

THE VOICE: FROM TEXT TO LIFE

BROTHER JAMES

GEOFF NEW

I am a fan of the TV reality series *Survivor*. *Survivor* pits eighteen contestants against each other in a tropical location over thirty-six days for a one million dollar prize. Contestants are voted out of the game by fellow “tribe members” along the way. I realise that many challenge just how real such purported reality shows are but there was an aspect in the last series that was very real. Two brothers competed on the show and against each other. They claimed they were on the show to heal their relationship. It didn’t always go so well. There was definitely bad blood between them, and by the end of the show the jury was still out on whether they had really achieved any lasting healing. Their story would not have been out of place in any number of biblical stories involving brothers.

The pattern begins in Genesis 4 with Cain and Abel. Cain commits the first recorded murder in the Bible, and in the context of worship. The sons of Noah are blessed and cursed respectively after Ham’s indiscretion towards his father (Gen 9). Noah blesses Shem and Japheth and destines Ham to all kinds of enmity at the hands of his brothers. Ishmael, the half-brother of Isaac, mocks his younger brother and is exiled (Gen 21). Jacob and Esau’s dysfunction is well documented in Genesis 27 and onwards. Jacob is a mummy’s-boy, and Esau his father’s favourite, with all kinds of consequential bad-blood generated between these two brothers. Joseph and his brothers (Gen 37–50) continue the pattern by introducing new ways to gain the upper hand in sibling rivalry, specifically, speculating on the slave-trade market. David and his brothers also had a tense and simmering relationship (1 Sam 16–17), David being subjected to the indignities often visited upon the youngest: indifference at best and indignation at worst. David might be known as a “man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22) but his eldest brother was of the view that a better description would be a “man after his own conceited and wicked desires” (1 Sam 17:28). Even one of the most famous stories Jesus told centred on two brothers; the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32).

We could be forgiven for thinking that someone of Jesus’ calibre would have been immune from this kind of family dysfunction. Not so. In John 7:1–5, the evangelist records Jesus’ brothers’ counsel that he raise his public profile during an upcoming festival. The advice is dripping with sarcasm and disdain, with John making the editorial note that “even his own brothers did not believe in him.” Mark 3:21, 31 describes Jesus’ family coming to the conclusion that he is “out of his mind” and his mother and brothers arriving to take him in hand. Just as the Old Testament is replete with brother against brother, here in the Gospels as we see the fulfilment of the

Scriptures taking place, this dysfunctional dynamic is still present. So what? I am intrigued by the life and example of one of the biblical brothers: James the brother of Jesus.¹

James was one of the brothers who believed Jesus to be out of his mind (Mark 3), and one of the brothers who mocked Jesus (John 7). James, was one the brothers who, quite frankly, did not believe in Jesus and continued the biblical pattern of one brother against another. But this was also the James, who came to believe in his brother after the crucifixion and resurrection (1 Cor 15:7), became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and was esteemed as a pillar of the church (Gal 2:9). It was James whose wisdom prevailed in the major crisis confronted by the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Quite a conversion.

If there is one significant and constant observation I have made as a pastor, it is that the dynamic of a prophet not being honoured in his hometown is never truer than in his or her family home. Family do not convert family. Yet here we have James emerging from the mire of sibling cynicism to salvation. So, what would someone like James say about his brother if he was to address us? What language and titles would he use? James 1:1 reads:

¹ There are several theories concerning the relationship of James to Jesus. I have taken the Helvidian view that James is the son of Mary and Joseph.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

When writing to scattered Jewish members of the church,² it must have been tempting to cash in on his fame as a brother of Jesus. Surely no-one would have objected if he had written “James, the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ.” James had a story to be envied. Imagine having Mary as your mother and Joseph as your father. Imagine the bedtime stories they could tell! But no, James identifies himself as “servant” or “slave” not brother. As a title, “servant” enjoys a long pedigree. Moses, David, Jeremiah, Amos, Daniel and Israel all had that title. However, nowhere else in Scripture does anyone phrase it quite like James. His formula is the only place where we read of an individual being called a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is something authentically humbling and revelatory going on here. James is immersing himself in the majestic event he is swept up in but not claiming any prestige in it. The titles of God and Jesus in James 1:1 are all mighty; God, Lord and Christ. His title is lowly: *doulos* (slave). And it is placed at the end of the sentence to emphasise that.

Here are the words written by a man who had had a problem family member. A brother who had at best been an embarrassment as James grew up and at worst had brought shame on the family when convicted and executed as a criminal and blasphemer. James lived for decades with a brother who was variously described as demon possessed and out of his mind, and then charged, convicted and sentenced for a capital crime. But now James has a message to the “twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” In other words, to those of Israel who have come to believe that Christ is the Messiah and who live and worship among their brothers and sisters who do not believe. The world over. “Greetings!” James has a message for those, like him, who have made the arduous journey to faith in Christ. To those who may have despised Christ in the past or dismissed him but are now servants and slaves of God and the

² The identity of the recipients of James’ letter is the subject of much scholarly debate and little consensus. I have settled on Scot McKnight’s reading, “[w]e conclude then that on balance it is more likely that James writes his letter to the messianic Jewish community or communities, which remain attached to the non-messianic Jewish community, which are residing in the Dispersion, and which James understands to be the foretaste of the kingdom of God. James sees such a community as part of Israel in the ethnic and covenant senses of that term.” Scot McKnight, “*The Letter of James*,” NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 67–68.

Lord Jesus Christ. A message to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations among whom there are now Christ-followers who are also despised and dismissed by others. To those who are also taunted, mocked and considered to be out of their minds because of their belief in God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here in the Letter of James because of the Brother, James the slave has a message. A message which gives us cause to pause. Can you insert your name in verse 1? Can you wear the title *doulos* of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ? We in the twenty-first century relish various titles as a result of our salvation in Christ; friend, child, son, daughter, brother or sister. However in these few opening words James the literal brother of Jesus models the DNA of it all. James, the leader who emerged out of the apparent dysfunction and mundane to realise he was literally in the presence of divine greatness, sees his place as slave of God and of the Lord Jesus

Christ. His familiarity and contempt has died and he has been resurrected into a place of awe and wonder. James had been blind to Who was in his family. His condition is common and he is humbled by it.

Our testimony as contemporary followers of Jesus may not be marked by mockery and disdain of Jesus; but I wonder if we have lapsed into over-familiarity. I wonder if we have become so used to considering ourselves as Jesus’ sisters and brothers, and as daughters and sons of the Father; that to replace James’s name with ours in verse one of his Epistle seems rather unnecessary. I wonder if as saved people we might not be at risk of reversing the family dynamic with reference to Jesus, and slide into a chummy theology so that the language of slave rankles. I wonder if we continue to use the majestic titles such as God, Lord, Jesus and Christ but only ever complement them with family titles when referring to ourselves. Insofar as we deem it unnecessary or unsavoury to wear James 1:1 we are continuing the unsavoury history of sibling rivalry beginning in Genesis 4.

GEOFF NEW is the minister of Papakura East Presbyterian Church. His doctoral research is in preaching. He enjoys silent retreats, movies, indoor rowing and biking. He leads Kiwi-made preaching, and is a regular contributor to *Stimulus*.