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Introduction

The Epistle of James is one of the most exciting parts of the New Testament. It has a hard-hitting punch and a reality-oriented attitude that catch readers unaware and astound them, while also offering them practical guidelines for life. Yet at the same time, it has been a neglected book, for ever since Luther called it an epistle of straw lacking the wheat of the gospel (which for him was Paul as Luther understood him), Protestants in general have struggled with the work. The result has been that the work has been pushed aside, so that it is only in the last two decades that a significant number of commentaries and studies on James have begun to appear. One now sees that the ugly duckling is indeed a swan, the neglected stepchild the true heir, for nowhere does the voice of Jesus speak to the church more clearly than in James. As the commentary progresses, the reader will see that James is an example of how the early church believers used and applied the words of Jesus to their daily life.

Authorship

The first issue to address in any study of a New Testament book is that of authorship. The straightforward claim of the work is rather clear: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). The scripture knows of several Jameses or Jacobs (the Hebrew for which *James* is the Greek), but most can be quickly eliminated. A few scholars have argued that the work is claiming to be by Jacob the son of Isaac, and that it allegorically presents the names of his wives and sons. There is literature of this type (e.g., the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*) written about the same time as the New Testament, but if James is an allegory it is not at all like the Testaments. Also, James is far too thoroughly Christian to be a Jewish work. So this "James" can be quickly passed over.

Then there is James son of Zebedee, brother of John. He was part of the inner circle of apostles around Jesus, so he knew

him well enough to have used his sayings freely. Since James was a fisherman, it is hard to tell what kind of education he had, but he could certainly speak Greek, the original language of the epistle. Yet he probably did not live long enough to write the work, for sometime between A.D. 41 and 44, only eight to ten years after Jesus' resurrection and before any New Testament literature was written or Paul began his missionary journeys, Herod Agrippa I had this James executed "by the sword" (Acts 12:1-2). His short career and sudden end make him an unlikely candidate for author of this epistle.

The other James among the twelve disciples is James son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3), who is probably the same as James the Little (Mark 15:40). So little is known about this person that no one can say he absolutely could not have written the epistle, but it is unlikely. Could such a relative "unknown" have written the simple beginning of the letter? Would he not have felt a need to identify himself more clearly, especially since the letter is so weighty and authoritative? Again, the reader must reject this "James."

Martin Luther believed an otherwise unknown James wrote the work late in the first century. If one believes that the work was written so late, this hypothesis might be attractive, for James or Jacob was a common name among Jews and Jewish Christians. But again there are problems. Why would such a James not identify himself more fully? Is he trying to impersonate an earlier, better-known James? Why does he believe he has this much authority? The conclusion must be that this theory was simply Luther's attempt to ascribe the book to a person who lacked apostolic authority.

Finally, having rejected the other candidates, one has narrowed the field to James brother of Jesus, called the Just. This younger brother of Jesus must have known his older brother and his teaching well. However, he did not believe him during his lifetime (John 7:2-5), and he (probably along with Mary) helped try to take Jesus home "for his own good" (Mark 3:20-21, 31-35). After the resurrection James suddenly appears with Jesus' other brothers among the disciples in the upper room, praying for the Spirit (Acts 1:14). It is Paul who gives the reason for this "about-face": Jesus appeared to James after the resurrection before he ap-

peared to the large apostolic company, and like the appearance to Paul, this was probably a converting experience (1 Cor. 15:7).

After his conversion, James' career in the church began. When the Twelve began to travel, after the stoning of Stephen, it is James who remained in Jerusalem. He is probably the James named first in Galatians 2:9 as approving Paul's mission (whom Paul calls an apostle in Gal. 1:19). He appears sending out church delegates in Galatians 2:12, he presides over the apostolic council in Acts 15 (and since his word is spoken last, it indicates that he had a higher status than Peter), and he receives and advises Paul with his collection in Acts 21. It is clear that James was the undisputed leader of the Jerusalem church and arguably the most influential Christian leader of his day. He remained in this position until shortly after Paul's arrest (A.D. 57).

In A.D. 62, three years after sending Paul to Rome, the procurator Festus died in office. During the period before the appointment and arrival of the procurator Albinus, the high priest Annas the Younger seized his chance and arraigned James and some others on the charge of having broken the Law. James was condemned and stoned. Although another member of the holy family, Symeon, was later chosen to succeed him, no leader equaled James in stature. The Jewish-Christian church in Jerusalem itself soon came to an end, for it fled to Pella in fear of the advancing Roman armies in A.D. 66 and was never afterward able to continue its mission to the Jews.

This James, a powerful and well-known figure of the early church, is surely the person indicated in the opening verse. He alone had the authority for a letter of this tone. He alone would be recognized by the mere mention of his name (so much so that Jude says "Jude, the brother of James" in Jude 1). The opening verses certainly intend to put his authority behind the epistle. The question that has been asked, however, is whether he truly stands there or whether the epistle is simply ascribed to him, much as the apocryphal work 1 Enoch (a Jewish work of the first century) was ascribed to Enoch, or Psalms of Solomon (a set of poems written by a Pharisee in the century before Christ) to Solomon.

Several points have been argued against James' authorship. First, the Greek of the letter is too good. Though this fact hardly

comes out in English translation, the Greek of James is among the two or three best Greek styles in the New Testament, being full of catchwords, alliteration, and other points of beauty. All scholars admit that a Galilean carpenter's son would probably speak some Greek, but many ask, would its quality equal this standard of excellence, especially since James the Just remained in Jerusalem, the center of Aramaic-speaking Judaism, most of his life? Those who believe he could not have written such Greek argue a later author wrote the work in James' name.

Second, there are some philosophical phrases (e.g., "the whole course of his life" in 3:6) and other indications (e.g., all the quotations agree with the Greek Old Testament; none are distinctively Hebrew) that the author is very familiar with the Greek world. James the Just may well have spoken Greek, but would he, like this author, have known Greek philosophical ideas and been familiar with Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon (Jewish wisdom literature from the two centuries before Christ)? Would he not have quoted the Hebrew Old Testament? Furthermore, the epistle contains little of the Jewish legalism and ritualism that many connect with James the Just. Does this not show the work of a later author whose Judaism was that of the Greek Diaspora at best, or even that of a God-fearing Gentile?

Third, the Epistle of James is very similar to the Shepherd of Hermas, a late first-century Christian work written in Rome. It also shows similarities to 1 Peter (although there was no borrowing, just mutual use of a common tradition), which itself is often dated late in the first century. Does this not mean that James belongs there as well? After all, his church seems settled and struggling with problems of acculturation (e.g., acceptance of the rich), not the problems of a new, expanding, evangelistic community. Several scholars thus propose a life-setting in Rome at the end of the first century, which would rule out authorship by James the Just.

Finally, there is the relationship of James to Paul. A comparison of James 2:24 with Romans 3:20; 3:28; and 4:16 makes it appear that James is directly contradicting Paul. James uses Abraham as his chief example and cites Genesis 15:6 (in 2:23) as Paul does. That means that James must have been written after Paul coined his slogans, or even after Romans was written. James does not seem to understand the slogans, so perhaps he has heard

them secondhand from someone who had read Romans but was misusing it. Now James the Just was present at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) where all these issues were argued face to face. Surely he would have understood Paul and would not have relied on secondhand data. But the epistle has the marks of being written after the controversy had died down, toward the late first century, long after James lay in the grave.

