

The Epistle of James

Introduction

This great charter of "practical Christianity" has been called a kind of "New Testament Book of Proverbs," not a bad way to describe it. And that quality of the Epistle of James is no accident: it is of a piece with the anti-Pauline polemic that true faith is incarnated in good deeds or it is an insubstantial phantom. James, so to speak, describes and repudiates a docetic version of the Christian life. Nor is this life of righteousness especially Christian. Most of the document is informed by familiar motifs from the Hebrew Wisdom and Prophetic books, not to mention popular Stoic wisdom (such as the idea that righteousness is either one hundred per cent perfect or non-existent. James is a partisan for the Torah, and yet little of the specifically Jewish character of the Mosaic law is even mentioned. If the point were really to press for the need to keep all Torah mandates equally, we might have expected some attention to dietary laws and sabbath observance.

And yet one cannot miss the plain attempt of the writer to carry forward the legacy of James the Just, bishop of the Jerusalem church. James 2:10-11 is equivalent to Matthew 5:17-19, and both seek to fend off the false gospel of the Apostate Paul, as they viewed him. Matthew has Gentile converts in view, James Diaspora Jews, and yet the danger is the same: both may be tempted to accept Paul's easier gospel which did not require adherence to the mores of an alien (for Gentiles) or increasingly alien (to assimilating Jews) culture. As befits a letter to the Greek-speaking Diaspora, James is written in the Greek language and is seasoned in Hellenistic wisdom, not that there was any longer much of a divide between Hellenism and Judaism. Many of the so-called distinctives of Rabbinic Judaism had been borrowed from Stoicism and other Greek philosophical schools anyway, including the very idea of a rabbi having a circle of disciples and the use of allegorical and other exegetical methods).

The author tries to say in his circumstances what the historical James the Just might have said, but, as Jerome already saw, he is not the historical James. For one thing, the Greek is too good for a xenophobic zealot such as James is depicted in all our traditions about him. For another, the writer is acquainted not with Paulinism in general, as a contemporary might have been (as in Acts 21:20-21), but with the Epistle to the Romans in particular, which he has open in front of him as he writes, offering specific rejoinders to specific points made in it (see note at 2:14-26). This means he is a later reader of a "published" epistle.

It seems idle to deny, as harmonists want to do, that James is at odds with Pauline thinking: he means to reject Paul's own terminology of "faith apart from works," because he believes that formula is a false promise of salvation. For James, salvation, justification, is based on a faith embodied in deeds. And it is safe to say that the modern figment that Paul intended not "faith in Christ" but rather "faithfulness like that displayed by Jesus Christ" never occurred to James, much less to Paul.

As anticipated, there is precious little about this document that marks it as

specifically Christian. This need not attest its primitive character, for it is not primitive. But it does attest something equally important: it implies that Qumran Christianity, Essene (or "Jessean," as Epiphanius called it) Christianity, arose from the common milieu of Jewish baptismal sectarianism, and that this branch further diverged from the Nazoreanism of Jesus quickly enough to have little in the way of Jesus-belief to carry with it. And though the Epistle of James comes from after the early split, it comes from the same stream which continued to flow for some time along its own channel.

Many argue that, despite initial appearances, James is one of the most Jesus-flavored of the New Testament documents, for do not its memorable maxims everywhere remind one of similar sentiments in the Sermon on the Mount? Indeed they do, but the borrowing is more likely in the other direction: the gospels are the later products, and their authors felt free to pillage early Christian epistles for striking nuggets that would sound good in the mouth of Jesus.

Finally, as to the early reception of the Epistle of James, Origen quotes it as from James and as Scripture. Jerome could see that some unknown had penned the work under James' name, but that did not make him reluctant to use it as Scripture. It is absent from the Muratorian, the African, and the Syriac Canons. Eusebius ranks it as "disputed," admitting that some branded it "spurious." Martin Luther, who saw quite clearly the contradiction between this epistle and those of Paul, relegated James to the appendix of his New Testament canon, denigrating it as "an epistle made of straw" (cf., 1 Corinthians 3:12-13).

The Epistle of James

1 James, slave of God and the Lord, Jesus-Christ,

To the twelve tribes in the Diaspora,

Greetings!

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you find yourselves amid various testings, 3 mindful that the probing of your faith effects endurance. 4 And let endurance come to full flower, in order for you to become perfect and complete, in no respect inadequate. 5 But if any one of you should fall short in wisdom, he need only petition God, the one who gives to everyone unstintingly and without asking embarrassing questions, and it will be given him. 6 Only let him be sure to ask in faith, without ambivalence; for the doubter wavers like the tossing of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. 7 Such a one need not imagine he is likely to receive anything at all from the Lord, 8 for he is of two minds, habitually indecisive.

