

Does James Have a Theology?

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The great German scholar Martin Dibelius bluntly declared that the Epistle of James “has no theology.” James Dunn called the letter “the least Christian writing of the NT.” If readers desire to find in James a theology expressed solely in the familiar categories of systematic theology, then they will be disappointed. Such definitions of theology, however, are simply too narrow and anachronistic in their expectations. If we expand our definition of the term *theology* to include biblical teaching that is firmly grounded in an understanding of God and his saving purposes, then James is most certainly and undoubtedly “theological.” While recognizing that James’ theology is sometimes more implicit than explicit, there are still a number of distinct theological emphases that emerge in the book.

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Introduction

It appears that scholarship on the Letter of James has finally escaped the enormous shadow cast over the book by the four-hundred-year influence of the Germans Martin Luther and Martin Dibelius.¹ As will be seen, many writers today believe that James is far more important than the infamous “straw” of Luther and more organized than the disjointed “paranesis” of Dibelius. But have we moved closer to correctly analyzing the beliefs of James, and can we now even dare to describe the theological truths that drove his writing?

It is probably better to speak about a “theology of the letter from James” rather than a “theology of James,” since we have only one, short writing from the man, not including the brief speech attributed to him in Acts 15. There have been, therefore, a number of writers who are skeptical about discerning any distinct

¹ Martin Dibelius, *Commentary on James*, trans. Michael Williams, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976). Luther’s characterization of the book as “an epistle of straw” could be more literally rendered “a right strawy epistle” (*eyn rechte stroern Epistel*). Martin Luther, “Preface to the New Testament, 1522,” in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 35:362.

Jacobean theology in the letter. The letter's strong emphasis on upright living has led some to think that the writer had little theological interest. Dibelius (again) puts it bluntly: "First, Jas has no theology."² Others prefer the expression "leading ideas" rather than a "theology" of the book.³ James desires his readers, however, to live out their Christian profession, and not just to "be moral" without any foundation from which to construct that morality. The letter exhibits acquaintance with a number of OT books, possibly some extra-biblical writings, and clearly a number of the teachings of Jesus. His practical matters proceed from a firm theological substructure, but one that is often more implied than expressed. Douglas Moo has remarked perceptively about the book's supposed lack of theology:

So if by "theology" one means a system of beliefs explicitly built on the person of Christ, then, indeed, the letter of James lacks a "theology." But such a definition of theology is much too narrow. If we expand the definition to include teaching grounded in an understanding of God and his purposes in the world, then James is thoroughly "theological."⁴

Even when we recognize that James' theology is sometimes more implicit than explicit, there are still a number of distinct theological emphases that emerge in the book.⁵

God

Theology for James is not abstract but always relevant to life. While James is a firm monotheist (2:19), the God of James is the one who is quite active in his

² Dibelius, 21.

³ Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of James*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) 88-94.

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 27.

⁵ For treatments of the theology of James, see the appropriate sections in the various New Testament biblical theologies. For individual monographs, see Andrew Chester and Ralph P. Martin, *The Theology of the Letters of James, Peter, and Jude*, New Testament Theology, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994); C. E. B. Cranfield, "The Message of James," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18, no. 3 (September 1965): 338-45; Peter H. Davids, "Theological Perspectives on the Epistle of James," *JETS* 23, no. 2 (1980): 97-103; Sophie Laws, "The Doctrinal Basis for the Ethics of James," in *Studia Evangelica*, ed. Elizabeth Livingstone, vol. 7 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1982), 299-305; Peter H. Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament, ed. Andreas Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). The most thorough treatment of the theology of the epistle is James B. Adamson, *James: The Man and His Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 259-471.

creation. When we pray for wisdom, God gives it generously (1:5). He has “chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith” (2:5). We are made in God’s likeness, a truth implying that we should not curse anyone (3:9). Because God is righteous and expects righteousness from his people, he is not tempted by evil things and also entices no one to sin (1:13). God is the giver of good and perfect gifts (1:16–18). His sovereign control of the heavenly lights is a special mark of his power. God is the generous giver of every perfect gift, and his constant goodness is in contrast with the changing lights of the sun and the stars in their journeys through the sky.