The arguments are powerful and have convinced many, but they are far from the whole story. On the matter of James and Paul, the commentary on 2:14-26 will show that they use terms differently. Paul has his own meanings for words, whereas James uses words in their older, Jewish sense (which is the reason the commentary will frequently cite extracanonical Jewish writings. It is quite possible James misunderstood Paul, but that was more likely earlier than later. In the period of Paul's first missionary journey, someone like John Mark may have brought a garbled version of Paul's teaching to Jerusalem. If James 2:14-26 is James' response to Paul before Paul explained what his position really was, it is possible James suggested the Abraham example to Paul—if Paul did not come by it quite independently. (In Gal. 4:21-31, Paul is probably borrowing an allegory from his opponents and turning it against them; he was quite capable of doing the same with those who misused James' arguments.) At the least, with such differences from Paul, James was more likely written before Romans rather than afterward when Paul's position was clearly known, for the real Paul would have agreed with what James meant even if he would have expressed it differently.

When it comes to James and the Shepherd of Hermas (a first-century Christian writer in Rome), it is clearly Hermas who is borrowing from James. By the time Hermas was written, copies of James had reached Rome; the epistle was used by Hermas, but he lacked James' Jewish background and so softened his condemnation of the rich and misunderstood several phrases (like James' teaching on prayer). This is hardly evidence that James was written at the same time as Hermas. Likewise, the relationship to 1 Peter depends on how long the tradition they both used lasted (it lasted at least until 1 Clement, a letter from the Roman church leader Clement to Corinth, was written in A.D. 96), when 1 Peter was written, and how early the tradition began.

The lack of "Jewishness" in the Epistle of James is only apparent. The phrases that appear philosophical may have originally come from a philosophical source, but they are used in very unphilosophical ways, for they have become the common expressions of the culture. The citations of the Old Testament may or may not come from the Greek Bible; in these five texts the Greek and Hebrew versions are identical. Furthermore Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon (both in the Apocrypha, i.e., Jewish works not accepted by Protestants as scripture) were widely read in Palestine, so the "Greek" culture of James would have been very much at home in Jerusalem. The truth is that one can picture a perfectly good Palestinian milieu for James. Most of the epistle's "Greekness" is only a surface appearance.

James the Just, contrary to popular opinion, was no legalist. Only two pieces of information would point in that direction. In the first (Gal. 2:12), "certain men [who] came from James" begin the Judaizing controversy. The text does not indicate whether James shared their views, but just states that he had sent them and thus they had enough authority to cause a disturbance, even if the purpose for which he sent them was very different. The second piece of information is a tradition from Hegesippus (an early Christian historian recorded by Eusebius) that portrays James the Just as a legal rigorist. Yet the tradition is not believable, for among other improbabilities, it has him entering the holy of holies in the temple. Most likely Hegesippus simply states as history what was in fact a theological description of James the Just.¹ As a basis for his historical character it is poor indeed, especially since Galatians 1:19 and 2:9 present him as accepting Paul and approving his mission, and Acts 15 and 21 present him as a mediating figure who holds the church together in unity by creating compromises between Paul and the rigorists. It is the picture in Acts *that is in harmony with the Epistle of James*.

Thus one returns to the quality of the Greek as the strongest argument against James the Just's authorship. This brings up another aspect of the epistle. It appears disjointed, but the same themes crop up in different words throughout the epistle. Indeed, there is a pattern to their appearance that F. O. Francis discovered fits a common pattern in literary epistles.² How can one account for an overall pattern that shows some inconsistency in

vocabulary between parts (e.g., 1:13–15 and 4:1–3 or 1:2–4; 1:12; and 5:7–11)? Then there is the fact that even with the good Greek there are a number of awkward phrases that show a Semitic thought pattern (e.g., 2:1, or the “doer of the word”—NIV, “do what it says”—of 1:22). This seems strange, for if a person could use the high-quality Greek of this epistle, one would expect him to be able to avoid Semitisms, and a person who thought so Semitically could most likely not produce the Greek style of the epistle.

The solution to this dilemma is a more careful look at the work. It is clearly oral discourse, like the Greek diatribe, the synagogue homily, or a sermon. There are a number of connected discourses (2:1–13; 2:14–26; 3:1–12; etc.) plus a scattering of shorter sayings (e.g., 3:18; 4:17). Since these are usually on ethics, they are sometimes termed paraenesis, or ethical instruction. These pieces have been combined into an overall structure so that they fit together yet have not entirely lost their original separate character. That is the answer to the riddle. James the Just is probably the main source of the sayings and discourses, but he delivered his sermons in Aramaic or relatively Semitic Greek. Later, either because visitors to Jerusalem requested it, or because James' martyrdom stimulated it, the sermons of James were collected, edited into a book around his favorite themes, and circulated as a general letter. The editor improved the Greek, but acted conservatively so as not to obscure James' voice. This explanation appears to satisfy all the data. The letter is by James, but just as Paul used secretaries to write his epistles and they had a good deal of freedom, and Luke improves the Greek of sayings of Jesus (when compared to Mark or Matthew), so James had an editor—either a trusted colleague, or a leader of the church after his death—who preserved his teaching for future generations.

Form

The form or structure of the Epistle of James, as discovered by F. O. Francis³ and later modified and developed by myself, is that of a literary letter (a letter designed to be published rather than mailed to real addressees) with a doubled opening. It has always been recognized that 1 John 1:2 repeats and extends 1:1.

Similarly, James 1:2–11 has three sections repeated and extended in 1:12–25. The same three topics appear in reverse order in 2:1–26, 3:1–4:12, and 4:13–5:6. There is a conclusion (5:7–11) and a closing (5:12–20). The closing covers three topics normally discussed in a Greek letter: oaths (5:12), health (5:13–18), and the reason for writing (5:19–20). The result is the following structure (using headings from the NIV, where they exist, for convenience, although in some cases we will subdivide them or limit their scope)

- I. Greeting 1:1
- II. Opening Statement (Trials and Temptations) 1:2–27
 - 1. Part 1
 - 1:2–8
 - a. Testing 1:2–4
 - b. Faith and Wisdom 1:5–8
 - c. Poverty and Riches 1:9–11
 - 2. Part 2
 - 1:12–18
 - a. Testing 1:12–15
 - b. Life and the Tongue 1:16–18
 - c. Listening and Doing 1:19–27
(vv. 26–27 are transition and linking verses; vv. 19–21 belong with 16–18 as much as with 22–27)
- III. Poverty and Riches 2:1–26
 - 1. Favoritism Forbidden 2:1–13
 - 2. Faith and Deeds 2:14–26
- IV. Wisdom and the Tongue 3:1–4:12
 - 1. Taming the Tongue 3:1–12
 - 2. Two Kinds of Wisdom 3:13–18
 - 3. Submit Yourselves to God 4:1–10
 - 4. Warning against Judging a Christian Brother 4:11–12
- V. Testing, Faith, and Wealth 4:13–5:6
 - 1. Boasting About Tomorrow 4:13–17
 - 2. Warning to Rich Oppressors 5:1–6
- VI. Patience and Prayer = Closing 5:7–20
 - 1. Conclusion: Patience in Suffering 5:7–11
 - 2. Oaths 5:12
 - 3. The Prayer of Faith 5:13–18
 - 4. Purpose 5:19–20

