The Wright Report

Why "James" Translates "Jacob" in the New Testament

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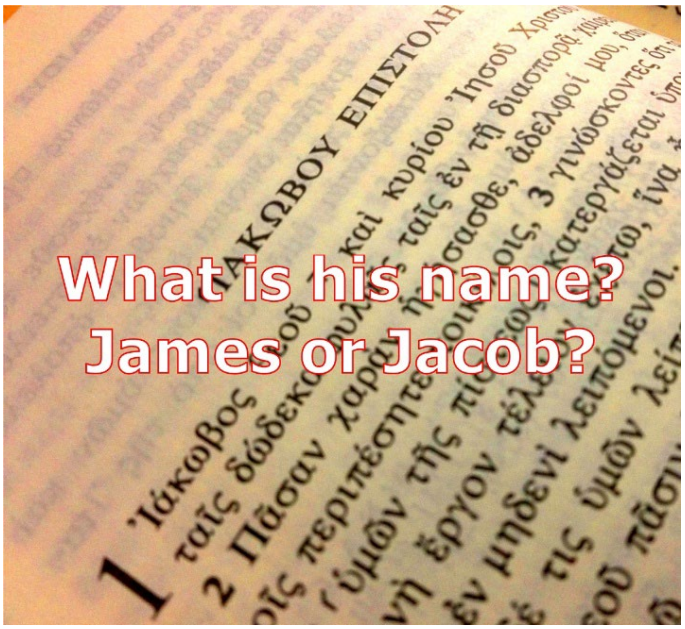

The Book of James begins with these words: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings."[1] James is the English word for Ἰάκωβος in the Greek. However, Ἰάκωβος is simply a Greek form for the name of Jacob in the Old Testament (יַעֲקֹב). So, why do we use the name James for the name Jacob in the New Testament?

Why "James" rather than "Jacob"? One theory is that during that translation of the King James Bible, the king forced the translators to substitute the king's name for Jacob in the New Testament because he wanted his name in the Bible. The argument goes like this: "Since the King James Version of the Bible, the name Jacob in the Greek New Testament has been rendered as James, as a way of sucking up to the King. This is exclusive to the English-speaking world: on the Continent, and, presumably, in pre-KJV English translations, the name *Ἰακωβος* is rendered as Jacob."[2]

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[1] James 1:1 (ESV).

[2] *Church Times*, (2016). "'James' or 'Jacob' in the NT?" https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/1-april/regulars/out-of-the-question/james-or-jacob-in-the-nt. Retrieved November 25, 2025.

Bill Mounce says that this view is assuredly incorrect,[3] especially since the name James was used by the Wycliffe translation in the 14th century.[4] So how did the Jewish name *Ya'akov* become so Gentilized as James? Since the 13th century, the form of the Latin name *Iacomus* began its use in English. In the 14th century, John Wycliffe made the first Bible translation into English and translated *Iakobus* as James. (However, in both the Old and New Testaments he arbitrarily used the name Jacob for the patriarch). In all future English translations the name stuck, especially after 1611, when King James I sponsored the translation then called the Authorized Version. Since 1797 it has been called the King James Bible.[5]

One cannot be dogmatic on the issue, but the following seems to be the best reconstruction we can do as to why James is used instead of Jacob in the New Testament.

A word about the name "James" itself is appropriate. Contemporary readers may miss the literary richness associated with this name in the biblical tradition, since the English "James" gives no automatic clues to its derivation from the Hebrew "Jacob." The English derives from the Old French "Gemmes" or "Jaimes," which equals the Spanish "Jaime," Catalonian "Jaume," and Italian "Giacomo." These, in turn, derived from the late Latin "Jacomus," a softening of the earlier Latin "Jacobus" (see also German "Jakobus"). The Latin is a straight transliteration from the Greek Ἰάκωβος (*Iakōbos*), which is itself a transliteration of the Hebrew *ya^{ca}qôb*.[6] This letter from "James," therefore, is in reality a letter from "Jacob," whose role in the biblical story carries with it considerable symbolic weight (see Genesis 25:26; Exodus 3:6, 15; Isaiah 40:27; Micah 2:12).[7]

Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* says the following:

> Etymology: < Old French James (Gemmes, *Jaimes) = Spanish Jaime, Provençal, Catalan Jaume, Jacme. Italian Giacomo < popular Latin *ˈJacomus, for ˈJacobus, altered from Latin *Iaˈcōbus*, < Greek Ἰάκωβος, < Hebrew *yaʿăqōb* Jacob, a frequent

[3] Mounce, Bill (2012). Why is Ἰάκωβος James and not Jacob? https://www.billmounce.com/monday-with-mounce/ why-ἰάκωβος-james-and-not-jacob. Retrieved November 25, 2025.

