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Andrew Chester and Ralph P. Martin

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I

*The Theology of James*

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## *Introduction*

James presents a unique problem within the New Testament. The questions that loom over it are whether it has any theology at all, and whether it should have any place in Christian scripture. Issues of this sort have haunted James for most of its history. So for, example, it was only relatively late on and with considerable reservation that it was included in the canon.<sup>1</sup> The agenda for the modern discussion of James has been set above all by Martin Luther, who famously described James as an 'epistle of straw'. He held that it had no place in the New Testament, since it says nothing about Christ, or his death and resurrection, and contradicts Paul and the true gospel of justification by faith by preaching justification by works.<sup>2</sup>

Luther's polemical attitude to James has been enormously influential, especially (although by no means exclusively) in Protestant scholarship. As a result, James has been left on the margins of the canon and formulations of Christian doctrine, and is rarely given any place at all within an overall theology of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> Within the present century, however, it is probably the classic commentary of Martin Dibelius that has

<sup>1</sup> James was only accepted as canonical at the end of the fourth century, and our earliest clear evidence for it being seen as 'scriptural' comes from Origen in the third century. This may well be due not only to doubts about its apostolic authorship, but also to its anti-Pauline stance or more general apparent lack of distinctive Christian themes. See further Dibelius-Greeven 1976, 5–54.

<sup>2</sup> Luther does also speak more positively in places of James, but his verdict is overwhelmingly negative, and he sees its poor theology as the reason why it was not accepted as canonical; see further Dibelius-Greeven 1976, 54–6.

<sup>3</sup> As Luck 1984, 2, notes, James is for example mentioned only briefly and disparagingly in Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*, and not at all in Conzelmann's *Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*.

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exercised more influence than anything else on the study of James, and, although Dibelius stands in the German, Lutheran tradition, he differs from Luther in important respects. He sees James as consisting of general paraenesis (or exhortation), with isolated wisdom material connected only by catchwords and lacking any overall argument or coherence; hence also it has no theology at all (Dibelius-Greeven 1976, 1–11, 21–34).

Although this brief summary of Dibelius' position may suggest a disparaging attitude towards James, he is in many respects very positive, and serves as a healthy corrective to Luther. For example, he makes sense of James as essentially a work of popular piety, which belongs to the ordinary people and their religion (Dibelius-Greeven 1976, 38–50). At the same time, however, Dibelius obviously leaves us with the problem of whether we can understand James theologically, and if so, how. That is, Dibelius and Luther between them seem to leave us with the choice of saying that James either has no theology or else that he deliberately presents a wrong, perverse theology. It is in some ways difficult to say which of these is worse; Luther's position is the more stridently polemical, but Dibelius, in the end, also represents an effective indictment of James theologically.

If I found Luther or Dibelius completely convincing, I would not have undertaken to write on James for this series. However, James has much more to offer than is often thought, and more of specifically theological significance than, for example, Dibelius allows. Admittedly the importance of James, theologically, should not be exaggerated; but, equally, James can be shown to have a distinctive role to play in contemporary discussion and formulation of Christian faith. This does not mean that we can treat James as though the work of Luther, Dibelius, and others did not exist. On the contrary, it is important to engage with these issues and the discussion arising from them, just as it is equally important not to be constrained by them. Hence the question of what kind of writing James is, and the context in which it was written, will be taken up in ch. 1; that of its theological content and distinctiveness in ch. 2; the problem of James' relation to Paul,

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and the problems it is perceived to create for the whole question of the canon and the inner consistency and coherence of the New Testament, in ch. 3; and the issue of the continuing significance of James, both positively and negatively, in ch. 4. But, anticipating this discussion, I want to assert at this point that James is worth taking seriously, and its theological significance specifically worth searching out.

