

THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF JAMES*

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The epistle of James appears to be a collection of sayings and thoughts loosely put together. It differs from the epistles that Paul has written, in which he first develops a doctrinal issue—for example, Christology in Colossians—and then concludes with a section on practical application. By contrast James presents a series of exhortations and numerous admonitions that reflect an ethical rather than a doctrinal emphasis. Even though these exhortations seem to be loosely connected, James shows progress and development in his presentation.

Typically James introduces a subject in summary fashion, which he afterward augments. Some of these subjects are faith, testing, wisdom (1:2-5), restraining the tongue, controlling anger, and submission to God (1:19-20). He returns to some topics to discuss them more fully: testing and temptation (1:12-15); keeping the law in faith (1:22-2:26); restraint of the tongue (3:1-12); earthly and heavenly wisdom (3:13-18); living in harmony with the will of God (chap. 4); exercising patience through prayer (chap. 5). Because James often reverts to discussing items he has mentioned already (cf. 4:8 with 1:8; 5:11 with 1:12), his epistle does not lend itself to separate divisions of topics. To treat every topic would make this paper proportionately too lengthy, and I will therefore choose only a few subjects.

James seems to leave the impression that he is familiar with the oral gospel of Jesus but not with the books of the NT. "No case can be demonstrated for literary dependence on our gospel of Matthew (or indeed on Luke and John)."¹ Had he been acquainted with the written gospel accounts and with the epistles, James would have been more theologically than ethically oriented in his epistle. True, he presents theology—but it is implicit rather than explicit. James depends on the preaching of Jesus, discusses the topic of faith and works independently of Paul's teaching, and writes on submission to God in a more elementary form than that which Peter presents in his epistles.

In his epistle, James echoes the tone and tenor of Jesus' preaching recorded in the gospels. The parallels between the sermon on the mount (Matt 5:3-7:27; Luke 6:20-49) and verses, clauses, phrases and words in the letter of

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¹J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 125.

James are remarkable.² Here are a few verses to illustrate the point:

Matthew

5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

5:19 "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments . . . will be called least in the kingdom of heaven."

6:19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy."

James

2:13 Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

2:10 Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

5:2-3 Moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. . . . You have hoarded wealth.

From a literary point of view, scholars generally acknowledge that James is not quoting from but alluding to the synoptic gospels. The choice of words, the syntax, and the structure of the sentences differ, so that it is safe to say that James relies on the spoken word and conveys allusion to the written gospel.³ On the basis of these numerous allusions to the teaching of Jesus we venture to say that James had heard Jesus preach on many occasions and therefore had become familiar with his teachings. With "eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (Luke 1:2), James participated in receiving and delivering the message of Jesus.

If we are able to detect the direct teachings of Jesus in James' epistle, is it possible to formulate a Christology? The answer is affirmative.

I. CHRISTOLOGY

The epistle of James is devoid of references to the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Although the doctrine of the resurrection is the substratum of apostolic preaching and a basic theme in the book of Acts, in his epistle James pays no attention to this redemptive event. He is interested in proclaiming the gospel of Christ not so much in terms of his person as in terms of the practical and ethical application of his teachings.⁴

The epistle contains only two direct references to Jesus. The first one is in the address: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). The

²J. B. Mayor has compiled a complete list of all the verbal resemblances between the epistle of James and the synoptic gospels. Choosing from the most striking parallels that Mayor indicates, I list only those parallels for Matthew 5-7: 5:3—Jas 2:5; 5:7—Jas 2:13; 5:11-12—Jas 1:2; 5:10-11; 5:34-37—Jas 5:12; 6:11—Jas 2:15-16; 6:19—Jas 5:2-3; 6:22—Jas 4:4, 8; 6:34—Jas 4:13-14; 7:1—Jas 4:11-12; 5:9; 7:7-8—Jas 1:5; 4:3; 7:16—Jas 3:10-13, 18; 1:21; 7:21-23—Jas 1:26-27; 2:14-26; 3:13-14; 7:24—Jas 1:22-25. *The Epistle of St. James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprint 1946) lxxxv-lxxxvii.

