

4 James. Jesus' Brother Affirms the Priority of Praxis

Outline

Greetings, 1:1

Introduction: Aphorisms, 1:2-27

Joy in the midst of oppression, 1:2-4-->5:7-11

Democratization of wisdom, 1:5-7-->3:13-18

Destiny of the rich, 1:9-11-->2:1-7; 4:13--5:6

God, source only of the good, 1:12-18-->3:13--4:10

Diligence in listening, 1:19-21-->3:1-12

The Word and praxis: authentic religion, 1:22-27-->2:14-26

Essays, 2:1--5:18

Respect for the dignity of the poor, 2:1-9

The Law that preserves the liberated community free from oppression, 2:10-13

Faith and sacrificial good works for the poor and vulnerable, 2:14-26

Tongues that murder the poor and vulnerable, 3:1-13

Wisdom democratized, 3:14-18

Violence of covetous oppressors, 4:1-12

Warnings to prosperous oppressors, 4:13--5:6

Imminent advent of the Liberator and Judge, 5:7-11

Avoid oaths, but dialogue with the Creator, 5:12-18

Conclusion: mutual correction, 5:19-20

1. The Poor, Sick, Women and Sexual Minorities. With its condemnation of oppression as the fundamental cause of poverty, James is the New Testament book that most closely reflects the Exodus paradigm and prophetic denunciations of wealthy oppressors common in the Hebrew Bible. This should not surprise us if James is the earliest writing of the New Testament (45-50 AD) and written by James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19; Acts 15:13; 21:18). Many argue for another author and a later date (70-90 AD), pointing out that the structure of the assembly (church) was more like that of the pastoral letters (with teachers and elders) than to the Pauline congregations (James 3:1; 5:14-15; cf. 1 Corinthians 12-14 with spiritual gifts, rather than offices).¹ This characteristic of James, however, may reflect the Jewish synagogue tradition, a cultural difference, rather than a temporal one (see “synagogue,” Greek, 2:2; “assembly” NRSV; cf. HCSB note). Most of those addressed in the “letter” (1:1) were neither poor beggars (2:2) nor wealthy (2:6; 5:1-6). As a Judeo-Christian minority (“Diaspora/Dispersion”, 1:1; HCSB note), the community was composed mainly of small farmers and artisans, who possessed little and had to live frugally.

In addition to the term used for the “beggarly poor” (ptochós, four times, 2:2-5), James’ vocabulary includes “the humble poor” (tapeinós, 1:9; cf. 4:6, 10), “the workers,” “the harvesters” and “the just” (5:4, 6; “innocent,” NIV). The beggarly poor are characterized as wearing shabby clothes (2:2) or being without clothes and daily food (2:15-16). The weak, marginalized, and needy also included women (2:15), the sick (5:14-16) and sexual minorities: widows (1:27, with orphans) and the sexual worker, Rahab (2:25; cf. Matthew 1:5; Joshua 2:1-21; 6:22-25; Hebrews 11:31). The presentation of Rahab as a paradigm of hospitality and faith together with Abraham (2:21-26; also note that Abraham divorced his concubine, Hagar, Genesis 21:14) demonstrates how close James’ perspective is to that of his brother Jesus and the “Q” source in terms of women and sexual minorities (see John 4 and Luke 7). “The composition

shows no interest...in sexual morality, or the ethics of marriage, or domestic arrangements.²

The only women specified (the widows, 1:27; the poor sister, 2:15; and Rahab, 2:25) represent sexual minorities.

Regarding the fundamental cause of so much poverty, weakness and marginalization in the world, James never blames the victims for such things as sloth, vices or genetic inferiority. Rather James focuses the spotlight on oppression (see Luke 4:18-19).³ According to James, oppression of the poor and the weak appears to take place basically in three ways:

- a. Economic-legal mechanisms, especially against poor debtors (2:1-12);
- b. Ambitious and arrogant business people (4:13-17; coveting, 1:14-15; 4:2);
- c. Wealthy landowners withhold wages, a very generalized method of oppression (5:4).