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## CHAPTER 1

*James: background and context*

The questions involved here are complex and disputed. James is an enigmatic and puzzling work. It is brief and apparently disjointed, and easily gives the impression of jumping haphazardly from one topic to another.<sup>1</sup> James also fails to fit into any of the main theological traditions or trajectories of early Christianity, and the question is inevitably raised of whether it is distinctively Christian at all.<sup>2</sup> Yet in fact there are several interesting points of contact with early Jewish and Christian tradition, both positively and negatively, not least with Paul.

## 1.1 RELATION TO EARLIER TRADITION

*1.1.1 Paul*

The relationship of James to Paul is of crucial importance for questions of the date and setting of the letter, and also for evaluating James theologically. The discussion here above all concerns 2. 14–26. With its highly positive assessment of works, its attack on justification by faith, and the way it uses the paradigm of Abraham and Gen. 15. 6, it appears to stand in a very negative relation with what Paul says, especially in Gal. 3–4 and Rom. 3–4. It is also much more plausible that James is familiar with Pauline teaching and practice, than that Paul is responding to James (see ch. 3). But, although James is prob-

<sup>1</sup> So e.g. Dibelius-Greeven 1976, 5–7.

<sup>2</sup> A. Meyer, *Das Rätsel des Jakobusbriefes*, Giessen 1930, presents in fullest form (following earlier writers such as Spitta and Massebieau) the thesis that James represents an originally Jewish work, lightly Christianized.

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ably opposing a distinctively Pauline position, it is not clear that this is done from knowledge of Paul's own writings; and, apart from 2. 14–26, there is not a great deal of evidence of contact with Pauline tradition.<sup>3</sup> The nature and implications of the relationship between 2. 14–26 and Paul are of central importance for the history and contemporary interpretation of James, and are taken up more fully in chs. 2 and 3.

*1.1.2 Jesus' Teaching*

More positively, there are striking connections between a considerable amount of the material contained in James and the teaching of Jesus as it appears in the Synoptic Gospels. For example:

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him? (Jas. 2. 5)

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [cf. 5.5: 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth']. (Matt. 5. 3)

So also the polemic against the rich in 5. 1 can be compared with the Woe of Luke 6. 24 (cf. 6. 25), and the prohibition against using oaths and the demand to say simply 'yes' or 'no', in 5. 12, is close to Matt. 5. 34. The points of contact are mainly with the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (or Sermon on the Plain in Luke), but they extend to other parts of Matthew and Luke, as well as some sayings in Mark.<sup>4</sup> The nature of the parallels, however, makes it highly improbable that James has used either Matthew or Luke.<sup>5</sup> The arguments that James has used the sayings-source Q are not particularly convincing either. Hartin (1991, 140–217, 220–44) asserts that James used the Q tradition as it was being developed within

<sup>3</sup> Mayor 1913, xci–cii provides a full list of possible (including unlikely) parallels.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, lxxv–lxxxviii again provides the fullest list of parallels; cf. also Hartin 1991 140–98.

<sup>5</sup> Amongst others, M. H. Shepherd, 'The Epistle of James and the Gospel of Matthew', *JBL* 75 (1956) 40–51, argues for James as dependent on a knowledge of Matthew, but the case is unconvincing; cf. e.g. Davies 1964, 403–4.

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the Matthaean community (a source designated  $Q^{Mt}$ ), but well before the composition of the gospel; that is, James was familiar with the original  $Q$  and also  $Q^{Mt}$ , but not with the final redaction of Matthew. However, although Hartin is convincing in noting the affinities with the sayings-tradition in Matthew, his attempts to tie this down more precisely in terms of the  $Q$  tradition are question-begging. Even the most obvious similarities in wording between James and the gospels are not particularly precise; often they are quite general or even remote. At least some can be explained by James using common Jewish tradition. Again, although there are striking similarities with Matthew, both for Jesus' teaching and more generally, there are impressive links with Luke as well. For example, Davids argues that in a number of ways James is closer to Luke's version of the Sermon than to that of Matthew.<sup>6</sup> This raises obvious problems for Hartin's thesis. To speak of James using  $Q$  in written form begs questions, still more so with the further refinements  $Q^{Mt}$  and  $Q^{L,k}$  (the  $Q$  tradition as it was being developed within the Lucan community), implying *written* tradition. We are inevitably brought back to the fact that the verbal parallels are often not at all close.<sup>7</sup> For much of the material, James is most probably making use of a tradition of Jesus' teaching, which will have at least general affinities with 'Q'; but it is quite possible, for example, that James is drawing on sayings in Aramaic form. We need, therefore, to be much more careful than Hartin about which precise tradition of teaching James is using. Finally, it is striking that, while James obviously draws on early tradition of Jesus' teaching, it does so without any of this teaching being attributed to Jesus.