God’s righteousness demands that his followers be slow to anger (1:19–20) and so care for others (1:27). Rather than emphasizing the cultic purity so important to observant Jews, James stresses ethical purity that is unstained by the world (1:27). Thus far, James affirms what could be called the familiar tenets of Jewish monotheism, including the theology of the creation account in Genesis.

In his discussion of the abuses of the tongue, while pointing out the inconsistency of blessing God yet with the same breath cursing people, James refers to God as “Lord and Father” (3:9), one of his three references to the Fatherhood of God (1:17; 27). Although there are references in the OT where God is called “Father” (Ps. 68:5, 89:26; Isa. 63:16, 64:8), they are relatively rare. Jesus frequently addressed God as “Father” and so refers to him at least fifteen times in the Sermon on the Mount; he also taught his followers to do so (Matt. 6:9). Davids concludes: “Thus James reflects what one might call a ‘Jesus-shaped’ understanding of God in which God is presented as head of a large family.”⁶

The world is in such binary opposition to God that someone friendly to the world actually becomes his enemy (4:4). Because God resists proud people but gives grace to the humble ones (4:7), we should, therefore, be submissive to him (4:7). When we draw near in this way, he graciously returns the favor (4:8). This is exemplified by Abraham, who was called his friend (2:23). While there is nothing like “theology proper” in James’ thinking and any theological abstraction is absent, he commends a dynamic faith in God that is actively displayed by obedience to him.

Messiah

Jesus is referred to by name in the letter only twice, but each reference stresses his messianic person and function (1:1; 2:1). Because of its thoroughly Jewish context, those two references in English Bibles to his title of “Christ”

⁶ Davids, *Theology*, 72.

should legitimately be rendered as “Messiah.” This translation conveys Jesus as the “anointed one” (Hebrew *mashiach*) sent by the Father in fulfillment of a number of messianic promises. Even if we recognize his messianic character in these two verses, this definitely does not exhaust the book’s discussion of Jesus. Allusions not only to Jesus’ person but also to his teaching are so many that it is not exaggerating to call James the most Jesus-soaked book in the NT after the Gospels.⁷ Jesus’ lordship is affirmed, and this affirmation carries a clear implication of his deity. In 2:1, he is associated with “glory,” which assumes his ascension and session at his father’s throne.

In addition there are a number of references to “Lord” which must refer to Jesus, particularly to his *parousia* (5:7–8). The references to “Lord” in 1:7, 3:9, and 5:4, however, could be references to God the Father, although dogmatism in either direction is inadvisable. In any case, James probably did not think in the finely tuned ontological categories as theologians do today. Because of the numerous verbal allusions to the *logia* of Jesus, references to the Lord’s compassion and mercy (5:11) probably also refer to Jesus, as does his readiness to heal the sick who have been anointed “in the name of the Lord” (5:14–15). These references are not intended to construct a formal Christology, but to convey a practical and pastoral message about the graciousness of the Lord Jesus and his being ready to hear and respond to the needs of his followers.⁸

Jesus elsewhere in James

With the suggestion that James’ approach to wisdom must be pursued through Jesus’ own approach to the subject, this is an appropriate place to explore the issue of the *logia* of Jesus that may be found in the book. As noted, Deppe analyzes in detail the twenty-five most common sayings in James that writers have attributed to Jesus. He applies a very conservative set of standards and concludes that there are only eight firm allusions to Jesus’ teaching, as we know these sayings in the Synoptic Gospels. Those allusions are set out by means of the following chart:

⁷ For a thorough discussion of both certain and probable allusions to the *logia* of Jesus in James, see Dean B. Deppe, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Epistle of James* (Chelsea, MI: Bookcrafters, 1989). See discussion in the following section.

⁸ For a more critical approach to the subject of Messiah in James, see Matt A. Jackson-McCabe, “The Messiah Jesus in the Mythic World of James,” *JBL* 122, no. 4 (2003): 701–730.

