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THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE EPISTLE OF JAMES*

Peter H. Davids**

Even to begin to write about a theology discovered in the epistle of James takes a little boldness, for Martin Dibelius denied just such a possibility in his commentary.[1] James is paraenesis, a miscellaneous collection of teachings from various sources without any internal coherence among its various themes. Fortunately, however, research on James has moved beyond the form-critical work of Dibelius. At the same time the latest German revision of Dibelius' work was being published, F. Mussner produced a truly new work in which he boldly argued for theological unity in the epistle, discussing its theological ideas in a series of excurses.[2] Similarly R. Hoppe's recently published dissertation argues that there are larger unities in the epistle than Dibelius believed and that the two themes of wisdom and faith appear as the great theological contributions of the work.[3] In other words, the study of James has now moved from the period of form criticism into that of redaction criticism. The age of the string-of-pearls conception of the letter is past, and its essential theological unity is ready for exploration. Furthermore, at least one author has found a literary form—that of the literary or secondary letter with a doubled introduction—into which the epistle as a whole fits.[4] It is this overall form that will give us a basis for extracting the theological message of the epistle, however limited our survey must be.

If then it is legitimate to look at James on the redactional level, one will discover that the epistle is primarily *Leidenstheologie*, an expression of a theology of suffering with a long history before James' Christian version. Naturally it is impossible for us to give a full discussion of the development or ramifications of this theological conception. We will simply sketch some of the major points as we move along.

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**Peter Davids is assistant professor of Biblical studies at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania.

[1]M. Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 1-7. Dibelius' work is based on a German edition of 1964, which in turn is but a slight revision of the 1921 edition. See also J. Cantinat, *Les Epitres de Saint Jacques et de Saint Jude* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1973), for a similar point of view.

[2]F. Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967).

[3]R. Hoppe, *Der theologische Hintergrund des Jakobusbriefes* (Würzburg: Echter, 1977), esp. 1-17.

[4]F. O. Francis, "The Form and Function of the Opening and Closing Paragraphs of James and I John," *ZNW* 61 (1970) 110-126.

Within the context of *Leidenstheologie* James' primary concern is with the health of the community. Thus the concern of the work is not simply suffering, but suffering within the context of communal concern.[5] This means that it is wrong to read the epistle with an individualistic focus, for that would be to miss the chief concern of the author. Rather the author addresses the behavior of individuals, because that behavior has an impact on the life of the community. One should note that all of the various sins and behaviors addressed have to do with the solidarity of the Christian community, not simply with the internal life of the faithful or with the relationship of the faithful to the non-Christian world. As such the ethic of James has some great similarities to the ethic of the Dead Sea community.

The starting place for a *Leidenstheologie* is suffering. Thus James begins with a primary focus on *peirasmos*. The concept itself has two sides. First, *peirasmos* is a test that in the context of James comes from the suffering of the Christian. It is something to be endured, to teach patience, and to lead to perfect virtue. This is essentially the message of Jas 1:2-4. Second, *peirasmos* is a challenge to the faith of the believer. As with Israel in the wilderness, the temptation in the face of suffering is to lose faith and to challenge God. One buckles in the test and blames God for the failure, for a sovereign God ought not to have sent such a test upon him. Here one finds the focus of 1:12-15.

The call in the epistle of James is for eschatological joy in the face of the testing situation. This *eschatologische Vorfreude*, as J. Thomas puts it,[6] is apparent in both halves of the doubled opening statement: 1:2 and 1:12. There is a blessedness in coming into the testing situation, for the test itself is a mark that one has chosen to be on the side of God, as R. Jonathan later said:

> A potter does not examine defective vessels . . . . What then does he examine? Only the sound vessels . . . . Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, tests not the wicked but the righteous, as it says, "The Lord trieth the righteous." [7]

The test can lead to reward—i. e., "a crown of life," presumably from the hands of Christ as in Rev 2:10—in the eschatological day. Thus there is every reason to rejoice in anticipation of that reward if one stands firm.