9 May the humble brother brag on his exaltation! 10 May the rich *acknowledge with equanimity* his *eventual* humiliation, since he must disappear like a wildflower. 11 For the sun rises with the hot wind and parches the *desert* grass, and its flower droops, and the beauty of its appearance perishes: in just this way the rich man will *one day*

perish while engaged in his business. **[Isaiah 40:6-8]** 12 Blessed is the one who endures testing, because, having earned approval, he will receive the award of life *after death*, which God promised to those who love him. 13 May no one who is tested say, "I am being tempted by God!" For neither is God amenable to temptation by evil, nor does he tempt anyone else! 14 Each one is tempted by his own desires being coaxed forth, seducing him. 15 Then Desire, having been impregnated, gives birth to Sin, and Sin, when grown to maturity, brings forth a child named Death. 16 Do not imagine otherwise, my beloved brothers!

17 Every good donation and every perfect gift is from above, descending from the Father of the stars, of whom one can predicate no change nor shifting shadow. 18 Having made up his mind, he caused us to be born by speaking a true message, so we might become, so to speak, the first of his creations to come ripe.

18 Know this, my beloved brothers: let each one be eager to listen, slow to speak or to get angry, 20 for our anger does not perform the righteousness God requires. 21 This is why you must repudiate everything sordid, all abundant wickedness, in favor of gentleness and accept instead the implantation of the truth that has the power to save your souls. 22 And become those who implement that truth, not merely those who hear it, which is to kid yourselves. 23 You see, if anyone *merely* hears the truth preached and fails to do anything about it, such a one is like a man who looks in the mirror at the face he was born with. 24 Imagine this: he took care to examine himself, then walked away and promptly forgot what he looks like! 25 But the one who has lingered long gazing into the flawless mirror of the law of liberty, not becoming a forgetful hearer, but *rather* one who performs the deeds required of him there, this one will have the blessing on what he does. **[Psalm 1:1-3]**

26 If anyone considers himself religious, but makes no effort to keep his mouth under control, but rationalizes what he says, this fellow's religion is a sham. 27 Religion that the God and Father deems pure and untainted is simply this: to see to the needs of destitute widows and orphans and to keep oneself unspattered from the world. **[Micah 6:8]**

2 1 My brothers, do not think you can embrace the religion of our Lord, Jesus-Christ, the Lord of splendor, while showing partiality. 2 Suppose a gold-fingered man in splendid clothing should enter your synagogue, and a beggar in reeking tatters enters, too, and you shower attention on the man in the fine clothing, saying, "Have a *choice* seat right here!" while you say to the beggar, "*Are you still here? Uh... stand over there, out of sight!*" or "Sit below my footstool." 4 Wouldn't you be playing favorites among yourselves? Wouldn't you be like judges who take bribes? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers! Didn't God choose the Poor **[Reflecting the self-designation of the Jerusalem Christians led by James the Just.]** in this world to be rich in faith and heirs to the kingdom he promised to those who love him? 6 But here you have disgraced the poor man. Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court *for nonpayment of debts*? 7 Aren't they the ones who blaspheme the noble name invoked over you? 8 If indeed you carry out a royal decree as Scripture says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," **[Leviticus 19:18]** you are

doing fine. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and you are denounced as transgressors by the Torah.

10 For whoever manages to keep the whole Torah but trips up in one commandment has become guilty of breaking all of them. 11 For the same one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not commit murder." So if you manage to abstain from adultery but do commit murder, you have *still* become a transgressor of the Torah. [1 John 3:4] 12 Therefore speak, therefore behave, mindful of the fact that you are soon to be judged on the basis of a law of freedom. 13 For the one who never showed mercy will find himself judged without mercy; in such a case, mercy rejoices at the verdict. [Proverbs 1:20-27]