Eight Firm Allusions

| <i>James reference</i> | <i>Synoptic reference</i> | <i>Subject</i> |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1:5 | Matt. 7:7//Luke 11:9 | ask and you will receive |
| 2:5 | Luke 6:20b//Matt. 5:3 | kingdom belongs to poor |
| 4:2c-3 | Matt. 7:7//Luke 11:9 | ask and you will receive |
| 4:9 | Luke 6:21, 25b | those who laugh will mourn |
| 4:10 | Matt. 23:12// Luke 14:11; 18:14b | humble will be exalted |
| 5:1 | Luke 6:24 | woe to the rich |
| 5:2-3a | Matt. 6:19, 20// Luke 12:33b | do not treasure up wealth |
| 5:12 | Matt. 5:33-37 | oaths |

Despite the large number of shared expressions and themes, not one of these sayings qualifies as a direct verbal quotation of the *logia* of Jesus as we have them in the Synoptic Gospels. The closest example is James' warning about oaths in 5:12 with its striking verbal similarities to Matthew 5:33-37. But even there, James is not quoting exactly the words of Jesus as we have them in Matthew. Perhaps we have not approached this issue in the best way when we try to find undoubted allusions based on the standards of exact quotations. Richard Bauckham has provided an excellent solution to this problem.⁹ He compares James' use of Jesus-material to Sirach's use of the canonical Proverbs. In no place does Sirach quote that canonical book, but any reader recognizes the large amount of shared themes and expressions in the two books. Bauckham suggests that Sirach adapts and reshapes hundreds of individual verses from Proverbs without ever actually quoting any of them. He argues that James approaches the

⁹ See Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage*, New Testament Readings, ed. John Court (New York: Routledge, 1999), 74-108.

sayings of Jesus in the same way. Without ever clearly quoting a saying of Jesus, James adapts dozens of those sayings and reshapes them for his own specific purpose.

Bauckham's suggestion, therefore, frees us from the need for a painstaking verbal comparison between James' statements and the *logia* of Jesus. Another aspect of the question is that we need not even suppose that James had a written Gospel in front of him. James may have simply recalled the oral traditions of Jesus' sayings before Matthew, Mark, or Luke ever wrote them down. The voice of Jesus, therefore, is heard distinctly in the Letter of James, but not in the form of direct citations. Consequently, we may safely conclude that in James we may not have the *ipsissima verba* ("very words") of Jesus, but we do hear loudly the *ipsissima vox* ("very voice") of Jesus.

Some authors have criticized James as being one of the least "Christian" books of the NT.¹⁰ When we realize, however, the thorough way in which Jesus' teachings permeate the writing, we could conclude that, after the Gospels, James is the most Jesus-centered book in the NT canon. While Paul theologizes about Jesus, he displays a measured interest in the teachings of Jesus (Acts 20:30). However, almost every point that James makes is grounded in or illustrated by an adapted saying or aphorism that echoes in some way a *logion* of his "uterine" brother. Finally, when we recognize how James uses the orally transmitted sayings of Jesus, it becomes probably the strongest argument for the early dating of the book. This use by James of an abundant amount of Jesus-material in the Gospels has even led one author to call James "The Fifth Gospel."¹¹

Holy Spirit

Apart from a disputed interpretation of "spirit" in 4:6, James has no explicit reference to the Holy Spirit. This has prompted some, and this author is also among them, to suggest that for James "wisdom" effectively functions as the Holy Spirit functions in other NT writings. A simple comparison of the characteristics of wisdom "from above" in 3:17–18 with the Pauline fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 suggests this identity of wisdom with the Spirit. The writer who has explored this proposal most thoroughly is Professor J. A. Kirk in

¹⁰ Dunn writes: "The letter of James is the most Jewish, the most undistinctively Christian document in the NT." J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2006), 271.

