

James the brother of Jesus

from Gloag, Paton James, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*

After the death of James the brother of John, there is frequent mention in the Acts and the Pauline epistles of another James. He was a person of great importance in the Christian church. Peter directs that information of his escape should be sent to him; he presides at the celebrated Council of Jerusalem; mention is made of those who came from James to Antioch; to him Paul repairs on his arrival at Jerusalem; he is called the Lord's brother, and one of the three pillars of the church. Now, besides James the brother of John, there was another James among the apostles, called James the son of Alphaeus. The question has been raised whether James "the Lord's brother" was the same as James the apostle, "the son of Alphaeus;" or whether they were different persons.

There are three opinions:

1. That this James "the Lord's brother," who is so prominently mentioned in the Acts and the Pauline epistles, was an apostle, and the cousin of our Lord, the same with James the son of Alphaeus.
2. That he was the son of Joseph and Mary, and not one of the original apostles.
3. That he was the son of Joseph by a former marriage, and was therefore called a brother of our Lord.

The **first opinion** asserts the identity between James "the Lord's brother," and James "the apostle, the son of Alphaeus." According to this hypothesis, it is supposed that the word "brother" is used in a lax sense to signify "cousin." The argument by which this opinion is maintained is as follows: The brethren of Christ are stated to have been James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). Now three of these names James, and Joses, and Judas are elsewhere mentioned as the

names of the sons of Mary, the sister of the Virgin, and the wife of Clopas. We are informed that there stood at the cross of Jesus His mother and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene (John 19:25); and it is elsewhere said that this Mary, the sister of the Virgin, was the mother of James the Less and Joses (Matt, 27:56; Mark 15:40): consequently these two James and Joses were the cousins of our Lord. Again, it is maintained that Alphaeus is in Hebrew the same name as Clopas; so that James the apostle, the son of Alphaeus, is the same as the above-mentioned James the cousin of our Lord: and we know that he had a brother named Judas, another of the apostles (Acts 1:13). Hence these children of Clopas, or Alphaeus, and Mary the sister of the Virgin namely, James, and Joses, and Judas are regarded as the same as those bearing the same names who are mentioned as the brethren of Christ. The names are the same, and to identify them we have only to suppose that the word "brethren" is used in an extended sense so as to include cousins.

This opinion, however, is supported by some doubtful suppositions, rests on arbitrary assumptions, and is liable to several objections. It is doubtful whether Mary the wife of Clopas was the sister of the Virgin. John says: There stood at the cross of Jesus His mother and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." Now these words may be read as mentioning four women at the cross: first, our Lord's mother and her sister, whose name is not given; and secondly, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. On this supposition, the sister of our Lord's mother and Mary the wife of Clopas are different persons. As we learn from the other evangelists that Salome the mother of John was at the cross, some suppose that it was she who is intended by "His mother's sister."

Besides, it is very unlikely that the Virgin and her sister would both be called by the same name. It is by no means a certainty that the names Clopas and Alphaeus are identical. It is an arbitrary assumption that the word "brethren" here signifies cousins. The word brethren is frequently used in

Scripture in a metaphorical sense, but without any danger of misconception. In only two instances is it used to signify a relationship different from that of a brother. Lot is called the brother of Abraham, and Jacob the brother of Laban, whereas in reality they were merely nephews; but it is never once used to denote cousins. The objection is equally strong in reference to those who are called the sisters of Christ.

We are informed by John that "His brethren did not believe on Him" (John 7:5). But according to the hypothesis that James the Lord's brother was the son of Alphaeus, two of these brethren James and Judas were at that time apostles. To this objection two answers are given: First, it is not necessary to suppose that John is speaking of all the brethren of Christ, but merely of His brethren in general terms. Or, secondly, the unbelief here adverted to might have been some temporary wavering, to which even the apostles might be liable. The brethren of Christ are several times expressly distinguished from the apostles; as in Acts 1:13, 14, where the apostles are mentioned first, and then the brethren of Christ (see also John 2:12; 1 Cor. 9:5). No great weight, however, can be put on this objection taken by itself. These are the chief objections against the opinion that James the brother of the Lord, and James the son of Alphaeus, are the same. This is, however, the most general opinion: it was asserted by Papias, Clemens Alexandrinus, Jerome, and Augustine among the Fathers, and is embraced by Calvin, Pearson, Eichhorn, Lampe, Schneckenburger, Gieseler, Lange, Ellicott, and Wordsworth among the moderns.

The **second opinion** is, that the James of the Acts was not an apostle, and was a real brother of our Lord, being the son of Mary and Joseph. Among the brethren of our Lord, there is mention of a James (Matt. 13:55); and Paul speaks of James the Lord's brother (Gal. 1:19). According to this hypothesis, these expressions are taken in their natural acceptance. There are, however, difficulties in the way of this conclusion. It is opposed to the general sentiment and universal tradition of the church.

Both the Western and Eastern [Catholic] Churches cling to the idea that the Virgin remained always a virgin. The grounds of this opinion are well stated by Bishop Pearson in his Exposition of the Creed: "We believe the mother of our Lord to have been, not only before and after His nativity, but also for ever, the most immaculate and blessed Virgin. For although it may be thought sufficient as to the

mystery of the incarnation, that when our Savior was conceived and born His mother was a virgin; though whatsoever should have followed after could have no reflective operation upon the first-fruit of her womb; though there be no further mention in the Creed than that He was t born of the Virgin Mary; yet the peculiar eminency and unparalleled privilege of that mother, the special honor and reverence due unto that Son, and ever paid by her, the regard of that Holy Ghost who came upon her, and the power of the Highest which overshadowed her, the singular goodness and piety of Joseph, to whom she was espoused, have persuaded the church in all ages to believe that she still continued in the same virginity, and therefore is to be acknowledged the ever-virgin Mary.