### 1.1.3 *Wisdom traditions*

There is clear evidence in James of the influence of wisdom tradition. 4.6 quotes Prov. 3. 34, while there is obvious affinity

<sup>6</sup> Davids 1982, 47–50; but he is concerned to stress that James has used the unwritten Jesus tradition freely, and not Matthew or Luke.

<sup>7</sup> Davies 1964, 403 rightly points out (in contrast to Hartin) that the parallels between James and  $Q$  are very few.

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with wisdom traditions in, for example, 1. 19 (cf. Sir. 5. 11; Prov. 10. 19; 17. 27), 1. 26 (Ps. 39. 1) and 1. 27 (Sir. 4. 10; 7. 35; Job 31. 16–21).<sup>8</sup> There are many further allusions and verbal parallels to Wisdom literature (especially Sirach, but also Job, Proverbs, Psalms, and Wisdom of Solomon) in all five chapters of James. More important than this, however, is the fact that much of James belongs to the style of teaching of the Wisdom literature.<sup>9</sup> This represents an intellectual tradition developed over several centuries, especially concerned with understanding and insight. But this is not an abstract concern; it is directed sharply towards practical advice and instruction to enable the reader to know what to do in various situations, and how to follow the right path and avoid the way of folly. Much of the advice is general (although not abstract) in nature, but it is all based on seeking wisdom, or being given it, as prerequisite. So James shows dependence on this tradition, in emphasizing the need to seek true wisdom from God (1. 5) and to show its effect in the whole of life (3. 13–18, and throughout), and the practical advice and instruction that is associated with this throughout the letter.

One specific theme which is prominent in the Jewish wisdom tradition (although by no means restricted to it) is that of the suffering of the innocent, righteous individual.<sup>10</sup> It is given its most clear and sustained treatment in the book of Job, which calls in question much of previous wisdom tradition and more general Jewish theodicy by showing a righteous, innocent individual not being rewarded by God, but suffering terribly. This theme is also prominent in a number of Psalms and in the wisdom tradition otherwise, and is taken up above all in Wis. 2–5 (cf. also Sir. 2. 1–11). All this is important background for James, not only, obviously, for 5. 11, with specific reference to Job, but also more widely, both in 5. 6, 10 and in the whole theme of the oppression of the poor. Already in the Psalms, and

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also e.g. 3. 2 (Qoh 7. 20; Sir. 14. 1); 3. 3 (Ps. 32. 9); 3. 6 (Sir. 8. 3; Prov. 16. 27; Ps. 120. 2–4); 3. 8 (Ps. 140. 3; Sir. 38. 17–21); 4. 13–14 (Prov. 27. 1; Ps. 102. 3; Job 7. 7; Wis. 2. 4).

<sup>9</sup> Martin 1988, lxxxvii–xciii gives a brief and helpful summary of the main issues; a more detailed treatment is provided by e.g. Hoppe 1977 and Luck 1984, 10–30.

<sup>10</sup> See further Martin 1988, xciii–cxviii.



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certainly in the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach, a close connection is made between the innocent who suffer and the poor who are oppressed.