Date

Given what was said earlier about the authorship and form of the epistle, its date can now be determined. Those, of course, who do not believe James the Just wrote the epistle at all date it relatively late, A.D. 70–130, most frequently A.D. 80–100. But it was argued earlier that James the Just *is* the source of the sermons contained in the epistle, which means that the source materials date from his lifetime; that is, before A.D. 62. Furthermore, James 2:14–26 was probably composed as a unit before James had a chance to discuss Paul's distinctive doctrines with him. That puts at least this part before A.D. 49. But this date is satisfactory for any of the epistle, for the church was by that time more than fifteen years old, which is fully old enough to have any of the problems described in James. Indeed, the decade of the 40s was a time of economic need in Jerusalem, which fits the kinds of economic insecurity and vulnerability that James' church is experiencing. Thus it is likely that much of the material in the epistle stems from the mid-40s and circulated orally or in rough Greek translations for a decade or so before being put in final form.

The second stage of the work, the final edited version, is harder to date. It is probably earlier than A.D. 66, for the flight of the church to Pella would have ended the continuity with Jerusalem and James the Just needed to collect a tradition. How much earlier is hard to determine. Most likely the death of James triggered the writing of the epistle, for with the living voice silent, there would surely have been a desire on the part of the grieving church to preserve his teaching to the true Israel, "to all God's people scattered over the whole world." This would also explain two other facts: (1) how Hermas got a copy in Rome by A.D. 96, for there was plenty of time between A.D. 66 and 96 for a copy to get to Jewish Christians there, and (2) why James is not used otherwise until Origen cites it about A.D. 256, for a Jewish-Christian work that was not useful in doctrinal controversy was surely half-forgotten with the Jerusalem church first in exile and then struggling for its distinctive existence as the Jewish mission collapsed with the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Historical Background

The discussion of dating has already suggested a historical background, but it now remains to paint it in some detail. James' church lived in Jerusalem about fifteen years after the resurrection. Actually it was a series of house churches or Christian synagogues, each one having no more than about sixty members; most were far smaller, twenty to forty members. They met for worship, probably a modified form of the synagogue liturgy, and then celebrated the Lord's Supper immediately afterward. They also enjoyed the celebration of Jewish festivals and the temple services, as Acts shows. Each house church was directed by one or more elders; the elders as a group, presided over by James, ran the whole church. There were also deacons (as in Acts 6), whose job it was to collect charitable contributions and distribute them to the poorer members of the church.

There were many poor members, for as a whole, the church itself was poor. There were a number of reasons for this. First, there were many members from outside Jerusalem who could not ply their trade in the city (e.g., Peter and Andrew were fishermen). Some of these were pilgrims who had been converted at a festival time and had chosen not to go home, where there was no church to nurture them. Second, there were streams of visitors who wanted to learn about Christianity at the fountainhead, so to speak. These had to be fed, housed, even clothed, as hospitality was an important church function (see the *Didache* for how this worked later in the century).

Third, Christianity always tended to appeal to poor and oppressed folk: prostitutes, thieves, tax collectors, and the like were all attracted by the promise of forgiveness; the wealthy and powerful, though, saw a group of people with whom they would rather not associate. The poor heard a message of faith, hope, and justice (Jesus will return); it is they whom James calls "rich in faith" (2:5). Fourth, many older folk came to Jerusalem to die. When they heard of the resurrection in Jesus and were converted, they came under the care of the church. It would not be surprising that in some cases children who had been supporting them used the conversion as a welcome excuse to discontinue support. One wonders as well what happened to the livelihood of the "large number of priests" who believed (Acts 6:7). Fifth, Jerusalem

itself fell on hard times. The city was in an economically marginal area, chosen for political and defensive rather than economic reasons. In the 40s there was a series of famines that required the help of wealthy aristocrats outside Palestine who sent food to the starving Jews of Jerusalem. The church suffered with the rest of the people but probably got little of the general relief.

Finally, there was persecution. The persecution in Jerusalem was rarely violent, but the Christians were a despised sect. This was especially true later when they refused to join the patriotic effort to free Palestine. Persecution could (and can) be very subtle: a laborer known as a Christian would be the last to be hired and would be the first fired when the economy slowed down. If a Christian were cheated out of wages or other rights by a Jewish leader, the mere fact he or she was a Christian would prejudice the case against the person wronged. None of this helped the church become rich.

The times were tumultuous. Herod Agrippa I, who had been a good king, died suddenly in A.D. 44 after a reign of only four years. He was followed by a series of venial procurators. Only the short-lived Festus was a decent ruler. They were open to graft and bribes of every sort and despised the Jews. Under them the Zealots arose as a "Palestine Liberation Front" and began attacking Romans and Roman sympathizers: banditry, coercion, and kidnappings for ransom became common news. The Roman procurator often released Zealots when properly bribed with money stolen from Roman sympathizers.

The temple was in no better condition. The highpriestly families struggled for control of the office; every couple of years the high priest was changed. Many of the Jews felt the whole group of them was illegitimate to begin with, for they were not descendants of Zadok (1 Sam. 2:27-36; 2 Sam. 15:24-29; 1 Kings 2:26-27; 4:2—the last high priest of this line was killed in 170 B.C.). The lower clergy were oppressed and discriminated against by the greater priestly families, while the more powerful priestly clans were known for luxury, oppression of the poor, gossip, and intrigue. They were hardly spiritual leaders, but they were economically powerful.

Economically there were five groups in the land. On the bottom were slaves, who were not numerous in Palestine (in contrast to the rest of the empire) because Jewish law made them

less profitable than hired workers (because if the slave converted, he or she had to be freed in the sabbatical year). Then came two groups of peasants. The poorer group were landless people who hired themselves out for the day; when there was no work, they starved. The less-poor group were farmers and artisans. The farmers owned their own farms, if they were lucky, but many had been forced by hard times to sell their farms to the wealthy and now worked as tenants and sharecroppers on land their family once owned. The next group up were merchants and traders, who as a whole were upwardly mobile. Some of them were rich; others only had enough. Since Jerusalem was not a trade center, they usually had to travel to pursue their business, unless they were part of the temple trade. But many could afford to live in Jerusalem part of the time. At the top of society were the large landowners, including the great priestly clans. They had large, tenant-farmed estates and so could spend time in Jerusalem enjoying their revenues and running the nation.

James' church lived in the midst of this collapsing world. Although the church as a whole was growing and spreading across the world, believers felt oppressed. In their suffering, their tendency was to imitate the world and try to gain power within the church. There was also a weariness about the church and an impatience with waiting for Christ's return. The struggle for power combined with this weariness to produce internal factions, gossip, and complaints. Since the church was economically insecure, church members tended to curry favor with the few wealthy members, to hold back on charitable giving, and generally to "look out for number one." James senses a general worldliness despite good attendance at services. This is the situation James addresses with a stinging letter designed to shake them out of their lethargy.