Naturally the problem in James is that some are not standing firm. To what can one attribute this failure to stand in the test? The reaction of the individual involved is to blame God, but James rules that out with his use of the term *apeirasmos*: "God ought not to be tested by evil men" (1:13), for this would be the same failure that Israel showed in the wilderness.[8] Instead James points out in

[5]R. B. Ward, *The Communal Concern of the Epistle of James* (unpublished Th.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1966), and J. B. Souček, "Zu den Problemen des Jakobusbriefes," *EvT* 18 (1958) 460-468, both address this aspect of the epistle.

[6]J. Thomas, "Anfechtung und Vorfreude," *KD* 14 (1968) 183-206.

[7]*Gen. Rab.* 55:2. Cf. *Num. Rab.* 15:12; Jdt 8:25-27; Sir 2:1 ff. See further J. H. Korn, *PEIRASMOS* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1937).

[8]For further discussion see P. H. Davids, "The Meaning of *APEIRASTOS* in James I. 13," *NTS* 24 (1978) 386-392. For further information on the testing tradition in Judaism and the NT see B. Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1966).

continuity with the tendency of later Judaism that God does not send the test, although James is not intending to make a statement here about the sovereignty of God. Rather the situation of suffering becomes a test of faith to human beings because of the evil impulse (*epithymia*) within us.

At this point James has combined two theological streams in the theology of later Judaism. The evil impulse or evil *yēṣer* was as well-known in later Judaism as the problem of suffering. The human being has within himself an undifferentiated drive or desire that pushes him to good as well as evil. When it impels marriage, the building of a house and the procreation of children, it is good. But since it is undifferentiated desire, it will just as forcefully impel one to adultery, theft and murder. This appeal to the evil *yēṣer* not only allows James to put the blame for failure squarely on the shoulders of the individual (1:13-15) but it also allows him to point to the same force as the reason for the lack of harmony in the community (4:1-8). In the latter passage one sees that the evil impulse is fundamentally tied to the world, so when one is motivated by this impulse he is bound to be tied to the world and thus put in a position of enmity with respect to God. Here one finds the person in a situation not unlike that of Paul in Romans 7: He has mentally accepted the proper theology and the need to serve God, but he is tied to this life, and a situation of suffering brings compromise and the breakdown of Christian virtue.[9]

Yet in pointing the blame to the evil impulse and thus to the individual, James does not in any way wish to negate the dualistic eschatological context within which he is working. One notes first of all that when he thinks of Christ he does not do so with reference to a *theologia crucis*, such as Paul might, but rather with reference to him as the exalted Lord in heaven who is soon to return. Thus the three ways in which he thinks of him are as (1) Lord (*kyrios;* six times), (2) judge (*kritēs*; 5:9), and perhaps (3) king (if *basilikos* in 2:8 refers to Jesus). The focus is on the *parousia* of the exalted Christ, which is "near"—even "at the door" (5:7-11). It is in the light of the coming of this person in apocalyptic judgment that one ought to endure for, as in the case of Job, patient endurance will be rewarded and that reasonably soon. Thus we are dealing with a reasonably simple Christological formulation more similar to those in the early speeches in Acts than to the more complex ideas of Paul. We are also dealing with a strongly apocalyptic eschatology such as that found in Mark 13 or the Apocalypse.[10]

Second, one notes that James sees another side to the problem of suffering than that of the evil *yēṣer*. In rabbinic Judaism and in Qumran it was not unusual to speak in one breath of evil impulses or spirits within the individual and in the next of Satan without, who leads the individual astray. James fits into the same camp of limited dualism as these (or, for that matter, the synoptic gospels). In Jas 3:13-18 the cause of community strife is traced to a "wisdom" (James him-

[9]For further study in *yēṣer* theology see F. Porter, "The Yeçer Hara," in *Biblical and Semitic Studies* (New York: Scribner's, 1901) 93-156; O. J. F. Seitz, "Two Spirits in Man: An Essay in Biblical Exegesis," *NTS* 6 (1959) 82-95; and W. I. Wolverton, "The Double-Minded Man in the Light of Essene Psychology," *ATR* 38 (1956) 166-175.

