

# Christ, Community and Salvation in the Epistle of James by Michael J. Townsend

*Mr. Townsend finds that there is more in the Epistle of James than simply good advice on Christian living; there is also a clearly Christian theology.*

Martin Luther's well-known description of James as 'a right strawy epistle'<sup>1</sup> is a judgement few would care to support today. Nevertheless, it is easy to undervalue James. Clearly we should not expect to find in so short a writing the same comprehensive understanding of God's dealings with men as we see in, say the epistles of Paul. Even when allowances have been made for the length of the work, however, a certain uneasiness remains, for it is true that the major New Testament themes of Christ's death and resurrection, the nature of the church and the Christian hope, seem to be absent. None would deny that James makes its major contribution to the teaching of the New Testament in its emphasis on the necessity for faith to show itself in practical action. We shall, however, attempt to look at three critical areas of Christian belief as they find expression in the epistle: Christology; the Church, and the grounds of salvation.

## CHRISTOLOGY

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Luther's standard of judgement on a text was simple enough: 'What does not preach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or Paul taught it.'<sup>2</sup> And by these standards it may well seem that he was justified in consigning James to an appendix at the end of the New Testament writings. Doubts are thrown on the rightness of Luther's judgement when it is remembered that Hebrews was brought under the same condemnation. Nobody today would defend the view that Hebrews fails to preach Christ! It is true enough that James makes no overt reference to the cross and its meaning, or indeed to the resurrection. It can, though, be argued that in several places his teaching presupposes or implies a theology of grace which is intelligible only in terms of the cross and the glory.

It is well enough known that James' characteristic title for Jesus is 'Lord'. It occurs six times, the last three simply with the article, 'the Lord' (5:7; 5:14; 5:15). In the first two it is coupled with the proper name 'Jesus' (1:1; 2:1). There are several other references to 'the Lord' where the context makes it plain that a reference to God the Father is

<sup>1</sup> *Introduction* to Luther's edition of the New Testament, 1522.

<sup>2</sup> 'Preface to the Epistles of Saint James and Saint Jude', *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1932), VI, 478.

intended (1:7; 4:10; 4:15; 5:10; 5:11). Two more difficult cases are 1:12 and 3:9. Jas. 1:12 speaks of 'the crown of life which he has promised' (*ep̄ngeilato*). Several modern versions take this to refer to the Father (RSV, GNB, NEB) in which case the imagery may be drawn from an Old Testament passage, such as Ps. 8:5. The Jerusalem Bible, however, opts for the more ambiguous 'the Lord' which, if it means Jesus, would require a promise of Jesus to which the passage might refer. Such a promise is not easy to find, although it might be a recollection in another form of Lk. 21:19 'By your endurance you will gain your lives.' In view of these uncertainties the suggestion that it may recall a promise of Jesus known to James but not recorded in the canonical gospels<sup>3</sup> is unlikely. Jas. 3:9 deals with the tongue; 'With it we bless the Lord and Father' (RSV). This particular phrase is not found elsewhere in the New Testament, but on the whole it is unlikely to be a reference to Jesus. We should understand it as 'God and Father' rather than 'Son and Father'.

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The two places where 'the Lord' occurs in conjunction with 'Jesus Christ' deserve further examination. In 1:1 the apostle describes himself as 'a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ' (RSV) which translated thus recalls several of Paul's characteristic ascriptions of greetings (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2 etc) in which God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are linked. It is possible to translate James' phrase as 'servant of Christ who is God and Lord' but this is most unlikely.<sup>4</sup> No translation of the New Testament known to me chooses this option.