³Says P. H. Davids: "Collectively, these allusions argue that the author was someone saturated with the teaching of Jesus and that the work was written before its author contacted written gospel traditions"; *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 23.

⁴Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, "The Message of James," *SJT* 18 (1965) 182-193.

second is in the discussion on faith, where James calls the recipients "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1).

Besides including these direct Christological testimonies, James refers indirectly to Jesus by employing the term "Lord" eleven times.⁵ I hasten to point out, however, that in the case of a few of these references this term is equivalent to "God" (3:9; 5:4, 10, 11).

When James calls Jesus "Lord," he wants his readers to think of the ascended Christ. The names of God and Jesus are parallel to each other in the address (1:1); the intent is to emphasize that the exalted Lord is divine. Furthermore James attributes divine acts to Jesus: He forgives sin (5:15), heals the sick (5:14-15), and is standing at the door as the Judge (5:9).

James furnishes still another allusion to Jesus. He tells the readers that the rich "are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong" (2:7).⁶ That noble name belongs to "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1). Note that James describes the Lord as "glorious" (in the Greek, "the Lord of glory"). This term reminds the reader of the glory of God that filled the tabernacle in the desert (see Exod 40:35) and resembles the descriptions of Jesus that John provides in the prologue of his gospel: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The term "glory" indicates that Jesus has fulfilled the OT promises that God himself would come to live with his people. In Jesus Christ, God has revealed his glory.⁷

And last, the early Church understood the phrase "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" to mean that Jesus had ascended to heaven where he reigns with God in heavenly glory.

In his epistle James discloses his Christology not directly but indirectly, and thereby he seems to reveal an early stage of doctrinal development in the Christian Church. If we assume that the Church in the first part of the first century had no fully developed doctrine of Christ, we may conclude that the letter appears to reflect an early period in the history of the Church.

II. PRAYER

James, who reportedly spent much time in prayer, acquaints his readers with this subject in at least three places in his epistle. In the introductory part of his epistle he exhorts them to ask God for wisdom (1:5-7). When he rebukes them for their sin of quarreling and fighting, he points out that they do not receive anything from God because they are asking him for goods they want to use for their personal pleasure (4:2-3). And if there is sickness or if sin has been committed, James counsels the readers to offer prayer so that the sick

⁵1:7; 3:9; 4:10, 15; 5:4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14, 15.

⁶R. N. Longenecker adds that this is a "reference to blaspheming the name of Jesus"; *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (SBT 17, 2d series; Naperville: Allenson, 1970) 45.

⁷Cf. B. B. Warfield, *The Lord of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 265; cf. also F. Mussner, "'Direkte' und 'indirekte' Christologie im Jakobusbrief," *Catholica* 24 (1970) 111-117.

person may be made well and sin may be forgiven (5:14–16).

In these three passages James instructs his readers that genuine prayer must be based on trust and faith in God. God answers prayer only when the believer asks in faith. In response to the believer's request, God generously will grant the gift of wisdom, supply man's material needs, and heal the sick. The prayer of a person who is right with God "is powerful and effective" (5:16). The example is that of Elijah, whose prayers influenced the course of nature (5:17–18).

Indirectly James touches on prayer in still more places. Prayer is also praise. "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father," writes James (3:9). Prayer is coming near to God (4:8) and humbling oneself before the Lord (4:10).

The similarity between the words of Jesus and the epistle of James on the subject of prayer is unquestionable. Jesus teaches that prayer based on faith is able to move mountains (Matt 17:20; 21:21; Luke 17:6). Says he, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer" (Matt 21:22). Other writers of the NT, among them the author of Hebrews, stress the same truth. Paul puts it rather pointedly: "Everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Rom 14:23).

III. FAITH

One of the first topics James introduces in his epistle is faith: "The testing of your faith develops perseverance" (1:3). And when a person approaches God in prayer, "he must believe and not doubt" (1:6).