[10]When one says that James has a simple Christology, it does not rule out sampling error—i. e., the book is both short and specialized. Likewise the eschatology is not necessarily early because it is apocalyptic, for the Apocalypse is hardly an early book yet contains similar ideas. Still the similarities between James and Luke-Acts are suggestive and point to a need for further investigation.

self only defines it negatively—"not-the-wisdom-from-above"—but surely the teachers dividing the community thought of it as wisdom) that is described as earthly, natural (i. e., devoid of the spirit—*psychikos*) and demonic (*daimoniōdēs*). Particularly this latter term leads one to suspect that our author would if pressed trace the origin of sin to something other than the evil impulse within the individual. In 4:7 he makes this fact clear, for in addressing those who are giving in in the test, who are driven by pleasure, he cries out: "Submit then to God; resist the devil, and he will flee from you!" Thus for James there is a tempter without as well as a tempter within. The testing situation is not from God but from the evil one. Yet the failure in the situation cannot be blamed on the devil, for it is the evil impulse within that leads one to fail under the stress of the test.[11]

Having observed the problem of suffering in the community, however, one should further note that there is a specific theological context for the suffering: *Armenfrömmigkeit*, the piety of the poor. It had become clear by the time of the post-exilic community that piety was not always rewarded with wealth and success. Under the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Hasmonean rulers it appeared far more certain that piety would be rewarded with poverty and suffering in this world. Yet God in the OT is said to be the deliverer of the poor and the oppressed. This fact is true and was felt to be true in such a degree that people would call upon God, pressing their claim on the basis that they were in fact poor and oppressed (e. g., Ps 86:1). Thus in later Judaism many of the pious groups came to see that their poverty was in fact a sign of their election by God—they were the community of the poor.[12] In some few cases the opposite conclusion was also drawn: The rich were bound for perdition (*1 Enoch* 94-105, 108).

This theology is found in the NT as well as in Judaism, notably in the sermon on the mount, particularly in the Lucan version (Luke 6). It is here that the Q tradition preserves sayings of Jesus that bless the poor (the "poor in spirit" of Matthew not intending to lessen the literal situation of poverty)[13] and, in Luke, curse the rich. Throughout the gospels there are numerous references to the poor and to the danger of wealth that must be understood in the light of this tradition.[14] James draws heavily on this tradition.

For James the elect community is the poor. God has "chosen the world's poor as rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom" (2:5). Earlier he has said, "Let the humble (*tapeinos*, which in context is equivalent to *'ānî*, "poor") brother boast in his exaltation" (1:9). Furthermore it is clear that the community contains many who are not at all wealthy, that the relatively wealthy members are unusual and thus potentially powerful, and that at least a portion of the community works as

[11]It is not surprising to find a dual source of testing, for this is common in both Christianity and Judaism: Paul is aware of both the devil and personal faults and so are Qumran (1QS 3:13-4:26) and the rabbis (*b. B. Bat.* 16a; cf. S. Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* [London: Adam and Charles Black, 1909] 261-262).

[12]1QH 2:5; 1QpHab 12:3, 6, 10; 4QpPs37 2:9; 3:10. Cf. M. Mansoor, *The Thanksgiving Hymns* (Leiden: Brill, 1961) 110 n. 7; *Pss. Sol.* Cf. E. Bammel, "*ptōchos*," *TDNT* 6 (1968) 896.

[13]So S. Légasse, "Les pauvres en esprit et les 'volontaires' de Qumran," *NTS* 8 (1962) 336-345; E. Percy, *Die Botschaft Jesu* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1953) 42; and H.-J. Degenhardt, *Lukas-Evangelist der Armen* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1965) 49.

[14]For further data see P. Davids, "The Poor Man's Gospel," *Themelios* 1 (1976) 37-41.

day laborers. This data, of course, fits with what we know elsewhere of the early Church in general and the Palestinian Church in particular.

On the other hand, James has little use for the rich. The very term *plousios* denotes one who is outside of the community and on his way to judgment. Thus the wealthy in 1:10-11 are said to wither and perish like grass. In 5:1-6 James roundly curses the wealthy as being the oppressors of the poor and earning the judgment of God that is about to fall on them. Finally in 2:6-7 the rich are accused of using the courts to oppress the poor and of blaspheming the name of Christ. In places where it is arguable that relatively wealthy Christians may be in view, James uses a circumlocution rather than *plousios* and then has little but criticism for the persons (2:1-4; 4:13-17).