14 For what reward can be expected, my brothers, when someone claims to have faith but has no deeds *to show for it*? Can his faith save him? 15 If a brother or a sister is found naked and not knowing where the next meal is coming from, 16 and one of you should say to him, "Good luck to you, finding clothes and food!"--but you don't *actually* give them the material necessities, where is your reward? [1John 3:17-18] 17 So indeed, faith, unless it has deeds, is dead by itself. 18 [? But someone might object,] **[This poser, characteristic of a Stoic diatribe (an imaginary dialogue with hecklers, anticipating likely objections) must have been added erroneously here, or else our author has entirely lost track of his own argument. Or is it possible the author is trying to imitate Paul while refuting him and does not quite understand the function of the device?]** You have faith, and I have deeds. Show me your faith that has no deeds! I will show you my faith by *means of* my deeds! 19 So you believe that there is one God, do you? Fine! The demons believe it, too--and shudder! 20 Are you willing to be shown, O empty-head, that "faith apart from deeds" is sterile? 21 Wasn't Abraham our father vindicated by means of deeds when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You can see for yourself the synergy between his faith and his deeds, and his faith was brought to perfection by his deeds, 23 and the passage of Scripture was fulfilled, namely, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him for merit, and he was *henceforth* called a friend of God." **[How was it "fulfilled," as if a prophecy? The quoted passage occurs earlier in the Abraham story, when Isaac's birth is predicted, Genesis 15:6. He exercised faith at that time, but it was brought to perfection only later when he was called on to sacrifice the very child of promise, Genesis 22:1-19. The logic is much the same as in Hebrews 11:17-19.]** 24 So you see an individual is saved by deeds, not by "faith alone." **[Verses 14-26 are a point-by-point rejoinder to Romans 3:27-4:6ff, which our author has open in front of him.]** 25 And in the same way, wasn't Rahab the prostitute delivered by *token of* her deeds, harboring the agents and smuggling them out? 26 For just as the body without a spirit is dead, so, too, is faith moribund without deeds.

3 1 My brothers, few of you ought to aspire to become teachers. Remember: we shall receive the more severe judgment. 2 For we all trip up in many ways; if anyone does not trip up in what he says, here you have a perfect man, able in fact to keep his whole life under control. 3 Now we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, and so we direct their whole bodies. 4 Think of ships, so massive in size and driven along by mighty winds! But a small rudder directs them wherever the pilot's whim decides they

should go. 5 So, too, the tongue is a little member and brags of great feats! Think of how little a flame it takes to kindle a huge forest fire! 6 *Well*, the tongue, *too*, is a fire, the very microcosm of iniquity. The tongue has been placed among our members to pollute our whole body and to set ablaze the *whole* wheel of birth. **[An astonishing piece of apparent Buddhism!]** *In turn* it is set ablaze by Hell. 7 For every species both of beasts and of birds, both of reptiles and of sea-creatures, is now domesticated, or has in the past been domesticated, by the human species, and yet no one has been able to domesticate the *human* tongue! It is a wild evil, full of deadly venom. 9 With it we eulogize our God and Father, and with it we curse human beings made in the image of God! 10 From the same mouth emerge blessing and cursing! It is not fitting, my brothers, for things to be so. 11 No fountain sends forth from the same opening both sweet and acrid water, surely? 12 Nor, my brothers, can a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine figs. **[In Matthew 7:16-18/Luke 6:43-44 this has become a saying of Jesus.]** Nor can salt water yield sweet.

13 Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him demonstrate his good behavior through his deeds of wise gentility. 14 But if you harbor bitter jealousy and rivalry in your heart, do not brag *about your supposed wisdom* and falsify the truth! 15 Such "wisdom" is not that which rains down from above, but rather worldly, cunning, demonic; 16 for wherever jealousy and rivalry thrive, there will be unrest and every base practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then irenic, patient, easily prevailed upon, full of mercy and good manifestations, without indecisiveness, not hypocritical. 18 And those who make peace are sowing the seeds for a harvest of salvation. **[We may detect some Gnostic coloring here and in verse 6, with its seeming reference to rebirth. Verses 13-16 might be understood as a contrast between the Fallen Achamoth and the Unfallen Sophia, both versions of Dame Wisdom. And verse 6 suggests that the original design of the human being included the dangerous sin-machine of the tongue. Who would have created us so, but the Demiurge, misbegotten son of Fallen Wisdom?]**

4 1 Where do wars and battles among you come from? Are they not the result of your pleasures struggling against one another in your various bodily members? 2 You desire and are frustrated; you murder out of jealousy, and still you are unable to find satisfaction--so you fight and you battle. But the reason you are frustrated is your failure to ask! 3 Or perhaps you do ask, but you receive nothing, because you ask wrongly, merely wanting to spend money on your pleasures! 4 Adulteresses! Don't you realize that friendship with this world is enmity with God? Thus whoever decides to be friends with the world becomes *ipso facto* the enemy of God. **[1 John 2:15b]** 5 Or perhaps you think Scripture is joking when it says, "The spirit which came to dwell inside you ever tends toward envy"? **[Genesis 6:3, 5?]** 6 But he provides even more spiritual help, **[This sounds like the Rabbinical doctrine of the evil and good imaginations, both planted by God in the human heart, the former, despite the tendency to sin, being needful to supply lust for procreation, cruelty to punish criminals and fight enemies, etc. See Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (NY: Macmillan, 1910), Chapter XV, "The Evil Yezer: The Source of Rebellion," pp. 242-263.]** which is why it says, "God sets himself against the arrogant but shows favor to the humble." **[Proverbs**