Especially in the second chapter James develops the subject of faith. In the original Greek this noun appears predominantly in chap. 2—that is, of the sixteen occurrences in the entire epistle,⁸ thirteen are in the second chapter. In addition the chapter has three occurrences of the verb "to believe" (2:19 [2 times], 23). This indeed is the chapter on faith in the epistle of James.

The recipients of the letter are called "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1). The person who is materially poor is spiritually rich in faith (2:5) and heir to God's kingdom.

In the section on faith and deeds, James asserts that faith that "is not accompanied by action is dead" (2:17, 26), for faith that is dead is no faith. Therefore he illustrates his teaching with a reference to the historical account of Abraham offering his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. He proves that Abraham's works result from the patriarch's active faith.⁹ Works, then, are an essential part of faith.

IV. LAW

For James, the law of God gives the believer freedom (1:25; 2:12), is summarized as "the royal law" ("Love your neighbor as yourself," 2:8), and must be kept (4:11). Concludes Peter H. Davids: "In each of these passages the va-

⁸1:3, 6; 2:1, 5, 14 (2 times), 17, 18 (3 times), 20, 22 (2 times), 24, 26; 5:15.

⁹D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981) 599.

lidity of the law is not argued, but simply assumed."¹⁰

Parallels between the epistle of James and the teaching of Jesus on the law are recognizable. The person who does what the law requires by looking intently into it, declares James, "will be blessed in what he does" (1:25). Jesus observes: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 7:21). The person who puts Jesus' words into practice is a wise man (7:25; see Luke 6:47). James depicts the second part of the summary of the law—"Love your neighbor as yourself"—as royal (2:8). Asked by an expert in the law to identify the greatest commandment in the law, Jesus teaches the summary: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt 22:37-39).

James instructs the readers not to criticize or judge a brother, for that is the same as criticizing or judging the law. "When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it" (4:11). The words are an echo and expansion of those spoken by Jesus: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged" (Matt 7:1-2).

The epistle of James breathes the spirit of Christ in respect to the law. True, James presents not a full-fledged doctrine of law and salvation but the teaching that God "gives grace to the humble" (4:6). It is for Paul to present to the Church the doctrine of justification by faith and not by works.

V. FAITH AND WORKS

A comparison of Romans 4 and James 2 discloses an apparent similarity in the choice of the words "faith" and "works" and the quotation from Gen 15:6: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:3; James 2:23). What is the relationship between Paul's presentation of faith and works in Romans and that of James in his epistle?

Some commentators maintain that James wrote his epistle to criticize Paul's teaching on faith and works. Paul, they say, was misunderstood by the Church because he separated the concept of faith and works. James saw a danger in the teaching Paul set forth—namely, that of faith without works. Therefore because some Christians misunderstood the phrase "without works" James wrote his letter to affirm the teaching that faith results in works.¹¹

Other scholars are of the opinion that James wrote his epistle before Paul began his writing career.¹² That is, after the epistle of James began to circulate in the early Church, Paul wrote his letter to the Romans to present a better understanding of the significance of faith without works.

¹⁰Davids, *Epistle 47*; see also "Theological Perspectives on the Epistle of James," *JETS* 23 (1980) 102.

¹¹Cf. e.g. M. Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 29, 178-180.

¹²Cf. Robinson, *Redating 127-128*: "As a reply to Paul's position James' argument totally misses the point; for Paul never contended for faith *without* works." Cf. also T. Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1909), 1. 143.

Both James and Paul develop the topic of faith and works, but each from his own perspective and for his own purpose.

James uses the word "faith" subjectively in the sense of trust and confidence in the Lord. This active faith gives the believer perseverance, certainty and salvation (1:3; 2:14; 5:15). Faith is the believer's active involvement in the Church and in the world. Through faith he receives wisdom (1:5), righteousness (2:23) and healing (5:15).