¹¹ R. S. T. Haslehurst, "The Fifth Gospel," *Theology* 35 (1937): 96–103.

an article that has been neglected by many recent commentators.¹² Kirk not only cites the above description of wisdom in 3:17–18 but also other references where language that James uses about the gift of wisdom (1:5–8) is paralleled by references to the gift of the Spirit in Paul (1 Cor. 12:4–11; Eph. 1:17; Rom. 8:9–11, 14–15; Col. 1:28). He then traces references to God’s Spirit and wisdom in the OT and in Second Temple Period literature, including the writings from Qumran. He concludes that there are a limited but significant number of passages in which wisdom and Spirit are directly identified or have the same functions, and that wisdom is the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit.

In the end, however, the internal evidence of the epistle itself is the strongest. There is the clearly ethical connotation given to wisdom (3:13–18) plus the fact that wisdom is a moral force to help overcome testing and temptation (1:5–8), ministries all related to the Spirit elsewhere. While Kirk’s argument may not be as clearly persuasive to all, it can be firmly asserted that we are not left with a writing that oddly omits the third person of the Trinity. Furthermore, we should also recognize that James may not have been familiar with the exact terminology with which later theologians would have referred to the divine Spirit.

Faith

James does not take long to address the subject of faith (*pistis*), a noun that he uses sixteen times while using the verb *pisteuo* twice.¹³ At the beginning and at the end of the letter he declares that effectual prayer must be offered in faith (1:6; 5:15). It is that type of prayer that will enable his readers to maturely handle the “testing of your faith” (1:3).

No treatment of James 2 can avoid the controversial subject of the relationship between faith and works in the epistle and how his teaching relates to Paul’s celebrated teaching on the same subject(s).¹⁴ The problem, for many, can be stated by asking how the Reformation distinctive of *sola fide*, which is derived primarily from Paul, can be squared with James 2:24: “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” By framing the problem within a later Reformation context, or even in a Pauline context, we may be wrongly approaching this so-called problem. Many contemporary readings of the

¹² J. Andrew Kirk, “The Meaning of Wisdom in James: Examination of a Hypothesis,” *NTS* 16, no. 1 (October 1969): 24–38.

¹³ Indeed, one evangelical Lutheran commentator (unlike Luther!) refers to James as “the Apostle of Faith.” See David Scaer, *James, the Apostle of Faith* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1993).

¹⁴ We omit the reference to “faith” in 2:1 because of disagreement over whether it means “faith” in Jesus or Jesus’ “faithfulness.”

letter too often regard it simply as a foil for Pauline theology. Although an adequate treatment of this issue can only arise from a full exegesis of 2:14–26, the following should provide a context in which the issues can be explored by a more in-depth analysis.

If either Paul or James is opposing the other, neither has done a very good job, because neither addresses the central point of the other's argument. Paul certainly stresses the importance of faith with such statements as "A person is justified by faith without works of the law" (Rom. 3:28), the verse most often cited as opposing James' statement in 2:24 (see above). But, we should not concentrate on isolated statements like these, or we may naively conclude that there is an irreconcilable contradiction. In actuality the two writers are not discussing the same subject and thus cannot contradict one another.

James never belittles faith, as will be seen, and Paul refers to "good works" far more than James, and always in commendation, not criticism, of them (Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 9:8; Eph. 2:10; Col. 1:10; 2 Thess. 2:17; 1 Tim. 2:10, 5:10, 5:25, 6:18; Titus 2:7, 2:14, 3:8, 3:14). This is an article on James' theology, not on Pauline theology. What does James say about faith, and what does he mean by works? If we can answer those questions, we can better determine what it is about "works" that Paul negates. James says that the believing poor are "rich in faith" (2:5). As we have already seen, he links faith with prayer (1:6; 5:15). He refers to faith being demonstrated by works (2:18). He assumes that faith is vital, and his concern is not "Should a person have faith?" but rather "When is faith dead, and when is it alive?"

The kind of faith James criticizes is a faith similar to the one that demons possess (2:19). Such faith only causes them to shudder. A faith that does not transform the believer is not faith as James understands it, because it is a dead faith. It is the kind of faith that responds to the needy by some pious-sounding line, but it does nothing to meet their needs (2:15–16).