The wisdom tradition thus impregnates James throughout, although it is question-begging simply to describe James as a 'wisdom document', without qualification.<sup>11</sup> It is still more misleading to claim that James takes up the developed tradition of personified (or hypostatized) wisdom.<sup>12</sup> James does in many ways have the characteristics of a wisdom writing, but it is important to realize, for a proper understanding of James' concerns and theology, that it uses wisdom traditions and material creatively. For example, the wisdom tradition is modified through the influence of James' eschatological perspective. This is akin to a phenomenon we encounter in Jewish texts, especially the Enoch tradition and other apocalyptic writings. In the case of James, however, the distinctive feature is that it draws especially on the central thrust of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom.<sup>13</sup> Hence James uses wisdom tradition as one of several perspectives, and it is very important background for its form and content. But James is not controlled by it, and, especially for its theology, it is not all-important.

#### 1.1.4 *Other texts and traditions*<sup>14</sup>

There are some notable points of contact between James and 1 Peter. For example, 1. 1 (1 Pet. 1. 1); 1. 2–3 (1. 6–7); 1. 21

<sup>11</sup> Hoppe 1977 and Luck 1984 both overemphasize the importance of wisdom theology for the theological argument in James, but Luck rightly follows Schlatter 1927, 418, against Dibelius-Greeven 1976, in stressing that James is not an amorphous collection of wisdom teaching, but is thematically ordered, with logical connections. Nevertheless, Popkes 1986, 149–51, properly stresses, against Luck and others, that James does not simply take over wisdom tradition passively, but uses it in a mediated and creative way.

<sup>12</sup> As e.g. Hartin 1991, 94–7 does; see further under section 2.9 below.

<sup>13</sup> Baasland 1982 qualifies his description of James as 'the New Testament wisdom document' by noting its novel emphasis on eschatology (although he fails to note the Jewish parallels for this). He also holds that all the important themes in James are found in the Synoptic tradition, and above all that what separates James from the wisdom tradition binds him to Jesus; thus the wisdom sayings in the Synoptics appear in a new light through the proclamation of the kingdom of God.

<sup>14</sup> For parallels between James and these texts, and discussion of their significance, see e.g. Mayor 1913, lxxxviii–xcii, cii–cviii; cf. Schlatter 1932, 67–77.

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(1. 23, 2. 1–2); 4. 6–7 (5. 5–6). It is not simply a question of verbal parallels, however, but of common themes and concerns. Equally, it is hardly plausible that James has used 1 Peter or is dependent on it; it is much more probable that 1 Peter is familiar with James, if either is dependent on the other. Both, however, may be drawing independently on a common tradition. Again, Jude may (on the basis of its opening and one or two further references) be familiar with James, but in any case James does not draw on Jude at all. There are interesting points of contact with parts of the Johannine literature, but these probably reflect common tradition, not dependency of one on the other. Finally, the *Didache* and *Hermas* have clear links with James, and may be drawing on it.

## 1.2. AUTHOR, DATE, AND SETTING

The task of setting James more precisely in context is difficult. As far as author and addressees are concerned, it would appear that 1. 1 gives clear information, but on closer examination it is tantalizingly ambiguous. There is general agreement that the author could only introduce himself simply as 'James' if he were a well-known figure in the early Christian movement. Of the five named 'James' in the New Testament, James the brother of Jesus is the only really plausible candidate.<sup>15</sup> If so, however, it is strange that nothing is said about Jesus that reflects personal knowledge of him. It is also the case that the theological concerns that emerge from the letter do not fit well with Gal. 2, where James appears to have a hard-line position on observance of the law, especially concerning food and circumcision. In fact it is by no means impossible that the James of 1. 1 is one we know nothing at all of otherwise. Similarly, 'to the twelve tribes of the Diaspora' most naturally suggests that the letter was written to Jewish-Christians outside

<sup>15</sup> This is not the place to discuss the possibilities; see further e.g. Mayor 1913, i–lxxxiv; Dibelius-Greeven 1976, 11–21; Martin 1988, xxxi–xli; Davids 1982, 2–22. If the identification with James the brother of Jesus is correct, it could of course be either an authentic self-designation or a pseudonymous claim to James' authority and prestige; this issue is clearly bound up with that of the dating.