue in 2:2 also suggests that his audience were **Jewish Believers**. References to their circumstances (e.g., oppression by wealthy landowners; 5:1–6) could refer to congregations anywhere in the **Roman Empire**. However, **Semitic** word order, quotations from the **Septuagint**, and the overall dependence of the epistle on the **Jewish** wisdom tradition suggest a specifically **Jewish Believer** audience.²

Message and Purpose

We live in a world where politics rules the day. In this world, a person's public reputation too often drowns out the private reality. *Who* you know usually trumps *what* you know. Name-dropping often gets you farther than talent or skill. These cynical sayings not only apply to the political realm, where quid pro quo is the status quo. Unfortunately, the "*good ol' boy*" system also tends to corrupt most areas of business, academia, entertainment—and, yes, even the church.

¹ Viktor Roudkovski, "**James, Brother of Jesus**," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

² R. Gregg Watson, "**James**," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Jeremy Royal Howard (Broadman & Holman, 2015), 1347.

This is why the opening words of the Book of **Ya'akov** are so refreshing. Like a cool spring breeze blowing through a musty room, the unassuming nature of these first few words drives out arrogance, ego, and presumption. Written by a man who could have dropped the Name above all names, this simple, straightforward greeting sets the tone for a letter that assaults our natural human tendencies toward sin and selfishness with a radical message of authenticity and humility.

Having identified the author as **Ya'akov**, the brother of **Yeshua**, what do we know about him that will help us as we read his letter? Let's reconstruct a meaningful picture of **Ya'akov's** life.

No second-born son or daughter can possibly fathom what it must have been like to suffer second child syndrome with an older brother who never sinned. But **Ya'akov** did. Can you even imagine? **Yeshua** always came when His mother called Him the first time. He always washed His hands properly before supper. He always did His chores quickly and with delight. He always obeyed. Then there was **Ya'akov**, born with a sinful nature like the rest of us, living in the shadow of a big brother who was **God** in the flesh. Being far from perfect, younger brother **Ya'akov** had a built-in problem right from the start.

I suppose **Ya'akov** would have been happy to see **Yeshua** leave home when He did. But then his already "strange" older brother came back to their home town claiming to be the long-awaited fulfillment of **Messianic** promises (Luke 4:16–21). How do you think **Ya'akov** felt toward his older brother then? We don't have to wonder. John 7:5 says, *"Not even His brothers were believing in Him."* And Mark 3:21 tells us that His family *"went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, 'He has lost His senses.'"*

So, throughout the **Gospels** we see **Ya'akov** in a state of unbelief and skepticism over his older brother. But things didn't stay that way. In 1 Corinthians 15:7, the apostle **Sha'ul** gives us a brief glimpse at an otherwise unknown event—the appearance of the resurrected **Yeshua** to **Ya'akov**. We probably should avoid speculating about the nature of that visit, but I suspect it was different from **Sha'ul's** much-needed **Damascus** encounter—the one that blinded him with brilliant glory (Acts 9:1–9). Rather, I picture **Yeshua** putting His arms around His younger brother, whispering words of encouragement and love in his ear—words he had longed to hear all his life.

Ya'akov's wise and convincing words became the basis for the **Yerushalayim** council's decision to affirm **Sha'ul's** gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. In agreement with **Sha'ul** and **Barnabas**, the **Yerushalayim** apostles and elders firmly rejected the addition of works to the gospel—and aren't we grateful! However, in order to maintain unity between the **Jewish** and **Gentile Believers**, the **Yerushalayim Council** asked **Gentile** converts to avoid practices that **Jews** would find offensive (Acts 15:28–29; 21:25). Stated succinctly, **Ya'akov** wanted to ensure that genuine faith was authenticated by **God-honoring** works.

Ya'akov appears again in the book of Acts about ten years later (58 CE). Shortly before being arrested and sent to **Rome**, **Sha'ul** arrived in **Yerushalayim** from his third missionary journey and met with **Ya'akov**, who was by then clearly the leader of the **Jewish Believers** in **Yerushalayim** (Acts 21:15–19). In an attempt to exonerate **Sha'ul** from charges that he had been encouraging **Jews** to abandon their customs after coming in faith to Christ, **Ya'akov** and the other elders in **Yerushalayim** encouraged **Sha'ul** to participate in a purity ritual at the temple (Acts 21:23–24). From this we learn that **Ya'akov**, a **Jew** living in **Yerushalayim** and leading the **Jewish Believers**, continued to keep the **Law** as a testimony to his fellow **Jews**. The last thing he wanted was for his genuine faith in **Yeshua** as the **Messiah** to be maligned because he and his people abruptly turned their backs on the **Law of Moshe**. Though the **Law** was never a means of salvation, for **Ya'akov** and many **Jewish Believers**, it was a means of testimony to unbelieving **Jews** that their faith empowered them to do good works.

Ancient historians tell us that **Ya'akov** continued to live and teach in **Yerushalayim**, convincing many **Jews** and visitors to **Yerushalayim** that **Yeshua** is the **Messiah**, the **Son of God**. Greatly esteemed for his piety, he spent so much time in the temple kneeling in prayer that he was given the nickname "***Camel Knees.***" Even his opponents, the **scribes** and **P'rushim**, could find no fault in him—except, of course, his "*misguided*" belief that **Yeshua** is the **Messiah**.

Nevertheless, **Ya'akov's** authentic faith eventually became the death of him. His true faith in Christ—demonstrated through good works, strengthened through suffering, and seasoned with God-given wisdom—drew the ire of the increasingly zealous and jealous religious elite. His words and works attracted thousands of **Jews** to Christ, and the anti-Christian powers in **Yerushalayim** eventually had enough of him.

Josephus reports that **Ya'akov** was simply stoned, but **Eusebius** recounts that he was thrown from the pinnacle of the **Temple** and then beaten to death with a club. Whatever the details of his brutal and unjust execution, **Ya'akov**, the brother of **Yeshua**, was martyred for his faith in 62 CE. ³

In our next post, we dig into the **Letter of Ya'akov (Ya'akov)** itself.

³ Charles R. Swindoll, [*Insights on James, 1 & 2 Peter*](#), vol. 13, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentar (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2014), 12.