That James is not teaching salvation by meritorious works is shown by his clear teaching on universal sinfulness (3:2). Sin is not only an act of wrongdoing; to know to do good and not do it is also sin (4:17). To fail in one point of the law is to be guilty of all (2:10). An author with this deep understanding of sin does not expect people to save themselves by doing some sort of meritorious acts to achieve that salvation. James looks for deliverance through mercy (2:13), and that mercy originates in that sovereignly divine will that leads to our spiritual birth (1:18). James is simply insisting that faith must be more than barren intellectualism. Like Paul, he expects a faith that works through love (Gal. 5:6). Both Paul and James agree that salvation comes through divine action, not

human merit, and that it is appropriated by a faith that must be lived out in obedient lives.

Another solution to the conundrum of their similar language is that when these two speak of justification, they are describing different stages in the life of the believer. While they both appeal to Abraham, Paul stresses the statement in Genesis 15:6 about the patriarch's initial step of faith that was reckoned to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:3, 9–10). James speaks of a time years later when Abraham was willing to offer his son (2:21; Gen. 22:2–18). Some authors also stress that Paul uses justification language that refers to the beginning of the Christian life, while James, along with Jesus in Matthew, uses the term for final justification, which will be displayed on judgment day.¹⁵

Still another factor to keep in mind is the different ways in which James and Paul use the word *works*. To Paul, the expression “works of the law” seems to refer primarily to the badges of national Jewish identity—namely circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and ritual purity. James uses “works” to refer not to those national badges, which could be worn proudly at the expense of personal faith, but to the deeds of kindness that must accompany those who say they have faith. This is particularly seen in the lack of love shown to the needy poor in 2:15–17. Paul would equally have been horrified by such a callous attitude by one who professed to have faith (Eph. 2:8–10). Paul would say, in agreement with James, that we should have “a faith that works through love” (Gal. 5:6).

An often overlooked aspect of the way James and Paul approach their respective subjects is exactly *how* they each employ that commonly shared text about Abraham: “And he [Abraham] believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6; cited by James in 2:23 and by Paul in Rom. 4:3 and Gal. 4:6). It is important to notice the way in which each writer applies the text in Genesis 15 by referring to different events *after* the statement recorded in that chapter. Paul makes the point that the Genesis 15:6 event took place prior to Abraham's being circumcised (Gen. 17). To Paul this is evidence that the patriarch was a true believer in his “Gentile” state *before* he was circumcised. Thus, it is unnecessary for Gentiles to be circumcised to become true believers. Like Abraham, Gentiles can have faith and a righteous standing before God. This is exactly the context of the problem faced in Romans and Galatians—namely, can Gentiles be genuine believers without circumcision? Yes, affirms Paul, because Father Abraham was just such a believer. James, on the other hand, mentions Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac at the command of God himself (James 2:21–22; Gen. 22). God tested Abraham's faith by this difficult command

¹⁵ Many authors have expressed this idea. Among them is Moo, 114.

(Gen. 22:1), but Abraham's faith passed the test, and thus the statement in Genesis 15:6 was "fulfilled" (i.e., "found its full meaning") in the *Akedah*, or the "binding" of Isaac. Thus, Abraham showed evidence that his faith was genuine, which is the point James is making to his readers: faith is evidenced as true by one's actions.

There is one final observation that may help us to understand that James was not consciously referring to any Pauline writing about justification in Galatians or Romans. If we are correct in assigning a date to the Letter of James of around AD 46–48, then he could not refer to those Pauline letters that had not yet been written.¹⁶ If someone responds that such dating does not prevent Paul from criticizing James, a valid response would be that such an attitude of correcting James is totally unlike the Paul in Acts and Galatians, who did what James told him to do on at least three separate occasions (Acts 16:4, 21:23–26; Gal. 2:10).

In light of the above evidence, it is not necessary to see a conflict between these two great leaders on the subject of faith. They each should be read in their own contexts. Rather than seeing them as opponents facing each other with drawn swords, it is wiser to see them back-to-back, each with his drawn sword encountering different opponents. When one sees James and Paul in this way, their letters then make perfect sense and complement rather than contradict each other.