*Thematic Emphases*⁴

Even to begin to write about theological themes discovered in the Epistle of James takes a little boldness, for the German New Testament scholar Martin Dibelius denied just such a possibility in his commentary (1921).⁵ James is ethical teaching, a miscellaneous collection from various sources without any internal coherence among its various themes. Fortunately, however, research

on James has moved beyond the work of Dibelius, beginning with scholars in his native Germany. In other words, the study of James has now moved from the period of form-criticism, which studies works in pieces, into that of redaction-criticism, which studies them as edited wholes;⁶ 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.⁷ It is this overall form that gives a basis for extracting the theological themes of the epistle.

If, then, it is legitimate to look at James as an edited unity, one will discover that the epistle is primarily a theology of suffering, an expression of a Jewish theology of suffering with a long history before James' Christian version. Naturally, it is impossible to give a full discussion of the development of this theological concept; it will suffice to simply sketch some of the major points, leaving the details for the commentary text.

Within the context of a theology of suffering, James' primary concern is with the health of the community. The concern of the work is not simply suffering, but suffering within the context of communal concern. This means that it is wrong to read the epistle with an individualistic focus; 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 upon 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 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 Scrolls community.

The starting place for this theology is suffering. Thus James begins with a primary focus on trials. The concept itself has two sides. First, a trial is a test that in the context of James comes from the suffering of the Christian.⁸ It is something to be endured, to teach patience, and to lead to perfect virtue. This is essentially the message of James 1:2-4. Second, a trial 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. Here one finds the focus of 1:12–15.

The call in the Epistle of James is for supernatural joy in the face of the testing situation. This joy because of belief in the coming of Christ and his reward 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 (an early rabbi cited in the Talmud and other Jewish literature) 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."⁹

The test can lead to reward (i.e., a "reward" or "a crown of life" [James 1:12], presumably from the hands of Christ, as in Rev. 2:10) on the Judgment Day. Thus there is every reason to rejoice in anticipation of the 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 phrase "God cannot be tempted by evil," which is better translated, "God ought not to be tested by evil people" (1:13), for this would be the same failure that Israel showed in the wilderness. Instead James points out, in continuity with the tendency of later Judaism, that God does not send the test (although James is not intending to make a statement about the sovereignty of God); rather, suffering becomes a test of faith to human beings because of the evil impulse within, that is, "evil desire" (1:14).

At this point James has combined two streams in the theology of later Judaism. The evil impulse, or evil *yêser* (the Hebrew name), was as well known in later Judaism as the problem of suffering. Human beings have within them an undifferentiated drive or desire that pushes them 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 impulse 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 one 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 is so tied to this life that suffering brings compromise and the breakdown of Christian virtue.

Yet in pointing 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 theology of the cross 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 (1) Lord (six times), (2) judge (5:9), and (3) king (if "royal law" in 2:8 refers to Jesus). The focus is on the return of the exalted Christ, which is "near," even "at the door" (5:7-11). It is in light of the coming of this person in apocalyptic judgment (when God breaks into history in the end of the world) that one ought to endure, for as in the case of Job, patient endurance will be rewarded, and that reasonably soon. James presents a simple teaching about Christ more resembling that found in the early speeches in Acts than to the more complex ideas of Paul. He also has a strongly apocalyptic eschatology (a teaching about God's relationship to the world focused on his judgment in the end of the world) like that found in Mark 13 or Revelation.

Second, one notes that James sees another side to the problem of suffering than that of the evil impulse. In rabbinic Judaism and in the Dead Sea Scrolls, it was not unusual to speak in one breath of evil impulse or spirit 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, i.e., the first three Gospels). In James 3:13-18 the cause of community strife is traced to a

“wisdom” (James himself only defines it negatively, “not-the-wisdom-from-heaven,” but surely the teachers dividing the community thought of it as wisdom) that is described as earthly, natural (i.e., devoid of the Spirit), and demonic. Particularly this latter term leads one to suspect that the 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 in the test are giving in, who are driven by pleasure or desire, he cries out, “Submit yourselves, 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 upon the devil, for it is the evil impulse within that leads one to fail under the stress of the test.

Having observed the problem of suffering in the community, however, one should further note that there is a specific theological context for the suffering, which is the piety of the poor. It had become clear by the time of the postexilic Jewish community that piety was not always rewarded with wealth and success. Under the persecution of the King of the Seleucid Empire in Antioch, Antiochus Epiphanes (170–164 B.C.), and the Jewish Hasmonean rulers (priest-kings descended from the priest Matthias, ruling 167–63 B.C.), it appeared far more certain that piety would be rewarded with poverty and suffering in this world. Yet God in the Old Testament is said to be the deliverer of the poor and oppressed. This fact is true and was felt to be true to 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. 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 New Testament, as well as in Judaism, notably in the Sermon on the Mount, particularly in the Lucan version (Luke 6). It is here that the sayings tradition (sometimes called Q¹⁰) preserves sayings of Jesus that bless the poor (the “poor in spirit” of Matthew not intending to mean less than literal poverty) 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 light of this tradition. James draws heavily upon this teaching.

For James the elect community is the poor. God has "chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom" (2:5). Earlier he has said, "The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position" (1:9). Furthermore, it is clear that the community contains many who are not all wealthy, that the relatively wealthy members are unusual and thus potentially powerful, and that at least a portion of the community works as day laborers. These data fit with what is known elsewhere of the early church in general and the Palestinian church in particular.

By way of contrast, James has little use for the rich. The very term *rich* denotes one who is outside of the community and on the 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 upon them. 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 the term *rich* and then has little but criticism for these persons (2:1-4, 4:13-17).

Given these data about the piety of the poor, then, one can see the dimensions of James' concern a little more clearly. First, the church, like the Dead Sea Scrolls community, is primarily the community of the poor. This would be true both literally and in terms of its own self-concept. The church does suffer 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 leading to martyrdom 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 Christians were poor. After all, as is shown by the revolt of the Jews in A.D. 70 (as well as by several disturbances among the poor in Rome), there was a great deal of general feeling among the poor against the rich.

But 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 persecution to religious motives.

The situation puts the church into a context in which it has become 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 fundamental 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. Third, there is the temptation to seek wealth oneself; this forms the basis of James' warning to the merchant group (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 cause. The community under pressure tends to split into bickering factions, each one trying to get control, push its own teaching, and take advantage of its own position. This appears to be the problem addressed in chapters 3 and 4. Needless to say, such reactions to stress are not in the least unknown in other ages.

Given a community including the poor undergoing testing and finding within themselves weakness rather than the patient endurance of the prophets (i.e., they were not willing to wait and allow the Lord on his return to set affairs right), one immediately asks about the role of faith and grace in this situation. It is here that James' epistle 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. One is found chiefly in chapter 1 and 5 (1:3, 6; 2:1, 5; 5:15) and could be roughly translated as "commitment" or "trust." Its opposite is "hypocrisy" or "double-minded" (1:8; 4:8), a divided mind in which the evil impulse is dominant and thus a mind that does not look solely to God for help but also to the world. Here faith is characteristic of one who is enduring the test; it is a definition reasonably close to the Pauline definition of faith. The other def-

inition 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, that is, the personal character, so evident in the Pauline and the Johannine conceptions.