Given this data of *Armenfrömmigkeit*, then, one can see the dimensions of James' concern a little more clearly. First, the Church (like Qumran) is primarily the community of the poor. This would be true both literally and in terms of its own self-concept. The Church suffers from its relative impoverishment. Second, the financially poor condition of the Church is in part the result of perceived persecution by the rich. It is clear that James' community is not suffering the type of legal persecution later found in the Roman empire, but it does appear to be suffering some forms of discrimination from a group it conceives of as the rich. Some of this suffering may have been just because they were poor. After all, as the revolt of A.D. 70 shows (as well as several disturbances among the poor in Rome), there was a great deal of feeling among the poor against the rich in general. But of course if Christians were a relatively despised minority, one would expect them to feel more of the brunt of the oppression (the wealthy could count on the courts being less favorable to such a group) and to attribute this suffering to religious motives.[15]

The situation puts the Church into a context in which it has become very attractive to form some type of compromise with the world—as James will put it—breaking the solidarity of the community. First, one sees the Church giving in, in that it panders to the wealthy. This, claims James, is fundamentally disloyalty to the law of Christ. Second, there is a tendency to avoid the demands of charity, but James reminds them that this is to reveal an essentially defective faith and to fail in the test, unlike Abraham.[16] Third, there is the temptation to seek wealth oneself. This forms the basis of James' warning to the merchant (better: peddler) group in the Church (4:13-17).

A second reaction to the outward pressure may or may not have been directly connected to the situation, but James at least connects it to the same underlying causes. The community under pressure tends to split into bickering factions, each one trying to get control, push its own teachings and take advantage of its own position. This appears to be the situation addressed in chaps. 3 and 4. Needless to say, such reactions to stress situations are not in the least unknown.

Given the above—namely, the community of the poor undergoing testing and finding a weakness within themselves rather than the patient endurance of the prophets (i. e., they were not willing to wait and allow the Lord on his return to

[15]Cf. R. P. Martin, "The Life-Setting of the Epistle of James in the Light of Jewish History," in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies* (ed. G. A. Tuttle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 97-106.

[16]So R. B. Ward, "The Works of Abraham," *HTR* 61 (1968) 283-290.

set affairs right)—one immediately asks about the role of faith and grace within this situation. It is here that James has proved most difficult, particularly because his thought has not often been seen within its larger context.

First, James apparently has two definitions of faith. The one is found chiefly in chaps. 1 and 5 (1:3, 6; 2:1, 5; 5:15) and could be roughly translated as "commitment" or "trust." Its opposite is *dipsychos*, a divided mind in which the evil *yēser* is dominant and thus does not look solely to God for help but also to the world.[17] Here faith is a characteristic of one who is enduring in the test. It is a definition reasonably close to the Pauline definition of faith. The other definition of faith is found only in 2:14-26. In this passage faith is simply "intellectual belief" (so 1:19). It certainly does not have the element of commitment and trust so evident in the Pauline and Johannine conceptions.

Second, for James true commitment will result in obedience. This is clear whether one looks at 2:8 ff. where the law as interpreted through Christ is taken for granted as the standard of Christian behavior (much as it is in Matthew), whether one looks at 1:19-27 where the reception of the word results in doing the word, or whether one looks at 2:14-26 where the true believer has faith and works—i. e., a faith that results in deeds of charity. Thus faith is in fact a resource in the situation if it is the first type of faith, a commitment to God that will disregard the world, for such trust will allow one to act upon the word—the law—and obey it in deeds of righteousness. The other type of faith is, of course, useless.

Third, note that at this point James shows no contact with Paul's thought. It is precisely in the passage in 2:14-26 where this fact is most evident, for his definitions of each of the three critical terms—*pistis, ergōn* and *dikaiō*—as well as his use of the Abraham example (which itself was already embedded in Christian paraenetic teaching and not an exclusive possession of Paul) [18] differ from Paul. If James is reacting to Paul, it is to a Paul so distorted and misunderstood that it can hardly be said to have been Paul at all.[19]

Faith, then, in its first meaning of "trust" is a commitment to God. This commitment yields far more than simply the words of the law, even those words as interpreted by Christ. Commitment leads to prayer, and prayer produces the wisdom of God. Here it is important to note two facts about wisdom. On the one hand it is that which is needed in the situation of testing (1:5), for it brings one to moral perfection. On the other hand it is a gift from above (3:13 ff. and probably 1:17 as well) [20] that grants one a series of community-preserving virtues when it motivates one. What, then, is the meaning of this gift from God? It is clear that it

[17]Besides the studies cited in n. 9 see C. A. E. Edlund, *Das Auge der Einfalt* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1952) 62, and Mussner, *Jakobusbrief*, 71-72. Note also that *pistis* in 2:1 and 1:3 may have more the sense of "religion" than of "trust," but as this would not change the argument they were more easily grouped with the first meaning without discussion.