The most obvious Christological reference is 2:1. The phrase has often been construed as if it were the same as 1 Cor. 2:8 'the Lord of Glory' but it is not. It is a phrase in apposition which literally reads, 'our Lord Jesus Christ the glory'. The question is whether there are good reasons for so translating it literally, in which case it certainly describes Jesus as the Glory.<sup>5</sup> In view of the undoubtedly strong Jewish influences on the epistle<sup>6</sup> a very good case can be made out for this. It may well be that James is here referring to Jesus as the Shekinah Glory of God. In Jewish thought the Shekinah is the Glory of God, dwelling in the midst of his people, and indeed with the well-known Jewish reluctance to name

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Carr, *The General Epistle of St. James* (Cambridge, 1896), 18.

<sup>4</sup> C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (London, 1966), 13.

<sup>5</sup> See A. M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (London, 1949), 149; A. T. Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (London, 1965), 132-3. The linguistic arguments are set out in J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of James* (London, 1892).

<sup>6</sup> Hellenistic influences are seen by F. C. Grant, *Roman Hellenism and the New Testament* (London, 1962), 65.

the name of God, came to be used to mean God himself. The key to the notion is that God is now *dwelling* with his people: 'And I will dwell (*shākan*) among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them forth out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell (*shākan*) among them . . .' (Ex. 29:45-6). Only those who lived devout and worthy lives could see this Shekinah.<sup>7</sup> In answer to the question 'Where is the Shekinah Glory of God?' the rabbis replied that it had been driven away by the sins of Israel. James seems to be emphasizing here that in spite of Israel's sin God has appeared on earth in such a way as now to be perpetually present with his people, that is, in Jesus. The Fourth Gospel tells us 'we beheld his glory' (Jn. 1:14) and James reminds us that this glory continues to be present in the worshipping community. In the risen and glorified Christ, apprehended and known in the midst of the Christian community, the glory and dwelling of God has again come amongst men. It is only in view of the fact that Jesus is the Glory that the petty snobbishness of the congregation stands judged (2:2). In view of the translation uncertainties in 2:1 it is probably best not to cite the passage as evidence that the New Testament Christians did refer to Jesus as 'God',<sup>8</sup> tempting though the possibility might be.

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A further Christological passage that claims attention is 2:7 'Is it not they who blaspheme that honourable name by which you are called?' (RSV). James here refers to the rich who are persecuting the little Christian community. In so doing they 'blaspheme' the name by which the community is called. This is clearly enough the name of Christ, even though James does not spell it out.<sup>9</sup> The idea of being called by the name of the Lord is a familiar enough one from Old Testament writings: 'And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord' (Deut. 28:10); and negatively, 'We have become like those over whom thou hast never ruled, like those who are not called by thy name' (Is. 63:19). Just as Israel's being called by the name of the Lord their God was a way of saying that they belonged to him and he had redeemed them (Is. 43:1) so Christians are called by the name of Jesus. As a matter of historical fact it was at Antioch that believers were first called Christians (Ac. 11:26) and since it was in 'those days' that prophets went from Jerusalem to Antioch, and Barnabas and Saul went from Antioch to Judea with the famine collections (Ac. 11:27-30) the contact may have

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<sup>7</sup> See R. A. Stewart, *Rabbinic Theology* (London, 1961), 40ff.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London, 1962), 72.

<sup>9</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (London, 1970), 45.

enabled the actual use of the term 'Christian' to spread to Jerusalem from Antioch. It may be that 2:7 refers to the custom of calling the name of Jesus over those being baptized<sup>10</sup> though it is not certain. However that may be, the Christian community is 'called' after its Lord, Jesus Christ, as the people of the Old Testament are called after the name of the Lord their God. They are his people and belong to him alone.