Second, for James, true commitment will result in obedience. This is clear whether one looks at 2:8ff., 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, true commitment results in obedience. 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 useless.

Third, James shows no direct contact with Paul’s thought. It is precisely in the passage of 2:14–26 that this fact is most evident. His definitions of each of the three critical terms, “faith,” “actions,” and “considered righteous,” as well as his use of the Abraham example (which itself was already embedded in Christian ethical teaching and not an exclusive possession of Paul), differ from Paul. If James is reacting to Paul at all, it is to a Paul so distorted and misunderstood that it can hardly be said to be Paul.

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 (3:13ff. and probably 1:17 as well) that grants 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 is not the typical Jewish identification—wisdom is Torah, or law—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 Christ is spoken of as wisdom in this 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 New Testa-

ment. Thus one has in James an extension of the identification of the Spirit with wisdom. This was previously known in Judaism and in some places included the expectation that wisdom would be God's gift to the elect in the new age. In James, wisdom is indeed 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 catalog being similar to the function of Spirit in Gal. 5 and the Dead Sea Scroll 1 QS 4) and enables one to withstand the test. In doing this it counteracts the evil desire that may be the "wisdom from below," and thus it functions similarly to the spirit in Romans 8 or the good impulse 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 and 11:9-13 prayer is a request for the Spirit. In James 4:1-3 the complaint is not that the people are not praying but that the prayer is wrongly directed; their focus is on the world and their worldly needs—they are not asking for the proper item, that is, divine wisdom. Their motives in asking are already controlled by the evil impulse. In the final context, 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 chapter 3) will be those full of that divine power. At the least it is the same type of prayer (prayer of faith, i.e., trust) that raises the sick and 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.

This hardly does more than simply sketch out the theology of James with the briefest of descriptions. Much more could be and has been written. But this brief sketch shows us an author concerned with a community undergoing suffering. He sees his community as the elect poor being tested by the devil. Outside the community, 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, 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 endure until the Lord who is at the door indeed arrives.

James and Jesus

It is clear to any casual reader of James that his writing is very close to the teaching of Jesus. In particular James is very close to the teaching of Jesus recorded in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) or the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6). This fact is underlined in that in all late Jewish and Christian literature, with one exception (1 Enoch), only James and Jesus pronounce woes on the rich.

The problem this raises is that James never directly cites a word of Jesus; he never says "Jesus said" or "the Lord said." Would not the Lord's brother refer to him directly? Would not a person so saturated with Jesus' ideas quote him at least once? The answer is that James does quote Jesus at least once, but even there he does not name his source (5:12). This leaves the reader with the probability that other verses in James (e.g., 3:18; 4:18) are sayings of Jesus that were not recorded in the Gospels.

Behind this phenomenon lies a feature of the early church. Before the Gospels were produced, there were probably some written records of Jesus' teaching (Luke refers to some sources in Luke 1:1-4), but the basic tradition was oral. Since Jesus was Lord and Head of the church, his teaching was its foundation and rule of life. Early Christians memorized this teaching much as Jews memorized that of their teachers. Further evidence of this lies in the Gospel of Matthew, where the teaching of Jesus is divided into five blocks (chapters 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 24-25), each of which has a single theme. These are designed for easy memory (since most Christians could neither read nor afford books), with numerical sequences and link-words being used to aid memory. Later, after the Gospels appeared, their teaching was compressed into handbooks like the *Didache* for teaching to new converts.

The result of this process was that most people in the church had learned much of the teaching of Jesus by heart. The letter of James is designed to take advantage of this fact. Where he

quotes Jesus directly without saying so, he realizes Christians will know who originally made the statement. It is even quite possible that most of the proverbs and short sayings in James came from Jesus. But more important are his allusions to Jesus, some thirty-five times in the epistle, or once every three verses (e.g., 2:5 and Matt. 5:3, 5; 11:5, 2:6 and Luke 18:3; 2:8 and Matt. 22:39-40). The early Christian reader would immediately recognize that James was reminding them of sayings of Jesus. They, along with the Old Testament, are James' authority. In the Old Testament he basically calls on stories; with Jesus he calls on teaching. The combination means that James' message could only be resisted by rejecting Jesus as well.

James, then, is a handbook of an early Christian community. It shows how the leader of the community drew on the foundation teaching of the community to address contemporary issues. Thus James serves as a model for the church as to how to use the teaching of Jesus. For him the teachings of Jesus are not merely interesting insights irrelevant to modern life or applicable only in the millennium. For him, Jesus is Lord and his teaching is the rule of life. Discipleship is not an optional extra but what it means to be a Christian. What remains is to apply the teaching to specific situations and to draw appropriate conclusions, that is, to preach using the teaching of Jesus as a text, expressed or unexpressed. James is a model of how this was done in the first decades of the church, an authoritative example for the modern church to heed and emulate.

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 370.

2. F. O. Francis, "The Form and Function of the Opening and Closing Paragraphs of James and 1 John," *ZNW* 61 (1970), pp. 110-26.

3. *Ibid.*

4. This section is an edited version of "Theological Perspectives on the Epistle of James," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23 (1980), pp. 93-104, reproduced here by permission of the editor.

5. M. Dibelius, *James*.

6. Form criticism, which more or less began with Martin Dibelius, focused on breaking the text into the units in which it was orally transmitted (e.g., proverbs, sayings, stories, sermons). Redaction criticism, which began in the 1950s, focuses on how the final editor of the work put the traditions he used together into a unified whole with a single theology. Both were initially developed for the Gospels, where the evangelists worked with sayings of Jesus, and only later were applied to the epistles.

7. F. O. Francis, "The Opening and Closing Paragraphs of James and 1 John."

8. Suffering in the New Testament is something which one endures because one is a Christian. In both Greek vocabulary use and attitudes toward suffering the New Testament differentiates it from sickness, which all people experience, Christian or not. James shows this difference clearly in 5:7-18. In 5:7-11 suffering is to be endured; in 5:14-18 sickness is to be prayed for and healed. See further P. H. Davids, "Suffering and Illness in the New Testament," in *Understanding Power Evangelism* (forthcoming; title tentative), eds. Douglas Pennoyer and C. Peter Wagner (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1989).

9. Genesis Rabba 55:2.

10. Q is a symbol used by New Testament scholars for those traditions Matthew and Luke have in common but that are not found in Mark. Some believe Q was a written document, others that it was an oral tradition.

§1 *Wisdom for Life's Tests (James 1:1-27)*

1:1 / The letter from James opens with a simple and direct greeting. The writer identifies himself simply as **James, a servant of God**. There was only one James so well known in the early church that he would need no other form of identification, and that was James the Just, brother of Jesus, leader of the church in Jerusalem. The readers are expected to recognize the name.

Yet for all his prominence and important position in the church (so important that the letter from Jude begins, "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James"), the title used is very modest. He is simply a **servant**. It is possible that he is thinking of himself as someone like Moses, chosen of God and taken into his service (Deut. 34:5; Josh. 1:2, Num. 12:7), but more likely it simply reflects the humility of the author. The most exalted statement he can make about himself is not his leadership of the church or his relationship to Jesus, but the fact that he, like every other Christian, is a slave of God and of Jesus. He calls Jesus **The Lord Jesus Christ**, for he is thinking of him as his heavenly, exalted Lord, who is about to return in glory to set things right in the world. It is this picture of Jesus that dominates the letter throughout.