The rich “oppress” (katadynasteúo, 2:6) those to whom the letter of James is addressed, using false witnesses (“the tongue!”) to drag them into court. Such injustice/oppression (´adikía) is what basically characterizes the entire worldly system (2:6; cf. 4:4 and “trials”, 1:2, 12). The “distress” (thlipsis, 1:27) that widows and orphans suffer also relates specifically to oppression (Mark 12:40; 2 Timothy 3:6).⁴

James (like Jesus) appears to ignore Paul’s teaching about Adam’s “fall” (Romans 5:12-21) but expounds a more authentically Jewish doctrine concerning creation (3:9) and sin’s origin (1:13-15): everyone is “Adam” (2 Baruch 3:9). James does not call for evangelism as it is commonly understood. Nevertheless, a poor person who entered the meeting would be attracted by the honor shown by a welcome without discrimination (2:1-4), by the Good News of God’s preferential option for the poor (2:5), by the prophetic denunciation of wealthy oppressors (2:6-7), by the praxis of loving solidarity with the poor and weak (1:27; 2:14-17), by testimonies of healing (5:14-15a; see HCSB notes), by the promise of divine forgiveness (5:15b), and by the shared hope of God’s decisive final judgment against the oppressors and violent to create a new

world of justice and peace (5:1-6; 3:18). Our quite limited concepts of “evangelism” fail to recognize that prophetic denouncement of oppression is an essential element of evangelization, biblically conceived as a proclamation of the Good News in a preferential way for the poor (Luke 4:18-19; 3:10-14; 6:20-26). James projects the vision of communities of disciples whose attractive lifestyle embodies the proclaimed word (1:18, 21; 4:6; 5:19-20). In a world characterized by greed, tyranny and oppression, the community, like “a city set on a hill” (Matthew 5:14-16) beckons with love to the poor, the weak and the oppressed (Isaiah 2:2-4).

James is especially concerned about the sins of the tongue that create a false feeling of importance and security for the affluent but deny dignity, honor and justice for the poor and the weak. Above all, the Bible denounces the sin of false witnesses who, many times bribed by the powerful and the rich, take away land, house and even life itself from the weak and poor (2:6-7). With his strong emphasis on the sins of the tongue (3:1-18), James reminds us of the destructive use of words to insult, express contempt and, with gossip, destroy the good reputation (“name”) and dignity of human beings. Modern studies about the power of words and labels demonstrate how such negative and destructive elements form part of the vocabulary and grammar of language itself. (Note the negative charge in common words in English: whore, prostitute, faggot, queer, blind.) Some interpreters conclude that Jesus’ prohibition of calling someone “raká” (“insult”, NRSV; -->Matthew 5:22) would be similar to “sissy” or “faggot” in English.

James presents justification as the divine response of vindication that dignifies and honors the oppressed in the face of the condemnation of the imperial courts and the false accusations of lying and bribed witnesses (2:12-13; 3:8-9; 4:11-12; 5:6). Therefore, James provides two examples: that of Abraham, an emigrant (see the recipients of the letter, 1:1) and that of Rahab, the sex worker who offered her hospitality as a gesture of solidarity with the slave ancestors of Israel, emigrants who escaped from Egypt.

As in any other part of the New Testament, becoming a “doer of the word”, in fulfillment of the “good news”, implies above all responding in a practical way to the material needs of indigent neighbors and one’s brothers and sisters in the faith (1:22-25; 4:17, cf. “forgiveness” and illness in 5:14-16). To refuse to be a doer of the word -- helping the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized -- means to kill (murder the poor, 5:6) and also to enter into an adulterous alliance with the oppressive world system (4:4-6; cf. 1 John 3:17).

Although James recommends peace (3:17-18) and approves the non-violent resistance of the oppressed harvesters, he is not passively indifferent to such injustice and oppression. On the contrary, he energetically denounces the cruel oppression and violence that impoverishes and kills (2:11; 3:8; 5:5-6). For their historical context, non-violent resistance forms part of the “wisdom that comes from above” that James recommends to all his readers as a critical reflection in the practice of good works (3:13-18). Other dimensions of this divine wisdom include prayer and “militant patience” (1:5-7; 5:13-17).⁵ The fervent expectation of Jesus’ Second Coming as God’s liberating justice for the all the oppressed continues to focus hope for direct imminent divine intervention (5:7-9; “apocalyptic eschatology”). Thus will God fulfill the promise of a new order (“kingdom”) characterized by liberation, justice, love, peace and wisdom (1:12; 2:5).