Last Things

One of the obvious characteristics of the letter is its emphasis on ethical behavior that is drawn from heavenly wisdom, much like the wisdom literature of Israel's scriptures and other Second Temple literature. What is distinctive about James' admonitions is the eschatological context in which they are set. He frequently warns believers about the coming judgment in order to stimulate them to adopt the right attitudes and behavior (1:10–11; 2:12–13; 3:1; 5:1–6, 9, 12). Additionally, he reminds them of the reward to which they can look forward if they live pleasingly for the Lord (1:12; 2:5; 4:10; 5:20). In keeping with early Christianity generally, James insists that the day of reckoning and reward is imminent: "The Lord's coming is near"; "The Judge is standing at the door!" (5:8–9). The sense of nearness that James and the other early Christians felt

¹⁶ For a defense of this early date, see Bauckham, 11–25; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible Commentaries, vol. 37A (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995): 118–20.

stemmed from two convictions: (1) now that the Messiah had come and the new age had dawned, the end of history was the next event in the divine timetable; and (2) this culmination of history could happen at any time. James, in other words, motivates his readers to godly living not by insisting that the Lord *would* come at any moment but by reminding them that he *could*.

Though future eschatology is the dominant perspective in James, the present eschatological nature of Christian existence is not ignored. The assertion that “God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him” (2:5) leaves uncertain whether the kingdom is to be inherited in the future or is even now the possession of those who are chosen. But in light of “the royal law,” or “the law of the kingdom” in 2:8, the latter is more likely. James also alludes to the “new birth” that ushers believers into the enjoyment of God’s kingdom blessings (1:18). And the most likely interpretation of 5:3, reflected in the ESV translation “you have laid up treasure in the last days,” indicates that James clearly understood that believers were already living in the age of eschatological consummation. Thus, James provides sufficient indication that he holds to the typical NT pattern of “fulfillment without consummation” that some refer to as a form of “inaugurated eschatology.” It is within the tension of this “already . . . not yet” that we must interpret and apply James’ ethical teaching.¹⁷

Wisdom

Is the Letter of James to be included in the Jewish wisdom literature found in both the canonical and the later Jewish writings? Some of this literature was read and enjoyed by James and his contemporaries. While the literature on this subject is extensive, exact parallels and explanations differ greatly. The German scholar Ernst Baasland, in an essay translated as “The Letter of James as New Testament Wisdom Literature,” has surveyed the different ideas and suggested a solution to the tension between James’ similarity and differences with traditional Jewish wisdom.¹⁸ Baasland calls James the “wisdom writing of

¹⁷ Some recent writers have attempted to draw out the implications of James’ eschatology. See P. J. Hartin, “Who is wise and understanding among you? (James 3:13): An Analysis of Wisdom, Eschatology, and Apocalypticism in the Epistle of James,” in *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism*, ed. Benjamin G. Wright III and Lawrence M. Wills, 149-168 (Atlanta: SBL, 2005); T. C. Penner, *The Epistle of James and Eschatology: Re-Reading an Ancient Christian Letter*, JSNT Supplement 121 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Ernst Baasland, “Der Jakobusbrief als Neutestamentliche Weisheitsschrift,” *ST* 36, no. 1 (1982): 119-139.

the NT which connects the closest to Old Testament wisdom literature.”¹⁹ Although only once does he clearly quote Proverbs (4:6), the ethos of that wisdom book, along with that of Sirach, has left footprints throughout the book.