With 'Lord' as the characteristic designation of James for Jesus, and in the absence of other characteristic New Testament titles for Jesus such as 'Son of God', 'Messiah', 'High Priest' or 'Saviour', we are probably justified in assuming that we are here dealing with a persistent strand of primitive thought about Jesus. It fits a Palestinian background well, coming as Vincent Taylor rightly said, '... from the conventicle and the altar rather than the school, and it was destined to live on through later centuries down to the present day'.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the title 'Lord' is important in the New Testament far outside the epistle of James. It has often been assumed that the title was developed in Hellenistic Christianity,<sup>12</sup> but there are good reasons for doubting this assumption. In fact all Christians, Jewish and Hellenist, experienced the Lordship of Christ in their common life and worship. It is to this Lordship as experienced in worship that James makes appeal when he urges his readers to avoid snobbish behaviour. Since Christ is actually present with his people in worship and fellowship (*cf.* Matt. 18:20) such behaviour is impossible. The appeal is not to the example or teaching of Christ, but to the difference his presence with his people ought to make. It follows that sensitivity to this is an important part of Christian behaviour. Those who show snobbery in the church (or, we may add, racial discrimination), not only contravene specific New Testament teaching, but demonstrate their gross insensitivity to the presence of the risen and exalted Lord in their midst.

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#### THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

We do not find in James a full-scale doctrine of the church as the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the New Temple, or any of the other images to be found in the Pauline writings. The particular Christian community

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<sup>10</sup> So Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul* (Oxford, 1964), 126. Also R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (London, 1957), 60.

<sup>11</sup> *The Person of Christ in New Testament Teaching* (London, 1958), 137.

<sup>12</sup> W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (Göttingen, 1913). For the contrary arguments see Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (ET London, 1959), 195ff. It is strange that Cullmann makes no reference at all to James. See also, F. F. Bruce, 'Jesus is Lord', in J. M. Richards (ed), *Soli Deo Gloria* (Richmond, 1968), especially 23ff.

which James has in mind exhibits distinctive features characteristic of early Jewish Christianity. It contains both rich and poor members (1:9-10), which in itself could be a source of friction (2:2ff.). There is mutual sharing required in the community (2:15-6) which reminds us of the communal experiment in Acts 4:32ff. In Jas. 5:14-6 we are given a clear picture of the 'elders' who appear to constitute a body with spiritual functions, and it is possible that this terminology was taken over from the synagogue.<sup>13</sup> James does in fact refer to 'synagogue' rather than 'church' (2:2).

The only other church officers mentioned apart from elders, are teachers — 3:1. We have, unfortunately, no further indication as to who these teachers were. In Acts 13:1 they are linked with prophets, and in 1 Cor. 12:28 come third in a list after apostles and prophets. Pastors are linked with teachers in Eph. 4:11. We must beware of attempting to impose uniformity on the New Testament witness to church order,<sup>14</sup> but it seems sensible to infer that teachers were responsible for the instruction of new converts, and as such had the responsibility for building up the faith of the local community. The common catechetical tradition which some have discerned underlying parts of the New Testament<sup>15</sup> may well have been drawn up for such teachers who, by the nature of their task, would have been members of the local congregation.<sup>16</sup>

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Apart from the specific references to church officers (which are themselves valuable to the biblical historian), James has one specific stress which is important in the total biblical witness to the nature of the church. His characteristic designation of fellow members of the Christian community is 'brothers'. The word occurs fifteen times in these five chapters. There is very little background in Judaism for this use of the term. The overwhelming majority of Old Testament references are to family or tribal relationships, although the concept of brotherhood is implicit in the common land which God has given to his people, and in such practices as remission of debts and the forbidding of usury to fellow Hebrews.<sup>17</sup> Within the Christian fellowship however, it was a proper

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<sup>13</sup> A. E. Harvey, 'Elders', *JTS*, ns, 25, 1974, 318-32, argues that we cannot draw any picture of elders in Christian writings from a supposititious Jewish eldership.

<sup>14</sup> W. D. Davies, *A Normative Pattern of Church Life in the New Testament: Fact or Fancy?* (London, nd), has emphasised that there is a unity of wholeness, a diversity of gifts and a development of forms.

<sup>15</sup> Philip Carrington, *The Primitive Christian Catechism* (Cambridge, 1940).

<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, 'Apostles before and during Paul's time', in W. Ward Gasque and R. P. Martin (eds), *Apostolic History and the Gospel* (Exeter, 1970), 287-304 has some useful remarks especially on the passage in Ephesians.