James sends his greetings to **the twelve tribes scattered among the nations**. On the one hand, he sees the church as a united body or a distinct nation in the world. Believers are God's people as the Romans are Caesar's people and Egyptians are Pharaoh's. They are his chosen ones here on earth. Yet they are not a powerful group, for they are **scattered**. They are not a physically united group; they do not have a land they may call their own. Instead they are spread throughout the nations, belonging, yet never being one of the people among whom they live, living out their lives as foreigners in the land in which they were born.

Their dignity is not in strength or numbers but in the fact that they belong to God.

James begins the letter itself by introducing his three main topics—trials, wisdom, and wealth: (1) A proper perspective gives one joy despite a difficult situation, although in order to stand in such a situation one will need divine wisdom. (2) The person who prays for this wisdom needs to pray from a committed position. Without commitment one will receive nothing. (3) One of the chief trials of life and tests of commitment is wealth and how one uses it. There is no need to fear the rich—their end is at hand.

1:2 / James addresses his readers as **brothers**, which means that he considers them members of the church in good standing. There is a warmth in his address that continues throughout the letter despite his criticism of them. He is one with his readers and shares their weaknesses, as he will show more graphically in 3:1-2.

The readers are to **consider it pure joy** when they suffer **trials of many kinds**. The trials to which James refers are the testing and refining situations in life, hard situations in which faith is sorely tried, such as persecution, a difficult moral choice, or a tragic experience. James does not gloss over the reality of the suffering involved—the tears, the pain, the sweat. Instead he points to a transformed perspective of those trials. If one looks at the difficult situation not merely from the perspective of the immediate problem but also from the perspective of the end result God is producing, one can have a deep joy. This is not a surface happiness, but an anticipation of future reward in the end-times (eschatological joy). It is not only possible, but necessary (thus James commands it), for without it one may become so bogged down in present problems as to abandon the faith and give up the struggle altogether. Only with God's perspective, thus considering oneself already fortunate in anticipation of God's future reward, can the faith be maintained against the pressures of life.

1:3 / One reason it is possible to believe oneself to be fortunate in adversity is that the suffering produces a good result even now. With Joseph one might say, "You meant evil against

me; but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). The process of testing faith is like the tempering of steel: the heat, rather than destroying the steel, makes it stronger. The apocryphal book Sirach (2:5) uses another image: "For gold is proved in the fire, and men acceptable to God in the furnace of affliction." The process is difficult, but the result is good.

James assumes the good result when he writes, **the testing of your faith develops perseverance**. The test has to do with the fact that they have faith, that there is "pure gold" in them. They should not look fearfully at testing, but look through it, for the result will be **perseverance**. This ability is hardly a virtue to be winked at. First, it is a virtue that only suffering and trials will produce. Second, it yields to a stable character, a firm, settled disposition of faith: It is a heroic virtue. A person possessing such a virtue could be trusted to hold out, whatever the circumstances. Such people were surely in demand as leaders in the church. Third, it relates the believer to other believers who were noted in Jewish tradition for this virtue: Abraham, who was put through the fire ten times (Jubilees 17:18; 19:8), Joseph, who went from trial to trial before becoming ruler over Egypt (Testament of Joseph 2:7; 10:1), or Job, who endured patiently a series of almost unbelievable sufferings, only to be rewarded in the end (James 5:11; Testament of Job).

There is no question that this virtue is important, just as there is no question that the means of getting it are unpopular. But the Christian is called to face into the fact: However difficult and unpleasant the test may seem, God is perfecting the Christian's character through it.

1:4 / Perseverance, however, is not a passive, teeth-gritting virtue, but a development in which the character is firmed up and shaped around the central commitment to Christ. It does not happen overnight, for it is a process. The process needs to **finish its work**, or "have its complete effect," for it is the shaping of the whole person that is at issue. One must be careful not to short-circuit it: to pull the metal out of the fire too soon, to abort the developing child, to resist the schooling—to use three metaphors often used to describe the process. James does not see a

single end to the process, such as the development of love as a super-virtue (Rom. 13:8; 2 Pet. 1:6) or the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:6; Rom. 6:22)—although he would have certainly approved of such—for the goal is far more global. The person is formed, not just partly or simply morally, but totally, as a whole being, and is thus to be **mature and complete, not lacking anything**.

In speaking of the person as perfect James is not thinking of sinless perfection but is probably referring to a concept like that found in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The concept is that of a commitment to the command of God in all its depth and radicality, a commitment that calls anything less than total obedience sin and repents and seeks forgiveness, a commitment that, rather than reducing the word to the cultural “pagan” standard of the world, seeks to be shaped and formed by it. In other words, James is referring to mature Christian character: It is **mature** in that it is well developed; it is **complete** in that every virtue and insight is in place; it is **not lacking anything**, but mirrors Christ. This is what adversity should produce in the Christian if he or she will allow it. But it is not a passive process; the believer has to permit this to happen. There is an imperative involved (a better translation might be “allow perseverance to finish its work”). It is possible to short-circuit the process and thus not to develop properly and to live through the suffering in vain.

1:5 / James now turns to his second theme and what appears to be a totally new topic, that of wisdom and prayer. It is indeed a major theme of the letter, but it is not unrelated to what goes before. If person hears a call to be perfect, he or she would certainly cry, “Help! Who can do it?” (like Paul’s “Who is sufficient for these things?” 2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5-6). Divine help is necessary, and divine help in James comes in the form of wisdom (cf. 3:13 ff.). Christians should indeed lack nothing, but in order to do this they need divine wisdom.

James shares this recognition. **If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God**. He can do this with full confidence that God **gives generously to all**. Here James draws on the Jesus tradition (the yet unwritten sayings of Jesus that later formed the Gospels), for Jesus promised God would give his children what they ask

(Matt. 7:7-11; Mark 11:24; Luke 11:9-13; John 15:7). What better gift could they request than the wisdom needed to withstand the trials they face. God **gives** it, for God is a good giver; God gives **generously**, which means that he gives without mental reservations, that he gives simply, with a single heart. He is not looking for some hidden return from believers; he does not have mixed motives or grudging feelings. In fact, he gives not just generously but **without finding fault**. That is, he does not complain about the gift or its cost. He is not a "fool," who "has many eyes instead of one. He gives little and upbraids much, he opens his mouth like a herald; today he lends and tomorrow he asks back" (Sirach 20:14-15). No, God gives true gifts: no complaining, no criticizing (What? You need help *again?*), no mixed motives, no reluctance. Free, generous, even spendthrift giving characterizes the Christian's God.

And what a gift he gives! He gives wisdom, which in this letter is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit, a gift that James' readers, as former Jews, would recognize (as the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls did) as one of the gifts of the age to come. Wisdom comes to the Christian through Christ (1 Cor. 1:24; 2:4-6). This surely is what is needed to withstand trials and come to perfection.