Paul, on the other hand, often speaks of faith objectively. Faith is the instrument by which the believer is justified before God (Rom 3:25, 28, 30; 5:1; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9). Faith is the means by which the believer takes hold of the merits of Christ. Because of these merits, man is justified before God. Justification, then, comes as a gift from God to man—a gift that he appropriates in faith.¹³ Justification is God's declaration that God has restored the believer through faith to a right relationship with himself.

In his discussion of faith and works, James appears to write independently of Paul's letter to the Romans. James approaches the topic from a point of view that is more practical than theological. In effect, his approach is elementary, direct and consequential.

Paul's discussion represents an advanced stage of the teaching relating to faith and works. Because the approach of James varies significantly from that of Paul, we conclude that he wrote his epistle independently of Paul's teaching and perhaps prior to the composition of Romans.

VI. TRIALS AND SUBMISSION

Two topics that both James and Peter pursue are those of trials and submission. This similarity raises questions. Did Peter depend on the epistle of James when he wrote his own epistle? Did James borrow from 1 Peter? Or did both authors derive their material from a common source?

Before we attempt to answer these questions, we must take note of at least three facts. First, with respect to resemblances and parallels the epistle of James is short and 1 Peter is elaborate. The hermeneutical rule "The shorter reading is likely to be the original" has merit, for a writer who borrows material tends to lengthen his presentation. Next, James addresses his letter exclusively to Jewish Christians, while Peter writes to Gentile Christians (see 1 Pet 1:18; 2:10, 12; 4:3). And last, James and Peter share a common heritage of culture, training and purpose. Undoubtedly their intimate fellowship in Jerusalem contributed to interdependence in the writing of their respective epistles.

Numerous are the resemblances between the epistle of James and the first epistle of Peter.¹⁴ Both authors allude to and quote two identical passages from the OT. The first one is from Isa 40:6-8: "All men are like grass, and all their

¹³Cf. F. W. Grosheide, *De Brief aan de Hebreëen en de Brief van Jakobus* (Kampen: Kok, 1955) 336; cf. also L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 520.

¹⁴Choosing only the resemblances that Mayor, *Epistle cvi-cvii*, indicates are the most striking parallels, I list the following passages of 1 Peter: 1:1—Jas 1:1; 1:3—Jas 1:18; 1:6—Jas 1:2; 1:12—Jas 1:25; 1:23—Jas 1:18; 2:1—Jas 1:18; 2:11—Jas 4:1; 2:12—Jas 3:13; 5:4—Jas 1:12; 5:5-6—Jas 4:6-7.

glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. . . . The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." James alludes to this passage (1:10–11) and Peter quotes parts of it verbatim (1 Pet 1:24). The second quotation is from Prov 10:12: "Love covers over all wrongs." Both James and Peter quote this verse (Jas 5:20; 1 Pet 4:8).

Also, we must note a few parallels in the two epistles to see how each writer unfolds a specific topic. From a look at parallels we are able to determine who gives the fuller account of that topic. Here are a few parallel verses to illustrate the themes of trials and submission:

Jas 1:2

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face many trials of many kinds.

James indicates that the man who perseveres under trial will receive the crown of life (1:12). Peter exhorts his readers not to be surprised when they endure painful suffering (4:12) and not to be ashamed when they suffer as a Christian (4:16).

Jas 4:6–7, 10

Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves, then, to God. . . . Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

1 Pet 1:6

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

1 Pet 5:5–6

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older . . . because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

Whereas James exhorts: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (4:7), Peter is expansive in his exhortation and in his description of the devil. He admonishes the readers to "be self-controlled and alert." He explains his admonition by saying: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." And last, he tells the believer to "resist [the devil], standing firm in the faith" (1 Pet 5:8–9).

These two examples illustrate the conciseness of James' style and the expansiveness of Peter's. Although this observation alone by itself is nothing more than the proverbial straw in the wind, it seems to favor the theory that the epistle of James was written before the letter of Peter. An early date for this epistle is more likely than one that is late.