<sup>17</sup> H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (ET London, 1974), 186ff.

understanding of the Christian's relationship to Christ which made the term peculiarly appropriate. Paul refers to Christ as 'the eldest among a large family of brothers' (Rom. 8:29 NEB), and it is from this alone that Christian usage derives its theological validity. It is not that Christians have any natural right to claim Christ as their brother, simply that God has ordained in his mercy that believers should be 'shaped to the likeness of his Son'. And, of course, the term 'brothers' is used by Jesus to address the disciples (Jn. 20:17).

120 In James the term is frequently used in the context of moral exhortation, which suggests the attitude of a teacher and pastor in the congregation. In this characteristic mode of address we hear the voice of a man who yearns over his brethren in the faith. It is always the case that 'When the people see that you unfeignedly love them, they will hear anything, and bear anything, and follow you the more easily.'<sup>18</sup> If James sometimes seems to address his readers harshly, this must be understood against his appeal to them as 'brothers'. Thus 4:11 indicates that James is making their common faith in Christ the basis of his appeal: 'Do not speak evil against one another, brethren' (RSV). Those who are of this world may well be slanderers (*cf.* Rom. 1:30) but the Christian community is a brotherhood, and within a brotherhood all slander is out of place. The same principle is found in 5:9 where Christians are exhorted not to grumble against one another. Again the basis of the appeal is that they are brothers. This is less christologically grounded than Paul's arguments regarding the relationship of the parts of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:14ff.), but James' insistence on the reality of the brotherhood, not of man, but of believers, is fundamental. It is the proper context in which rebukes can be offered (*cf.* Gal. 6:1).

#### THE GROUND OF SALVATION

It is in relation to the understanding of salvation that most readers find the epistle of James puzzling. Stated in its most extreme form, the objection has been made that the treatments of 'faith' and 'works' in James and Paul are so different from one another that one of them must represent a deliberate contradiction or correction of the other. Closer examination of the evidence, however, shows that the supposed contradiction is not as real as is sometimes thought.

It is important to realise that 'faith' in Paul and 'faith' in James do not refer to precisely the same thing. For Paul, faith is the quality by

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Baxter, *Reformed Pastor* (ed. John T. Wilkinson; London, 1950), 139.

which man is enabled to apprehend and grasp God's grace in Christ.<sup>19</sup> The two crucial texts in James are 2:14 and 2:19. A very good case indeed can be made out for saying that in both places, faith refers simply to an intellectual belief in monotheism, a declaration of orthodox theistic doctrine.<sup>20</sup> The second occurrence of faith in Jas. 2:14 should then be read in inverted commas, thus: 'What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his "faith" save him?' If this is correct, any view that the 'clash' between Paul and James can be accounted for by deliberate doctrinal correction<sup>21</sup> is simply not necessary. We would do well to recall the dictum of Calvin, '... it is surely not required of all to handle the same arguments... but this diversity should not make us to approve of one, and to condemn the other.'<sup>22</sup> There is no objection to describing what James writes as a debate against misunderstood ideas of Paul<sup>23</sup> provided we do not assume it was James himself who so misunderstood Paul. On the contrary, his reply is to those who pervert the true gospel by lapsing into antinomianism and claiming authority for their conduct from Paul himself. Paul indeed would have repudiated such conduct as thoroughly as does James. We know from Rom. 3:8 that such misunderstandings of the Pauline gospel were current at about the time James was writing. James merely insists that faith has to be real and not a pretence. Jesus himself provided the basis for such teaching: 'Not every one who says to me, "Lord, Lord" shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven' (Matt. 7:21 RSV). When James writes, 'You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone' (2:24) he is summarising what has gone before. Where no works exist it must also be supposed that no faith exists either. So a man who claims to be a believer, yet has no works to demonstrate the reality of his faith, will find that such 'faith' does not justify him at all, for it is not real. After all, it was Jesus who said, 'You will know them by their fruits' (Matt. 7:16 RSV), and James expounds this emphasis faithfully.<sup>24</sup>

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Even if it is granted that James does not contradict what we find else-

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<sup>19</sup> See D. E. H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul* (Oxford, 1970), 161ff.