Despite his closeness to the Hebrew Scriptures, James already is at a certain distance from the oldest traditions of the New Testament that deal with the poor, the weak and the marginalized: the Christian Jews he addresses are in exile (1:1), but are not itinerant prophets like Jesus and his closest disciples. James’ readers live in an established community of “sisters and brothers” (2:6-7, 15; 1:27; 2:25-26), although shaken by conflicts (of class?; 4:1-3). James is one of three New Testament authors who are married (see also Peter and Jude, 1 Corinthians 9:5). Nevertheless, his exaltation of Rahab (an unmarried sex worker) and Abraham (a bigamist who divorced his concubine) and his disregard for common family values and responsibilities,

place him closer to the original ideal of itinerant prophets than to the teaching of some later writings (1 Peter, the deuterio-Pauline and pastoral letters). James prophetically denounces oppression and the abuse of wealth, but does not advocate totally abandoning household, possessions and business (cf. Luke 14:26; 18:29).

2. Liberating Justice. Addressing communities that catered to wealthy visitors and had become indifferent to the poor, James may well have been the pioneer in the incorporation of Hebrew Bible and Jewish justice vocabulary into standard church discourse. Reflecting God's liberating justice in the Exodus paradigm, James uses dik-vocabulary with relative frequency (eight times + adikía, oppression/injustice one time in five chapters):

- "Human wrath does not accomplish God's liberating justice" (dikaioúne, 1:20);
- Abraham and Rahab were "justified" (four uses in 2:21, 23-25) by their authentic faith manifest in their works;
- "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of liberating justice" (dikaioúne, 3:18);
- "You murdered the just person [díkaion], who did not resist you" (5:6, see 5:1-6);
- "The prayer of a just person [dikaíou] is powerful and efficacious" (5:16).

James focuses on the tongue as an instrument of violence in a world characterized by oppression: "The tongue is a fire, a world of oppression/injustice (adikías) among the body's parts" (3:6). But he also employs other terms for oppression and violence:

- "Do not the rich men oppress [katadunasteúousin] you, and they drag you to tribunals?" (2:6);
- "The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields....You have lived daintily and indulgently on the earth, you have fattened your hearts for a day of slaughter. You condemned [katedikásate], you murdered the just person [díkaion], who did not resist you" (5:1-6).

3. James and Jesus: Parallel Texts (//) in Matthew 5--7:

James	//	Matthew	
1:2		5:11-12	Great joy...on being surrounded by...trials.
1:4		5:48	That you may be perfect and complete.
1:5		7:7	Ask God, who gives generously to all.
1:19-20		5:22	Slow to anger.
1:22		7:24	Put the Word into practice.
2:5		5:3	Has not God chosen the poor?
2:10		5:19	He who keeps the whole law yet stumbles at just one point.
2:13		5:7	Mercy triumphs over judgment.
3:12		7:16	Can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?
3:18		5:9	Those who seek peace sow in peace.
4:4		6:24	Friendship with the world is hatred toward God.
4:10		5:5	Humble yourselves before God, and God will lift you up.
5:2-3		6:19-20	Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes.
5:9		7:1	Don't grumble against each other in order not to be judged.
5:10		5:12	Prophets as models of suffering.
5:12		5:34-37	Do not swear -- not by heaven or earth.

In addition to the Sermon on the Mount, see James 1:6 // Matthew 21:21; 2:8 // 22:39; 3:1 // 23:8; 3:2ss. // 12:36-37; 5:7 // 24:13; 5:9 // 24:33. At times James is closer to Luke (James 2:5 // Luke 6:20) and apparently knew, not Matthew's text but a text similar to the early source "Q."

Such data support an early date for James. Were it from another author late in the first century we might expect it to reflect more closely the texts of Luke (80 AD) or Matthew (85 AD), rather than Q (60 AD).⁶ The Matthew and Q parallels also indicate how James' Christology focuses primarily on Jesus' teaching and praxis, more than his titles (but see 1:1 and "our glorious Lord" in 2:1).

4. James' Theology for Dialogue with Other Religions. The nineteenth century witnessed the great missionary expansion of the church (in Africa and Asia) and in the twentieth century we have experienced an incomparable ecumenical movement involving dialogue between the Christian confessions. The new millennium, however, appears destined to be above all an epoch of dialogue between the world's religions and ideologies (see the expansion of Islam in traditionally Christian nations). For such a dialogue James offers us highly relevant perspectives and guidelines:

a. "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak," James 1:19. Therefore, the dialog is not some "liberal" invention but a biblical mandate and should generally precede any effective proclamation of the Good News.

b. James carefully describes "religion" (not a biblical category) in terms of a liberating praxis (1:26-27, visit "widows and orphans") and thus transcends the Marxist critique of religion. See James' texts on good works, oppression and God's coming judgment of oppressors.

c. The solidarity of James with the poor and his focus on oppression as the fundamental cause of their poverty (1:27; 2:6; 5:1-6) manifest his continuity with the most profound perceptions of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Exodus paradigm). James thus avoids any tendency

towards the Neoplatonic asceticism so common in many religious traditions, including Christianity.