[4] William Tyndale's 1526 translation of the New Testament has "Iames" (as had John Wycliffe's two centuries earlier). Note that spelling has an "I" instead of a "J", and this difference in the spelling and pronunciation of the first consonant of the name continues across the languages of the world. Needless to say, the choice of this spelling is not royalist flattery; for Tyndale was no flatterer of kings. The spelling was more probably chosen as a colloquialism, to enhance the immediacy of the translation.

[5] Wilson, Mark (2025). "James or Jacob in the Bible?" https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bible-versions-and-translations/james-or-jacob-in-the-bible/. Retrieved November 25, 2025.

[6] See *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, ed. J. A. H. Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901) 5:549.

[7] Johnson, L. T. (2008). *The letter of James: a new translation with introduction and commentary* (Vol. 37A, pp. 92–93). Yale University Press.

> Jewish name at all times, and thus the name of two of Christ's disciples (St. James the Greater and St. James the Less); whence a frequent Christian name.[8]

Got Questions elaborates on this point:

> In the original Greek of the New Testament, the names *Jacob* and *James* are variants of the same root—both names stem from the same Hebrew name, *Yaaqob* (יַעֲקֹב), which is translated "Jacob" throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Genesis 25:29).
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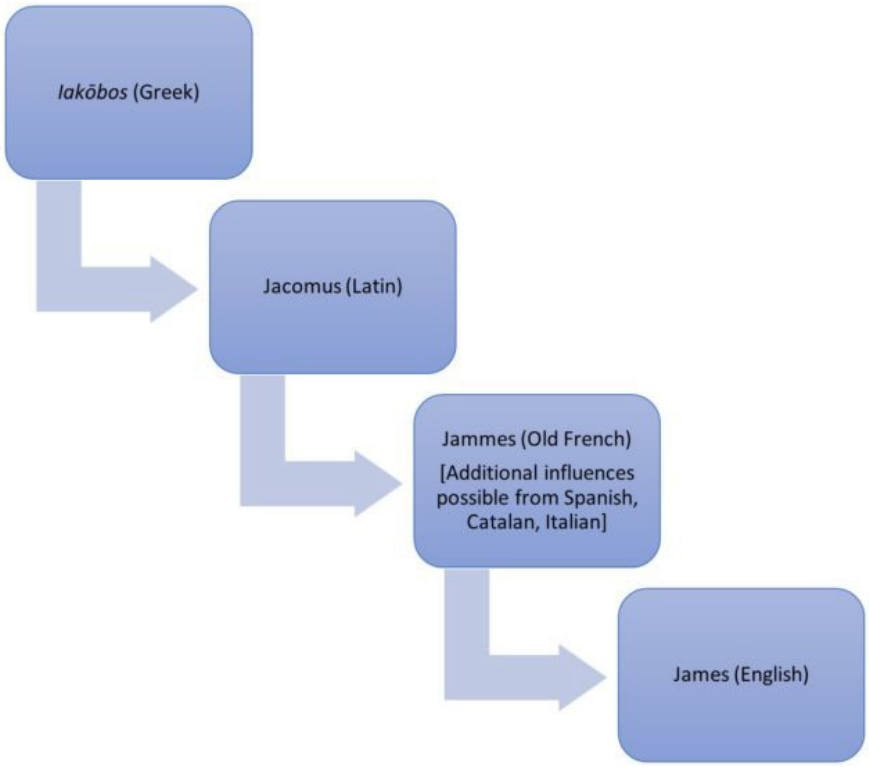
> In the Greek language, the Hebrew name *Yaaqob* becomes *Iakób* (Ἰακώβ) in a straight translation. That word is still translated as the English "Jacob" throughout the New Testament. For example, when Matthew refers to the son of Isaac and to the father of Joseph, Mary's husband, he uses *Iakób*. Both those men were named Jacob (see Matthew 1:2 and 8:11).
>
> *Jacob* was a common name in Jesus' day, and many people named their son after the patriarch. But, since the culture was strongly influenced by Greek language and culture, the name was also given a Greek form, and the result was *Iakóbos* (Ἰάκωβος). In English translations, this becomes "James."
>
> The transformation of *Iakób* to *Iakóbos* is an example of a word being Hellenized or Graecized—being adapted to Greek structure and spelling. A similar phenomenon occurs in English, as well: a name of foreign origin is often Anglicized for English speakers. For example, the Scottish name *Cailean* can be Anglicized to *Colin*, and the Welsh name *Eoghan* becomes *Owen*. *Eoghan* and *Owen* are variants of the same name—the spellings and pronunciations are all that's different. The same is true for *Iakób* and *Iakóbos*.
>
> There is still the matter of why *Iakóbos* is translated as "James" rather than "Jacob." It's an adventuresome etymology, and we have to follow the Greek word *Iakóbos* through its later development from Greek to English. Before the time of Jerome and the Latin Vulgate, the Greek Septuagint had been translated into Latin; in that version, *Iakóbos* was transliterated as *Iacobus* (or *Jacobus*)—still very close to *Jacob*. In Late Latin, however, a slight change in spelling and pronunciation occurred, and the name started to be written as *Iacomus* (or *Jacomus*). Early French adapted the Latin name and truncated it to *Gemmes* (or *Jammes*), and from there English took it as *James*.