[18]Cf. *1 Clem.* 10:7; 12:1 and H. Chadwick, "Justification by Faith and Hospitality," *Studia Patristica* 4 in TU 79 (1961) 281.

[19]For example:

dikaiō	Paul: justified	James: declared to be righteous
pistis	Paul: commitment	James: intellectual agreement
ergōn	Paul: works of law (esp. circumcision)	James: charitable deeds

[20]Hoppe, *Hintergrund*, 50, 71.

is not in one of the typical Jewish identifications (wisdom is Torah), for the law is certainly separate from wisdom in James. Nor would it be proper to speak of a wisdom Christology, for there is no evidence that such operated in the book. But it is quite clear that the function of wisdom in James is parallel to that of the Spirit in much of the rest of the NT. Thus one has in James an extension of the identification of the Spirit with wisdom, previously known in Judaism,[21] which identification in some places included the expectation that wisdom would be God's gift to the elect in the new age.[22] In James, wisdom is God's gift to the elect. It is a power within the individual that produces the needed virtues for community life (3:13-18, the vice-and-virtue catalogue being similar to the function of the Spirit in Galatians 5 and 1QS 4) and enables one to withstand the test.[23] In doing this it counteracts the evil *yēṣer*, which may be the "wisdom from below," and thus it functions similarly to the Spirit in Romans 8 or the good *yēṣer* in later rabbinic thought.

Wisdom, then, fits into a context of prayer. Prayer in 1:5-8 is certainly the request for wisdom, much as in Luke 10:21-24; 11:9-13 prayer is a request for the Spirit.[24] In Jas 4:1-3 the complaint is not that the people are not praying, but that the prayer is wrongly directed. Their focus in the situation is on the world and their worldly needs. They are not asking for the proper item—i. e., the divine wisdom—for their motives in asking are already controlled by the evil impulse. In the final context on prayer (5:13-18), prayer functions similarly to confession in 1 John and yields the healing attributed to the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12. The connection in this case may well be that the community is the real possessor of divine wisdom and thus the elders (perhaps the truly wise teachers of chap. 3) will be those with that divine power in the full. At the least it is the same type of prayer (prayer of faith—i. e., trust) that raises the sick as that which calls down wisdom. It may well be that for James the divine wisdom itself (i. e., the Spirit) is a possession of the community as much as of the individual.

We have hardly done more than simply sketch out the theology of James with the briefest of descriptions. Much more could be and has been written. But what we have shown is an author concerned with a community undergoing suffering. He sees his community as the elect poor being tested by the devil. Without, they face the oppression of the rich; within the group they face dissension, and within each they must face the evil impulse. They must and can stand and even rejoice in this situation, but to do so they must trust unreservedly in God, refuse to hope in the world and its security at all, act on the word that they have heard, persevere in their identity as the poor by acting charitably, and above all seek the divine wisdom that enables them to live up to the total demand of God. In so doing they will persevere until the Lord who is at the door indeed arrives.

[21]This development stemmed from the function of wisdom in creation. Job 28; Proverbs 8; Sirach 24; Wis 1:5-7; 7:22-23 form a sequence showing the development of the identification.

[22]*1 Enoch* 5:8; cf. 91-105, where "the wise" *are* the elect (or "the righteous") as opposed to "the rich" or "the wicked." So also 1QH 12:11-13; 1QS 4:2-6.

[23]So J. A. Kirk, "The Meaning of Wisdom in James," *NTS* 16 (1969) 24-38.

[24]See Hoppe, *Hintergrund*, esp. p. 148. We disagree with Hoppe on the form of James and his finding its background in wisdom thought, for he neglects the apocalyptic evidence. But we find much of his study and conclusions excellent.