<sup>20</sup> Dan Otto Via Jr, 'A Right Strawy Epistle Reconsidered: A Study in Biblical Ethics and Hermeneutics', *JR* 49, 1969, 253-267.

<sup>21</sup> B. W. Bacon, 'The Doctrine of Faith in Hebrews, James and Clement of Rome', *Journal of Biblical Studies*, 19, 1900, 12-21.

<sup>22</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (translated by John Owen; Grand Rapids, 1948), 276.

<sup>23</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London, 1955), II, 131.

<sup>24</sup> On the whole issue see C. E. B. Cranfield, 'The Message of James', *SJT* 18, 1965, 182-193.

where in the New Testament about the ground of salvation, is there no more positive teaching to be found in the letter? There is certainly plenty of moral exhortation, and advice about good conduct, which is normally a characteristic of 'second-generation' teaching. To look at the Pauline epistles and then at the post-New Testament *Didache* is to be made aware of the difference. As C. F. D. Moule says, the danger with second-generation Christians is that 'they may forget the vital thing which changes life — the power of Jesus crucified and risen — and preach and teach instead the results rather than the cause.'<sup>25</sup> Yet the soundest dating for the epistle seems to be between AD50 and AD60, very far from a second-generation document. Professor Moule has himself made a suggestion which probably ought to be accepted: that James is based on a sermon, and 'it is quite possible that, on some occasions, the preacher might assume the Gospel and concentrate on ethical teaching.'<sup>27</sup> What evidence is there then, that James assumes the gospel?

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A crucial passage is Jas. 1:17-25. It begins by speaking of the way in which the 'father of light' is the giver of 'every good endowment and every perfect gift' (1:17). Both natural gifts and those gifts sent for the living of full Christian lives are granted 'from above'. Does this include the gift of faith? Jas. 1:18 tells us that 'Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of firstfruit of his creation.' Here the phrase 'of his own will' stresses that God's action and initiative in creating and making anew is the primary factor in conversion (*cf.* Jn. 1:13), and the 'word of truth' is a description of the gospel of salvation. 1 Pet. 1:23 refers to the 'living and abiding word of God' as the agent of salvation, and Eph. 1:13 to 'the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation', so Jas. 1:18 has close parallels in both Petrine and Pauline thought. Those whose lives have been made new by the 'word of truth' are 'firstfruits' for God, an idea which may well derive from Je. 2:3 'Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of his harvest' (RSV). Jas. 1:19-21a consists of moral exhortations *based* on the fact that we have received the 'word of truth', and in v.21b James brings the argument full circle by reminding his readers again to 'receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls'. Here the balance between grace and ethics is very plain indeed. Advice about conduct is enclosed within two clear statements which give the grounds for

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<sup>25</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *Christ's Messengers* (London, 1957), 42.

<sup>26</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *op. cit.*, 30-33.

<sup>27</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *Worship in the New Testament* (London, 1961), 65.

<sup>28</sup> R. Newton Flew, *Jesus and His Way* (London, 1963), 117.

all ethical behaviour — namely that God's word, which is the gospel of Christ, has been planted in us and is able to save us. For James then, as for Paul, ethics must be the ethics of grace.<sup>28</sup> There is indeed a very positive note sounded here: obedient submission to the gospel is the necessary precursor of right living. James does not only 'assume' the gospel — he states the necessity for it.

#### CONCLUSION

The modern Christian will hardly turn to the Epistle of James for a fully balanced diet of theology. It would be wrong, however, to assume that it contains nothing more than exhortation and advice. In addition to its major emphasis on practical action James makes its distinctive contribution to the New Testament witness to the faith of Jesus, the Lord, and the Glory, whose brothers we are through the gospel.