d. James faithfully represents the theocentric (God-centered) theology of Jesus rather than the Christocentric theology of Paul (and most other New Testament authors). For any dialogue with people of other religions, such a point of departure (God, not Christ) has the obvious advantage of focusing first on shared elements of belief (see even Paul in Acts 17; cf. 1 Corinthians 1). We may thus question the traditional Protestant tendency of seeing the few references to Jesus in the book of James as an indication of a theological “weakness.” Moreover, by simply calling him “Lord” (1:1; 2:1), James affirms the identity of Jesus with Yahweh, the liberator God of the Exodus. Although Protestants, beginning with Luther, point out the lack of references in James to the cross, the resurrection, and justification by faith, James appears more concerned about the faith of Jesus in a God who does not discriminate against the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, rather than faith in Jesus (2:1; cf. Galatians 2:20).

e. James severely denounces the arrogance of the oppressors and affirms the basic dignity of the oppressed, the weak, and the marginalized (1:9-11; 2:1-13; 4:13-17; including sexual minorities, 2:21-25). Such support for and solidarity with the weak and oppressed constitute a fundamental element for authentic religious truth in any culture. (Consider the concern for self-image and dignity in contemporary psychology and in the liberation movements that focus on the pride of women, blacks, sexual minorities, the physically challenged, etc.)

f. James seeks to focus exclusively on the goodness of God (1:13, 16-17), instead of preserving the primitive concepts of divinities that incorporate elements of evil and the demonic (see the healing ministry of Jesus, Matthew 9--10; cf. the plagues of the Exodus supposedly sent by Yahweh). Like the good doctor in Jean-Paul Sartre’s The Plague, Jesus is able to battle

against illness because he affirms the pure goodness of his Heavenly Parent and doesn't portray God as author of the plagues which afflict humanity.

g. In his anthropology James avoids the Pauline myth of Adam's Fall (Romans 5:12-21; cf. Genesis 3, which does not speak of a "fall" of the race but simply of the disobedience of two persons). Instead, James seeks to present a more realistic and balanced vision of good and evil in human nature (1:14-15; 3:9; 4:11-12). Such insistence on human responsibility for the evil that we ourselves commonly produce would appear more compatible with insights from modern science (biological evolution and evolutionary psychology).

h. By James' democratization of wisdom (1:5-8; 3:13-18) and insistence on the indisputable place of reason (3:17, Greek: eupeithés), James avoids the extremes of bibliolatry and anti-intellectual fideism, so common in traditional theologies. James' understanding of wisdom also subverts elitist tendencies in traditional education (3:1) and the sterile polemics that disguise themselves as "purer theologies" (4:1-3).

i. James portrays the "apocalyptic hope" of Jesus' second coming as God's judgment that puts an end to all oppression (5:1-6). He also counsels a militant patience (5:7-11) so disciplined that one can suffer violence without practicing it (5:6; 3:18).

j. James avoids any concept of evangelism that involves aggressive proselytism. Rather, he insists on a praxiological approach (2:1-26) accompanied by honoring with pastoral encouragement all who begin to identify with the community of faith (1:27; 2:2; 5:19-20; cf. Jude 20-23; 1 John 5:16-17; Isaiah 2:2-4). In many contexts Paul's more Christocentric but conflictive approach may be more appropriate. However, James, more a wise teacher than an apostle, enables us to appreciate the diversity that exists in the New Testament. He reminds us that the fundamental conflict always should be, not with certain mistaken ideas, but with oppressive and violent practices and the lies that seek to mask and rationalize them.

Bibliography on Religion

- Ariarajah, S. Wesley. The Bible and People of Other Faiths. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985/89.
- Bosch, David J. Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991.
- Knitter, Paul F. No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985.

Bibliography on James

- Dowd, Sharyn. "James." In The Women's Bible Commentary, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992.
- Eisenman, Robert. James the Brother of Jesus. London: Faber & Faber, 1997.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. The Letter of James. The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1995.
- Laws, Sophie. "James, Epistle of." In The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman, 3:621-628. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Maynard-Reid, Pedrito. Poverty and Wealth in James. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987.
- Tamez, Elsa. Santiago: Lectura latinoamericana de la epístola. San José, Costa Rica: DEI, 1985; The Scandalous Message of James. New York: Crossroad, 1990.
- "James." In Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 2:381-391. New York: Crossroad, 1994.