1:6 / Not everyone, however, receives that wisdom requested. "Where is that spiritual power?" one might ask. "If God is so generous, where is the wisdom I need to discern the situation, to withstand the test, and to come to perfection?" Such questions were certainly asked, for James provides an answer: **But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt.**

First, **he must believe**, that is, one must ask in the context of faith. Faith here is not simply intellectual knowledge (as it will be in 2:19). James has no thought that one simply has to give intellectual assent to a doctrine to receive the blessing (e.g., God will give what Christians ask; therefore he will give them wisdom if they ask for it). James does not appear to be calling for research into the truth of a matter (e.g., that the promise really is one given by Jesus or that out of a hundred people who prayed all received their request, while only fifty of a similar group who did not pray had a satisfactory outcome), but for commitment. Therefore he is also not speaking of faith as an emotional feeling

(i.e., if only people could keep feeling that God is really giving wisdom to them will they receive it). Certainly, this is how James has been interpreted by later commentators both in modern popular religion and in ancient times. But James is not trying to encourage believers to stuff their doubts deep within and to drum up an emotional *feeling* of certainty, but to commit themselves. Faith for James is a single-minded commitment to God that trusts in God because God is God. Thus faith remains resting in God despite doubt and holds on through testing. Faith is the "but if not" of Daniel's friends (Dan. 3:18); the "though he slay me yet will I trust him" of Job (Job 13:15). It is a confident trust in God or a resting in God despite the outward circumstances.

Because of this fact, the opposite of faith (**not doubt**) is doubt. The person who doubts is not doubting that God will do something *specific*, but is doubting in general. "Does God really act *today*?" or more deeply expressed, "Can I trust God to do the best for me or must I look out for myself?" Here James may be applying a tradition from Jesus like that in Matthew 21:21: "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, . . . you can do what was done to this fig tree."

The doubter is **like a wave of the sea**. The picture is graphic. The doubter is "one who lives in inner conflict between trust and distrust of God." (F. Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief* [Freiburg: Herder, 1967], p. 70.) In a service of worship this person is caught up in the music, the words of praise, or the exhortation of the sermon and trusts God completely. Outside, the same person faces the winds of adversity and, instead of trusting *despite feelings*, gives in and believes that only his or her own resources and cleverness can help. Like wind-tossed water, an unstable Christian sways back and forth.

1:7-8 / That man, says James (to clearly distinguish this individual from other people with a stable faith), **should not think he will receive anything from the Lord**. Obviously James cannot be sure that such a person, or even a wicked blasphemer, for that matter, will receive nothing from God. God is gracious and kind, often giving more than he has promised and always giving far more than people deserve. Sun and rain come to the good and the evil alike. But such a person wavering between God and the

world ought not to *expect* to receive something from God. Such a person has no right to expect **anything**, much less wisdom, for he or she is not following the proper principles. The promises of the gospel all assume a commitment of the individual to, and trust in, God (e.g., the “in my name” formula, John 14:14). Without this trust there is a more basic issue to be settled than that of the item asked for: The more basic issue is that of trust. Until one has dealt with this issue, one is in no position to begin praying.

This person, claims James, **is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does**. The pre-Christian Jew Sirach had already said, “My son, disobey not the fear of the Lord, and approach it not with a double heart” (1:28), and, “Woe unto the fearful hearts and faint hands, and unto the sinner that goes two ways . . . woe unto you who have lost your endurance” (2:12-14). James has the same concern for this person of a double mind. If a person’s mind is split and he or she really does not know whom to trust, one can hardly have confidence in such a person. Such a one is not just undecided but, in fact, **unstable**. Now, indeed, he or she may “trust” in God and be part of the church, but with a heart filled with doubt, this person is emotionally keeping options open and other lines of support clear. There is a basic instability within that will eventually become evident in behavior. You cannot trust such a person, for he or she is like Aesop’s crow, trying to walk down two paths at once. The implied call is for commitment. “Put all your eggs in one basket,” and make that basket God. Without commitment, prayer is in vain. James 4:1-10 will make this crystal clear.

Additional Notes §1

1:1 / **The twelve tribes** of Israel were God's chosen people in the Old Testament. James looks on the church as the continuation of that people of God. The church includes the remnant of the old Israel and takes into itself the converts from the Gentiles. It is therefore "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), the people of God in the new age of the Spirit (cf. Rom 4:13-25; Gal. 5:21-31).

Scattered among the nations is a technical term for the dispersion or Diaspora. After the exile of Jews from Palestine in 586 B.C., most did not return. Instead they spread out through the cities of Asia and Europe, westward to Rome and Spain, south to Egypt, and east to Babylon and Persia. To the Jews living in Palestine, these people were Diaspora, scattered people, exiles from the land to which they belonged. James uses this term for Christians, for they are also "exiles" in the land in which they live. In much the same way, Peter refers to Christians as sojourners or pilgrims (1 Pet. 1:1, 17; 2:11).

1:2 / The phrase **consider it pure joy** has as its central word the Greek word "joy," *charan*, which forms a wordplay with the *chairein*, "greetings" of v. 1. James uses such wordplay links to tie his letter together despite his tendency to juxtapose topics.

The structure of vv. 2-4 is that of a chain saying, which is also found in Rom. 5:3-5 and 1 Pet. 1:6-7. In 1 Peter, in particular, some identical phrases are used. The saying appears to have been widely and loosely used within the early church, which means that each author felt free to adapt it to make his own point. The basis of the structure is probably some statement of Jesus similar to that in Matt. 5:11-12, "Happy are you when men insult you. Rejoice and be glad, because a great reward is kept for you in heaven." For further reading see D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 113, 117-19.

The idea of **trials** is not a new idea to the readers of this letter, for it is deeply rooted in Judaism. The earliest reference is in Gen. 22:1, an incident referred to in James 2:21, where God tests Abraham. God is also said to test the Israelites in the wilderness, but unlike Abraham they fail the test (Num. 14:20-24). As one moves into the intertestamental period, one finds the famous reference in Sirach 2:1-6:

My son, when thou comest to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation. Set thy heart aright and endure firmly, and be not fearful in time of calamity. . . . Accept whatsoever is brought upon thee, and be patient in disease and poverty. For gold is proved in the fire, and men acceptable to God in the furnace of affliction.

(Cf. Jubilees 8:25, or the Dead Sea Scrolls 1 QS 10, 17, 1 QH 5:15-17; 1 QM 16:15-17:3). Thus the early church had a long tradition upon which to draw that expected faith to be tested. See H. Seesemann "Peira," *TDNT*, vol. 6, pp. 23-26, for further data.

1:3 / The phrase **the testing of your faith** is a single word in Greek, *dokimion*. It properly refers to the means of testing in this passage, although in 1 Pet. 1:7 it refers to the result of the test, i.e., genuineness. The means, however unpleasant they may be, produce a good result. They are not simply negative, destroying ungentle faith, but positive, if viewed in the right light.