[8] *Oxford English Dictionary*.

> In the English New Testament, the name *Jacob* is mostly reserved for references to the Old Testament patriarch (24 out of 26 times). *James* is used of any of several men named James, including two of Jesus' disciples and the half-brother of Jesus.[9]

The following diagram from Peter Goeman perhaps could be of some help at this point.[10]



Studying the influence of languages on one another can be tricky. This is just one example of the complications involved. Because the English language relies on so many other languages, the influence of those languages shows up in some of the most interesting places—even our English Bibles.

This example is not one of theological richness per se. Nor is it a vendetta on how we must translate the Bible. Rather, it is simply study of interest. It is a good reminder that there are often more complications involved in Bible translation than we sometimes realize. And some of these hidden intricacies in the world of English Bible translation are helpful to know.

Mark Wilson asks: So what is lost by using James instead of Jacob? First, it has created an awkwardness in academic writing. Scholars providing a transliteration of James

[9] https://www.gotquestions.org/James-vs-Jacob.html. Retrieved November 25, 2025.
[10] https://petergoeman.com/why-james-translates-jacob-in-new-testament/. Retrieved November 25, 2025.

indicate *Iakōbos*, which even lay readers know is not the same. Hershel Shanks has noted that the reason Israeli scholars failed to understand the significance of the eponymous ossuary[11] is that they didn't connect James with *Ya'akov*.[12]

Second, James's ancestral lineage is lost. In Matthew's genealogy, we learn that Joseph's father was named Jacob (Matthew 1:16) and that his family tree included the patriarch Jacob (Matthew 1:2). James was thus named after his grandfather. As Ben Witherington writes, "It is clear that the family of 'James' was proud of its patriarchal heritage."[13] So Jacob was the third Jacob in the family.

Third, James's Jewish cultural background is minimized. Tal Ilan identifies Jacob as the 15th most popular name in Palestine in antiquity, with 18 known persons carrying it.[14] Including both the Eastern and Western Diasporas, Jacob was the third most popular Jewish name, with 74 occurrences.

Fourth, the Jewish literary heritage is muddled. The Book of Jacob (i.e., the Book of James) is addressed to "the twelve tribes in the diaspora" (James 1:1) and full of references and allusions to the Torah and Wisdom Literature of the Jewish Bible (Christians' Old Testament). Scholars consider James the most "Jewish" book in the New Testament. Its genre is considered to be a diaspora letter like Jeremiah 29:1–23 and the apocryphal works *The Epistle of Jeremiah*, 2 Maccabees 1:1–2:18, and 2 Apocalypse of Baruch 78–86.

Wilson concludes: For these reasons, changing English translations of James to Jacob makes a lot of sense. In my lifetime we have adapted to a number of name changes: Bombay to Mumbai, Peking to Beijing, Burma to Myanmar, and Rhodesia to Zimbabwe. These changes were soon incorporated by the media as well as in subsequent editions of geographical and historical books. Making such an onomastic adjustment need not be too difficult in religious circles, either.

But can such a switch be made practically? Biblical scholars and publishers would need to agree that continued use of "James" is linguistically indefensible and culturally misleading. Most difficult to change would be Bible translations, which are very conservative. To start, a footnote could denote that James is really Jacob. And while we're

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[11] See: Is the "Brother of Jesus" Inscription on the James Ossuary a Forgery? The burial box of James, the brother of Jesus. https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/artifacts-and-the-bible/is-the-brother-of-jesus-inscription-on-the-james-ossuary-a-forgery/. Retrieved November 25, 2025.

[12] Shanks, Hershel and Ben Witherington III (2003), *The Brother of Jesus: The Dramatic Story & Meaning of the First Archaeological Link to Jesus & His Family*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 28.

[13] Shanks and Witherington III, *Brother of Jesus*, 97.

[14] Ilan, Tal (2011). *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity. Part IV: The Eastern Diaspora 330 BCE–650 CE*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

at it, let's rehabilitate Jacob as the name of two of Jesus' disciples/apostles. These connections, now lost only for English readers, were caught by Greek-speaking audiences as well as modern readers of translations in most other languages. Let's give Jacob his due.[15]

[15] Wilson, Mark (2025). "James or Jacob in the Bible? Giving Jacob his due." https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bible-versions-and-translations/james-or-jacob-in-the-bible/. Retrieved November 25, 2025.