On the other hand, those who adopt the opposite opinion hold this to be no argument, but a mere appeal to sentiment, arising from a false notion of the superior sanctity of the unmarried life. (See Luke 2:7; Matt. 1:25.) 2. It is objected that, if Mary had children of her own, Jesus would not have recommended her to the care of John (John 19:25-27). We consider this a strong objection. The only answer that has been given to it is, that His brethren did not then believe; but this is a feeble reply, as immediately after His resurrection we find them among the number of the disciples, o. It is asserted that this James is expressly called an apostle:

"Other of the apostles," says Paul, "saw I none, save James the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:19). To this two answers are given. First, it is said that the words do not imply that James was an apostle, but may be thus read: "I saw none other of the apostles, but only (I saw) James the Lord's brother." This, however, is not so natural and obvious an interpretation. It is also apparently opposed to Acts 9:27, where it is said of the same visit, that Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles; from which it would follow that Peter and James, the only two whom he then saw, were both apostles. Secondly, it is said that the word **apostolosis** not confined to the twelve, but is applied not only to Paul, but also to Barnabas (Acts 14:14). This lax sense of the term, however, hardly suits Paul's argument, and is certainly not the obvious meaning in the passage (Gal. 1:17-19).

James is here (Acts 12:17) introduced by Luke without any designation: now, with the exception of James the brother of John, who had just been slain, the only other James known to his readers, and whom he had already mentioned (Acts 1:13), was

James the son of Alpheus; and therefore, it is argued, it is more natural to suppose that he meant this James than a James unknown to his readers. It is objected that, by supposing James to be the actual son of the Virgin Mary, you would introduce two sets of the same names James, Joses, and Judas as sons of the Virgin Mary, and sons of Mary the wife of Clopas. Not much, however, can be made of this objection, as these names were among the most common Jewish names; and, as already stated, it is a somewhat doubtful supposition that the Apostles James and Judas were brothers.

The opinion that James was the son of Mary and Joseph was first started toward the close of the fourth century by a certain Helvidius, whose followers were called Helvidians, and were universally regarded as heretics. The opinion was condemned by the sixth General Council. It has since been revived and embraced by Meyer, Lechler, Neander, Wieseler, Stier, Alford, and Davidson among the moderns.

The **third opinion** is, that James and the other brethren and the sisters of our Lord were the children of Joseph by a former marriage, and were, on account of this relationship, regarded as His brethren and sisters. No positive arguments can be adduced in favor of this opinion: however, it is exposed to no great objections, and it avoids some of the difficulties which beset the other two theories. It accounts for these disciples being called the brethren of Jesus; it lessens the objection arising from Christ recommending His mother to the care of John; and it does no violence to the universal sentiment of the church concerning the perpetual virginity of Mary. Nevertheless it has not been favorably received in modern times, and has gained few supporters, probably because it savors too much of a mere arbitrary supposition adopted to avoid difficulties, and is destitute of positive arguments in its favor. It is not, however, necessarily erroneous, and we do not think ought to be summarily dismissed. It was the favorite opinion of the early Fathers, being held by Origen, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, Epiphanius, Hilary, Victorinus, and Ambrose; and has become the generally received opinion of the Greek Church.

Such are the three opinions concerning James the brother of our Lord. The third opinion is the least supported. The great objection to the first opinion is, that some disciples are actually called the broth-

ers and sisters of Christ. And the great objection to the second opinion, is the difficulty of reconciling it with John 19:25-27 and Gal. i. 19. It is a perplexing question; it is hard to say on what side the preponderance of evidence lies; and we feel constrained to leave the matter *in dubio*. Happily it is a question of small doctrinal importance, though of considerable interest.

James, the brother of our Lord, is frequently mentioned in the history of the church. He is there known by the name of Bishop of Jerusalem; and certainly, if not actually bishop, it would appear from the Acts of the Apostles that he at least exercised an important influence in the mother church.

A long account of his character and death, written by Hegesippus, who lived about the middle of the second century, is preserved by Eusebius. He informs us that he was universally known by the name of the Just, and along with the apostles received the government of the church. He lived as a Nazarite: he drank neither wine nor strong drink, and no razor came upon his head. He was in the habit of entering the temple alone, and was often found upon his bended knees, interceding for the forgiveness of his people; so that his knees became as hard as camels', in consequence of his habitual supplication before God. He was put to death, shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem, by the fanatical Jews. His last words were: I entreat Thee, O Lord God and Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." "Thus," concludes Hegesippus, "he suffered martyrdom, on the spot where his tombstone is still remaining, by the temple. He was a faithful witness, both to the Jews and to the Greeks, that Jesus is the Christ. Immediately after this, Vespasian invaded and took Judea" (Euseb. ii. 23). Josephus also gives a similar account of his martyrdom. He tells us that he was put to death by the high priest Ananias, during a vacancy in the Roman procuratorship, after the death of Festus, and before his successor Albinus had arrived in Judea. Ananias assembled the Sanhedrim, and brought before them the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some of his companions; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned" (Ant. xx. 9. 1). According to this account, James was martyred in the year 63, shortly before the commencement of the Jewish war.