The term **perseverance**, Greek *hypomonē*, is virtually a technical term in the New Testament. Paul uses the term sixteen times (2 Cor. 6:4; 12:12; 1 Thess. 1:3), and Revelation finds it most important (1:9; 2:2; 13:10; 14:12). It is obvious, from this fact and the fact that its use for Abraham, Job, etc., is found in intertestamental works, that the virtue is important in a community suffering persecution. The Jews after the exile, and particularly after the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes (167-164 B.C.) were concerned about holding fast to the faith despite opposition, disadvantage, or even persecution. They looked to the Old Testament to supply examples, which they exegeted accordingly. Likewise the church found itself vulnerable as a despised and persecuted minority within Judaism and, later, the Roman Empire. Fly-by-night or flash-in-the-pan Christianity would not do. It is not those who apostasize and fall away but "he who endures to the end" who will be saved (Mark 13:13; Matt. 10:22; 24:13). Thus endurance is one of the cardinal virtues of the Christian life, not a side issue. To endure means to copy Christ in his endurance and to assure oneself of future blessedness.

1:4 / The term **must finish its work** is literally "have its perfect [or complete] work." It is this phraseology that suggested to many commentators that a specific virtue is in mind. Instead of a single virtue, however, "You are that perfect work" (M. Dibelius, *James*, p. 74).

The idea of perfection is not original in James. Noah is the archetypal perfect person: "Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generation" (Gen. 6:9). He kept God's law, or he was "of stable integrity, not contaminated by divergent motives or conflicts between thoughts and deeds" (P. J. DuPlessis, *Telios: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament*, pp. 94-99). Thus the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls could both think of themselves as perfect because of their inward and outward dedication to God (1 QS 2:1-2; 14:7; 1 QH 1:36) and still long for a higher perfection (1 QS 4:20-22). For Paul, Christians are also already the perfect or mature (1 Cor. 2:6), but becoming perfect or mature people is still a process going on with its goal in the future (Eph. 4:13; cf. Col. 4:12; Phil. 3:15). For Matthew, as in the Dead Sea Scrolls, perfection consists in copying God (*imitatio dei*, Matt. 5:48), but in both Matthew and Paul this was re-interpreted in terms of a more available example, God-in-Flesh, Jesus. Thus it becomes copying Christ (*imitatio Christi*, Matt. 19:21; cf. Phil.

2:5ff.). Perfection, then, is a tension. It is both possible and impossible, both present and future. See further, W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 212–13; and R. Schippers, “Goal,” *NIDNTT*, vol. 2, pp. 59–66. The important fact to consider is the eschatological nature of perfection, its “now” and “not yet” tension, as well as the fact that in its realizable form it is focused on copying God and Christ and thus needs divine revelation and human obedience.

1:5 / The English wordplay lacking (v. 4)–lacks (v. 5) is also present in Greek. This catchword linking of ideas is a favorite method by which James joins them into a unity.

The idea of **wisdom** in James is not simply insight or God’s law (as in Sirach 4:17; Wisdom 7:15; 8:21) but a gift of the coming new age that can now be found in those who belong to that age (as in 2 Baruch 44:14; 2 Esdras 8:52; 1 Enoch 5:8; 98:1–9; 100:6). As these Jewish parallels (and others in the Dead Sea Scrolls: 1 QS 11; CD 2; 6:3; 11 Q Psa 154) show, Jewish readers would recognize a tension. Wisdom will only be fully possessed in the coming age, but the righteous remnant (“the wise” of Dan. 11–12) already have a foretaste of it in this age. It is this that leads people to perfection, a relationship between wisdom and perfection that Paul also recognized (1 Cor. 2:4–6). See J. A. Kirk, “The Meaning of Wisdom in James.”

God is a good giver (Prov. 3:23; cf. Didache 4:7; *Hermas Mandate* 9), but he is also a generous giver (*Hermas Mandate* 2). The term for generosity, *haplos*, appears in the New Testament only here. It is related to the term *haplotēs*, which means sincerity. Epictetus shows the meaning of *haplos* when he writes, “Stop letting yourself be drawn this way and that . . . but be either this or that *simply* and with all your mind” (*Discourses* II, 2, 13). The same sense of simplicity and sincerity is to be in human giving according to Jesus, for in a context on giving he says, “If your eyes are clear [*haplotēs*], your whole body will be full of light” (Matt. 6:22), which is an idiom for sincere giving, as bad eyes were for stinginess. On this term see further B. Gärtner, “Simplicity,” *NIDNTT*, vol. 3, pp. 571–72.

1:6 / “Faith” has far more than one meaning in James. Here and in 1:3, 2:5, and 5:15, it means commitment, trust; in 2:14–26 it means intellectual assent; and in 2:1 it means the body of truth about Jesus that is believed. This first use is most like Paul; the others differ from Paul’s. See O. Michel, “Faith,” *NIDNTT*, vol. 1, pp. 587–606.

To **doubt** shows that the person is unlike God. God gives sincerely, with an undivided mind. The doubter prays, but without an undivided mind. He is not at all certain God will answer. The figure of the swaying **wave** was popular in Jewish and Greek literature, e.g., Sirach 33:1–3:

No evil befalls the man who fears the Lord, but in trial he will deliver him again and again. A wise man will not hate the law, but he who is hypocritical about it is like a boat in a storm. A man of understanding will trust in the law.

1:7-8 / The chief term in these verses is *dipsychos*, translated as **double-minded**. The term itself is found first in James and may have been coined by the author. The idea, however, has deep Jewish roots. A person is to seek God with his or her whole heart (Deut. 6:5; 10:10), and thus to doubt or have a **double** heart is in itself evil, a mark of hypocrisy (Ps. 12:1-2; 1 Chron. 12:33). Jewish tradition was constantly calling people to a clear choice: It cannot be God *and* Baal or God *and* Egypt; it must be either one or the other. The sharp contrast continues in Sirach (e.g., 33:7-15) and later literature. Testament of Levi 13:1 calls, "Fear the Lord your God with your whole heart, and walk in simplicity according to all his Law." One notices how simplicity (*haplotēs* from James 1:5) is important. Testament of Benjamin 6:5 adds, "The good mind hath not two tongues, of blessing and of cursing . . . of hypocrisy and of truth . . . ; but it hath one disposition, uncorrupt and pure, concerning all men." The people at Qumran were likewise concerned lest someone who had outwardly (and perhaps meaning it at the time) pledged to follow the way of God would turn back and follow his or her evil nature to the detriment of the community:

No man shall walk in the stubbornness of his heart so that he strays after his heart and eyes and evil inclination, but he shall circumcise in the Community the foreskin of evil inclination and of stiffness of neck that they may lay a foundation of truth for Israel, for the community of the everlasting Council (1 QS 5:4-5).

People who did turn back were surely condemned:

As for them, they dissemble,
they plan devilish schemes.
They seek Thee with a double heart
and are not confirmed in Thy truth.
A root bearing poisoned and bitter fruit
is in their designs;
they walk in stubbornness of heart
and seek Thee among idols,
and they set before them
the stumbling-block of their sin.
(1 QH 4:13-14)

Paul has a similar concern, although expressed in less colorful language, in Romans 6-8. People might commit to Christ but then "walk after the flesh." Paul reacts to the idea with horror. By no means should such instability be allowed. Single-hearted devotion to God is the order of the day.

James' concern with a double heart and instability was later picked up by Hermas (*Mandate 9* for *dipsychos* and *Mandate 2.3* and *5.2.7* for *instability*, which Hermas considers demonic in origin). But the idea is weakened there. James uses it with the full force of tradition. Hermas has concern simply about effective prayer.