

ST. JAMES THE JUST: PRAYERFUL PILLAR AND FIRST BISHOP OF THE MOTHER CHURCH

by

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St. James is known as the brother of our Lord although he was not a brother in the ordinary context of that word as we understand it. Archpriest Seraphim Slobodskoy points out what is not meant in the Gospels by “Brothers”:

‘Brothers and sisters’ of the Lord, as used in the Gospels, has a meaning completely different than what is meant by brothers and sisters of the Lord in contemporary terms. According to the custom of Eastern peoples of that time, as is now kept in the life of the Arabic people living in Palestine and Asia Minor, ‘brothers’ meant not only the relation of brother, but also cousins, second cousins and, in general, all close relatives.

There could not have been any *actual* (emphasis supplied) brothers of the Lord, as the Mother of God bore only one Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and is called by the Holy Church Ever-Virgin because She was so until the birth of Christ, and in giving birth and after the birth of Christ remained the same, as She vowed to God never to enter into marriage. St. Joseph was not a real husband to Her, he was only betrothed, the custodian of her virginity.¹

“The generally accepted Orthodox tradition is that the ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ of the Lord are the children of Joseph by an earlier marriage.”²

Our Orthodox spirituality is greatly enhanced by delving into St. James the Just, also called the Righteous. Eusebius, the early Church Historian, Bishop of Caesarea Maritima in Palestine, friend and biographer of the Constantine the Great, in discussing how the apostles lived after the Lord’s Ascension states:

Then there was James, who was known as the brother of the Lord; for he, too, was called Joseph’s son, and Joseph Christ’s father, though in fact the Virgin was his betrothed, and before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Ghost, as the inspired gospel narrative tells us.(Matt. 1:18) This James, whom the early Christians surnamed the Righteous because of his outstanding virtue, was the first, as the records tell us, to be elected to the

episcopal throne of the Jerusalem church. Clement in *Outlines* Book VI, puts it thus:

‘Peter, James, and John, after the Ascension of the Saviour, did not claim pre-eminence because the Saviour had specially honoured them, but chose James the Righteous as Bishop of Jerusalem.’

In Book VIII of the same work the writer makes this further statement about him:

‘James the Righteous, John, and Peter were entrusted by the Lord after His Resurrection with the higher knowledge. They imparted it to the other apostles, and the other apostles to the Seventy, one of whom was Barnabas. There were two Jameses, one the Righteous, who was thrown down from the parapet and beaten to death with a fuller’s club, the other the James who was beheaded.’(Acts. 12:2)

James the Righteous is also mentioned by Paul when he writes:

‘Of the other apostles I saw no one except James the Lord’s brother.’ (Gal. 1:19)³

James the Just presided over the Council in Jerusalem which heard the disputations regarding whether the Gentiles needed to be circumcised after the Law of Moses; otherwise, they could not be saved. After Peter had spoken so eloquently, and the “miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them” [Barnabas and Paul] had been considered, James delivered the Apostles’ decision:

And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, men and brethren, hearken unto me:

Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.

And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,

After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up:

That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.

Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.

For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day.⁴

James was particularly esteemed by the Jewish Christian community for his piety. Hegesippus, of the first generation after the apostles, provided the most detailed account of him:

Control of the Church passed to the apostles, together with the Lord's brother James, whom everyone from the Lord's time till our own has called the Righteous, for there were many Jameses, but this one was holy from his birth: he drank no wine or intoxicating liquor and ate no animal food; no razor came near his head; he did not smear himself with oil, and took no baths. He *alone* (emphasis supplied) was permitted to enter the Holy Place, for his garments were not of wool but of linen. He used to enter the Sanctuary alone, and was often found on his knees beseeching forgiveness for the people. Because of his unsurpassable righteousness he was called the Righteous and Oblias—in our own language 'Bulwark of the People, and Righteousness'- fulfilling the declarations of the prophets regarding him.⁵

There are a plethora of 'non-canonical' references to James and his leadership of the mid-first century Church in Jerusalem. In most of these a claim is made for James' supremacy and leadership within Christendom. This claim was later dropped by the West but has continued in the East. The place given to James in Apostolic Succession by ancient writers is significant, many early Christians believing that James ranked *first* in primacy.

Blessed Jerome (+419 A.D.) quoted from the Gospel of the Hebrews of James the Just:

And when the Lord had given the linen cloth to the servant of the priest, he went to James and appeared to him. For James had sworn that he would not eat bread from that hour in which he had drunk the cup of the Lord until he should see him risen from among them that sleep. And shortly thereafter the Lord said: Bring a table of bread! And immediately it is added: he took bread, blessed it and brake it and gave it to James the Just and said to him: My brother,

eat thy bread, for the Son of man is risen from among them that sleep⁶.

As Orthodox Christians, we are the beneficiaries of a wonderful Divine Liturgy. James the Just of Jerusalem figures significantly in its origin. According to *The Rudder (Pedalion)*:

James the Apostle is the original author of the divine liturgy, of the bloodless sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ; and just as he received the mystery of the divine Eucharist orally from Christ he delivered it in writing to be celebrated with leavened bread and wine. To save time St. Basil the Great shortened the liturgy of St. James; and St. Chrysostom shortened that of St. Basil to that which we Orthodox Christians have kept to this very day;...⁷

Each time we celebrate the Mysteries as priests or attend the Divine Liturgy as laity and take Holy Communion, we should remember our debt to St. James and the Mother Church of Jerusalem. St. James is also known for his Catholic Epistle including his preaching that illustrated the relationship between faith and works.

