

ay recognise who, and why, they are

NATIONAL GALLERY



resurrection

ed be strange
ich seem so
"deal with
carry their
m. . . .
that not all
are actually
same goal,
to be taken
hile it makes
le together
equal but
, and to en-
r to achieve
rious faiths
rx, for once.

Sorting out James from James

Karen Armstrong

JAMES THE BROTHER OF JESUS
Recovering the True History of Early Christianity
By Robert Eisenman
Faber, £25
ISBN 0 571 17573 2

One of the most mysterious characters of the New Testament is James the Just. He first appears, without any introduction, in the 12th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles as though we are expected to know who he is — as, perhaps, we should, since not only is James called Jesus's brother but he is obviously the leader of the early church. It is a mark of the selective way we read our scriptures that James's role is rarely queried, even though it contradicts the traditional version of the Christian story. After all, Jesus is not supposed to have had any siblings, and it is generally assumed that Peter, not James, was the first head of the Church.

True, Luke, the author of Acts, is not the most reliable of historians. But in his gospel, Mark unabashedly states that Jesus had not one brother only but four. Paul is also clear that James was the first Christian leader and shows that even Peter scuttles obsequiously to do his bidding. Since James played such a pivotal role, it is strange indeed that he is often known as "James the Less" to distinguish him from the more famous James, son of Zebedee.

Those who have puzzled over James will reach eagerly for Robert Eisenman's new book and they will learn a great deal. Eisenman has an encyclopaedic grasp of the extra-biblical texts which touch upon the early history of Christianity, especially the Dead Sea Scrolls. He points out that James figures more prominently in much of this literature than Jesus. Where the New Testament gives the impression that the Church's activities were by far the most important events in Palestine at this time, Eisenman shows that they were merely one current in a complex scenario.

Eisenman completes the story of James, showing that he was a revered figure in most of the Jewish movements of the first century — a fact that will disturb those who cling to the view that the early Christians made a clean break with Judaism. Eisenman suggests that James was the leader of the opposition to the pro-Roman establishment, that he was killed in the temple in 62 AD when he preached the imminent advent of the Messiah, and that his death led to the destruc-

tion of Jerusalem by the Romans eight years later. All this raises questions about the political activities of James's brother, Jesus.

But the book frustrates as often as it instructs. Eisenman has a fascinating story to tell but no gift for narrative. His chronicle is



MARY EVANS

Mystery: James the Less

frequently impeded by massive parentheses, which clog his readers' minds with too much extraneous detail. We go over the same material again and again, in a way that confuses and leaves us with the impression that Eisenman is milking a rather small amount of information for all it is worth.

More seriously, Eisenman gives his own interesting but highly speculative theories about such events as the stoning of Stephen and the status of solid fact, without a shred of evidence. This unscholarly tendency casts doubt on some of his other assertions, as does his palpable bias against St Paul. Yet despite James's obvious importance, it was Paul's view that prevailed. This was not merely — as Eisenman suggests — through a nefarious suppression of facts, but because facts alone cannot account for the religious phenomenon. In the long run, Paul's proved to be the more profound and satisfying vision of Jesus.