

Recovering the Lost Letter of Jacob

It is high time the English-speaking church recovers the long-lost letter of Jacob. For 500 years, we have wrongly called this the letter of James, despite the fact that the Greek does not say James, but rather Jacob (as in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), and despite the fact that in every other language, the letter of Jacob is rightly identified as such.

By calling this the letter of James, and by referring to the apostle James rather than the apostle Jacob (not to mention Jacob the brother of Jesus, also wrongly called James, who led the congregation in Jerusalem), we have produced theological confusion and cut off an important Jewish dimension to the roots of the Christian faith.

Consider for a moment that in German or Dutch Bibles, this is the letter of Jakobus, while in French it is Jacques and in Polish, Jakub. Check this out in 50 different languages, and in every one, you will find a variation of Jacob. Even the Spanish name "Santiago" comes from San Diego (Saint Diego, which is also a variant of Jacob). Only our English Bibles say James, completely without justification. (The name was corrupted as it passed from Hebrew to Greek to Latin to English, ultimately morphing into James.)

Consider also that when English translators of the Bible saw the name of the patriarch Jacob in verses like Matthew 1:2, they did not translate it to James. Otherwise, we would have had absolutely bizarre statements like, "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of James, and James the father of Judah and his brothers," or Jesus would have made reference to "the God of Abraham, Isaac and James" (see Matt. 22:32).

Yet, when it comes to the apostle Jacob or the letter of Jacob, virtually all English translations—with the primary exception of Messianic Jewish versions—refer to this Jacob as James. Why? Does it sound too Jewish?

If so, what do you do with the names of the twelve apostles, as listed in Matthew 10:2-4, which originally sounded like this: “First, Shim’on, called Kefa, and Andrew [Andrai] his brother, Ya’akov Ben-Zavdai and Yochanan his brother, Philip [Philippos] and Bar-Talmai, T’oma and Mattityahu the tax-collector, Ya’akov Bar-Halfai and Taddai, Shim’on the Zealot, and Y’hudah from K’riot, who betrayed him” (Complete Jewish Bible).

To be perfectly clear, I have no problem rendering the Hebrew name Ya’akov (*Iakobus* in Greek) with the English name Jacob. In fact, that is the correct English translation. But I have a real problem calling him James. That is not who he was, and that is not how he should be known.

Let’s look at the opening verse of his letter as rendered in a contemporary English version: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings” (James 1:1, NIV). You might take this as saying, “This is the Christian leader James writing to Christians scattered around the world, figuratively referred to as the twelve tribes.”

But what if we rendered the Greek literally, also rendering other names in a way that reflects their Hebrew/Aramaic background? It would sound like this: “Jacob, a servant of God and of the Lord Yeshua Messiah, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Shalom.” Now what comes to mind? This is a letter from a Jewish believer in the Messiah to Jewish believers scattered around the world. And notice that one key word: *Jewish*. The New Testament is a very Jewish book!

Let’s take this one step further: The Greek word *synagoges*,

meaning “assembly, meeting place, synagogue,” occurs 56 times in the Greek New Testament, being found most frequently in the Gospels and Acts (53 times), where it is virtually always rendered with “synagogue.” And when you hear that word, you think, “Jewish.”

But there’s one time in our English Bibles where *synagoges* is not translated “synagogue,” namely, James 2:2: “Suppose a man comes into your *meeting...*” Or, in the King James Version, “For if there come unto your *assembly...*” In other words, since this is a “Christian” context rather than a “Jewish” context, *synagoges* cannot possibly mean “synagogue.” Rather, we assume, it has to mean “meeting” or “assembly,” since Christians don’t meet in synagogues.

There’s only one problem with this line of reasoning: This is the epistle of Jacob, not James, and it was written to Jewish believers, not Gentile believers. That’s why the Complete Jewish Bible rightly renders this with, “Suppose a man comes into your synagogue...” while Kenneth Wuest’s Expanded Translation reads, “For if there comes into your synagogue [the meeting place of Christian-Jews]...”

How novel this sounds to most Christian ears: a Jewish epistle written to Jewish believers who met in Messianic synagogues. But that is clearly what the text indicates, although it is not the way many Christian teachers have interpreted the text.

I say it is high time for Bible translators, seminary and ministry school professors, pastors, teachers and all believers, to expunge “James” from our Bibles (I’m not talking about King James) and go back to what the original Greek text says: Jacob.

It might just start a revolution in our churches, a revolution of truth, along with a reconnection to the Jewish roots of our faith. Will you join me in recovering the letter of Jacob?

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