The Letter of James also has its own uniqueness in this wisdom tradition because of its evident debt to the wisdom teaching of James’ older “brother.” In Baasland’s words, “The same thing that differentiates James from Jewish wisdom writing is what connects James with the proclamation of Jesus.”²⁰ To James, wisdom has received a new center, the starting point of which is belief in the “glorious Messiah, the Lord Jesus” (2:1), and the manifestation of which is that the poor will inherit the kingdom (2:5). While there seems to be no dependence on Paul, neither are they alien, with Paul taking wisdom further into more ontological realms. Baasland concludes:

The lines of wisdom can be traced back to the wisdom literature of the OT. On the other hand, we see a line in the NT, which originates in Jesus and stretches over the parts of the proclamation of Paul (Rom. 2:6, 12; 1 Cor. 1–4, etc.) and which continues over James and other NT letters up to the Apostolic Fathers (the Clements and Origen).²¹

There is an entire paragraph in James on the subject of wisdom, and it is so prominent that it seems to serve as the thematic peak of the entire book.²² After his initial rhetorical question setting up the issue of wisdom (“Who is wise and understanding among you?” 3:13a), James calls on his readers to demonstrate the reality of their wisdom by humility and good behavior (3:13b). In other words, James is more concerned with describing wisdom from above than in theoretically defining it. This description follows closely his emphasis on the two ways, a subject grounded in OT wisdom literature (Ps. 1:1–6; Prov. 6–9). It is the stark contrast between these two kinds of wisdom that dominates the paragraph. The wrong kind, coming from below, is characterized by envy, selfishness, and disorder (3:14–16), the opposite of peace. The right kind of wisdom, coming from above, is above all “peace loving” (the first specific “fruit of wisdom” listed in 3:17). James then underscores this virtue with his concluding blessing on peacemakers (3:18). The absence of peace, on the other hand, is obviously the main issue in 4:1–3. The community is marked by quarrels and

¹⁹ Ibid., 120.

²⁰ Baasland, 120.

²¹ Ibid., 139.

²² William Varner, “The Main Theme and Structure of James,” *TMSJ* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 115–29.

arguments, some of them perhaps even violent. James traces these disputes to the characteristics of false wisdom that he pointed out in 3:14, namely envy (4:2) and selfishness (4:3).

Some writers have described the approach of James to wisdom literature as “subverting” the traditional wisdom tradition and preferring a descriptive title like “apocalyptic wisdom.”²³ James would, however, probably not have viewed his approach to wisdom as being particularly subversive. He simply approaches the two-ways tradition in Hebraic literature as echoed by Jesus and then applies it to the new kingdom inaugurated by his more famous family member. The poor, for example, had a definite role in the social message of the Hebrew prophets. Jesus and James simply focus on their role as being more central to the purposes of God and the Messiah in this phase of the kingdom plan. This may, therefore, be more accurately described as an extension of wisdom rather than a subversion of wisdom.

Conclusion

As has often been the case with a number of acerbic comments in Dibelius’ influential commentary, subsequent writers on James have been able to transcend his blunt statement which opened this article: “First, Jas has no theology.” Indeed, it is difficult to conclude how any writer who inhabits the thought world of Scripture can be without a theology that drives his conclusions.²⁴ On the other hand, if readers desire to find in James a theology expressed solely in the familiar categories of “systematic theology,” they will be disappointed. But why should we approach any New Testament book with such expectations? Such definitions of “theology” are simply too narrow and anachronistic in their expectations. If we expand our definition of the term theology to include biblical teaching that is firmly grounded in an understanding of God and his saving purposes, then James is most certainly and undoubtedly “theological.”²⁵

²³ For further reflections on wisdom in James, see also B. R. Halson, “The Epistle of James: Christian Wisdom?” *SE* 4 (1968): 308–14; Kirk, “Meaning of Wisdom,” 24–38; J. M. Reese, “The Exegete as Sage: Hearing the Message of James,” *BTB* 12, no. 3 (July 1982): 82–85; and Robert W. Wall, “James as Apocalyptic Paraenesis,” *ResQ* 32, no. 1 (1990): 11–22.

²⁴ German readers will profit by a recent monograph on Jacobean theology. See S. Wenger, *Der wesenhaft gute Kyrios: Eine Exegetische Studie über das Gottesbild im Jakobusbrief* (Zurich: TVZ, 2011).

²⁵ Some of the concepts in this article have been adapted from the author’s commentary on James. See William Varner, *James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Fontes Press, 2017).

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