James the Just, the Righteous, suffered martyrdom when he refused to deny Christ to the Jews. Here is the continuation of the account of Hegesippus as quoted by Eusebius:

Representatives of the seven popular sects already described by me asked him what was meant by 'the door of Jesus', and he replied that Jesus was the Saviour. Some of them came to believe that Jesus was the Christ: the sects mentioned above did not believe either in a resurrection or in One who is coming to give every man what his deeds deserve, but those who did come to believe did so because of James. Since therefore many even of the ruling class believed, there was an uproar among the Jews and Scribes and Pharisees, who said there was a danger that the entire people would expect Jesus as the Christ. So they collected and said to James: 'Be good enough to restrain the people, for they have gone astray after Jesus in the belief that he is the Christ. Be good enough to make the facts about Jesus clear to all who come for the Passover Day. We all accept what you say: we can vouch for it, and so can all the people, that you are a righteous man and take no one at his face value. So make it clear to the crowd that they must not go astray as regards Jesus: the whole people and all of us accept what you say. So take your stand on the temple parapet, so that from that height you may be easily seen, and your words audible, to the whole people. For because

of the Passover all of the tribes have forgathered, and the Gentiles too.'

So the Scribes and the Pharisees made James stand on the Sanctuary parapet and shouted to him: 'Righteous one, whose word we are all obliged to accept, the people are going astray after Jesus who was crucified; so tell us what is meant by "the door of Jesus".' He replied as loudly as he could:

'Why do you question me about the Son of Man? I tell you. He is sitting in heaven at the right hand of the Great Power, and He will come on the clouds of heaven.'

Many were convinced, and glorified in James's testimony, crying: 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' Then again the Scribes and Pharisees said to each other: 'We made a bad mistake in affording such testimony to Jesus. We had better go up and throw him down, so that they will be frightened and not believe him.' 'Ho, ho' they called out, 'even the Righteous one has gone astray!' fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah:

Let us remove the Righteous one, for he is unprofitable to us.

Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their works.
(Is. iii. 10 (LXX))

So they went up and threw down the Righteous one. Then they said to each other 'Let us stone James the Righteous', and began to stone him, as in spite of his fall he was still alive. But he turned and knelt, uttering the words:

'I beseech Thee, Lord God and Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.'

While they pelted him with stones, one of the descendants of Rechab the son of Rachabim—the priestly family to which Jeremiah the Prophet bore witness, called out: 'Stop! What are you doing? The Righteous one is praying for you.' Then one of them, a fuller, took the club which he used to beat out the clothes, and brought it down on the head of the Righteous one. Such was his martyrdom. He was buried on the spot, by the Sanctuary, and his headstone is still there by the Sanctuary. He has proved a true witness to Jews and Gentiles alike that Jesus is the Christ.

Immediately after this Vespasian began to besiege them.⁸

After Eusebius quotes the detailed account of Hegesippus, he stated that his martyrdom was immediately followed by the siege of Jerusalem and that the siege “happened to them for no other reason than the wicked crime of which he had been the victim”.⁹ Josephus had also written it down similarly:

These things happened to the Jews in requital for James the Righteous, who was a brother of Jesus known as Christ, for though he was the most righteous of men, the Jews put him to death.¹⁰

James the Righteous was martyred for Christ. His voice had rung out loudly and clearly in affirming the Lord. While still being persecuted and as he suffered, he nevertheless asked Him to forgive them. James the Just - the ultimate Christian!

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Archpriest Seraphim Slobodskoy, *The Law of God*, (First English Edition), Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, New York, 1996, p.300.

² Father Michael Pomazansky (tr. By Hieromonk Seraphim Rose), *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, (Second Edition), St. Herman Brotherhood, Platina, CA, 1994, p.189, see fn.2 citing Archbishop John Maximovitch, *The Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, St. Herman Brotherhood, Platina, CA, 1978, p.24.

³ Eusebius, *The History of the Church From Christ to Constantine* (tr. By G. A. Williamson) Revised Edition (rev/ed/intro by Andrew Louth), Penguin Classics Paperback, New York, New York, 1989, Book 2, pp.35-36.

⁴ Acts. 15: 13-21.

⁵ Eusebius, *op.cit.*, p.59, quoting his fifth book.

⁶ Eusebius lists the Gospel of the Hebrews as spurious not heretical: “Moreover some have found a place in the list for the ‘Gospel of the Hebrews’, a book which has a special appeal for those Hebrews who have accepted Christ.” Spurious books were those that were disputed yet familiar to most churchmen. Eusebius, *id.*, p.89.

⁷ *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, (Agapius, a Hieromonach and Nicodemus, a Monk), first published in 1800, English translation from the fifth edition of 1908 by D. Cummings, The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, Chicago, Illinois, 1957, p. xxvii.

⁸ Eusebius, *op. cit.*, pp.59-60.

⁹ *id.* p.61.

¹⁰ *id.*