3:34] 7 Therefore submit to God; but determine to resist the Accuser, and he will run away in fear. 8 Approach God, and he will reciprocate. Purify your hands, sinners, and cleanse your hearts, you vacillators. 9 Panic, mourn, weep! Let your laughter turn to mourning, your joy to depression! 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. 11 Do not talk behind one another's backs, brothers. Whoever slanders another or assumes the worst of his brother speaks in violation of the Torah and thinks himself superior to it; and if you have placed yourself above the Torah, you are no keeper of the Torah, but its critic. 12 There is but one Legislator and Judge, the one capable of both delivering and destroying. So who are you to judge your neighbor? **[In Matthew 7:1-2//Luke 6:37, this has become a saying of Jesus.]**

13 Come now, you who boast, "Today or tomorrow we will take a trip to So-and-so city, and we will trade there a year and make a profit!" 14 You do not even know what will become of your life tomorrow! For you are a morning mist, visible for a short time, then *as suddenly* vanishing! **[Luke 12:16-21]** 15 This is how you ought to hedge your speech: "If the Lord wishes it so, we shall live and do this or that." 16 But as it is, you wallow in your blusterings. All such bragging is evil. 17 Therefore, the one who knows the good thing to do and chooses not to do it, it is chalked up as sin for him.

5 1 Come now, you rich! Weep and sob for the terrible fate about to overtake you! 2 You will awake to discover your riches have tarnished and your wardrobe is full of moth-holes, 3 your gold and silver have rusted through, **[Matthew 6:19]** and their corruption will witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire! **[1 Corinthians 3:12-15]** You *made the investor's mistake of* amassing treasure in the Last Days! 4 Just listen! The tell-tale cry of the wages due the laborers who harvested your acreage but were cheated! **[Jeremiah 22:13-17]** And the cries of the laborers have reached the ears of the Lord of the harvest. **[Exodus 3:7]** 5 On earth you lived as both connoisseur and orgiast, but all you did was to fatten up your hearts for the day of slaughter! You condemned and murdered the Just One, who put up no resistance. **[This is an only slightly-veiled reference to the martyrdom of James the Just, the ostensible writer of this epistle. His enemies, the High Priesthood, were scorned by the Qumran pietists as voluptuaries and apostates. The martyrdom is similarly disguised, this time as that of the fictional Stephen, in Acts 7:52ff.]**

7 Be long-suffering, brothers, till the arrival of the Lord. Look, the farmer anticipates the precious harvest of the earth, marking time over it as it soaks up first the early, then the latter rains. 8 You, like him, be long-suffering and fortify your hearts since the arrival of the Lord has drawn near. **[This has become a parable of Jesus in Mark 4:26-29]** 9 Do not grumble against one another, so you may avoid being judged; just look! The judge is standing at the doors! **[In Mark 13:29//Matthew 24:33//Revelation 3:20 this has become a saying of Jesus.]** 10 Brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as examples of enduring adversity and of long-suffering. For we beatify those who endure. You are acquainted with Job's endurance, and you saw the outcome of the Lord, that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

12 But above everything else, my brothers, swear no oaths, whether by the heaven

or by the earth or any other oath. No, just let your "yes" mean "yes" and your "no" mean "no," so you will avoid incurring judgment. **[In Matthew 5:34-37, this has become a saying of Jesus.]**

13 Is there anyone sick among you? Let him pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing one of the Psalms. 14 Is anyone among you enervated? Let him call the elders of the congregation to his bedside, and let them pray for him once they have anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And if they pray with faith, the sick will recover, and the Lord will raise him up, and *if some sin was at the root of the illness, it will be forgiven.* 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for forgiveness for one another, so you may be cured. The supplication of a *zaddik*, **[A special type of holy man whose extraordinary piety wins him the ear of God.]** once set in motion, is very strong. 17 Elijah was a mortal, *cut from the same cloth* as us, and in prayer he asked urgently that it might not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. 18 Again he prayed, and the sky gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

19 My brothers, if anyone of your number strays from the truth and someone steers him back in the right path, remember that whoever guides a sinner out of his false path will rescue his soul from death and will veil from sight a great number of sins. **[Galatians 6:1; Jude 23]**