

Faith and Action: Exploring the Letter of St James

Cork Scripture Group

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Context

- Letter is one the Catholic Epistles (James; 1&2 Peter, 1,2,3 John; Jude) and is included in Apocrypha in Protestant bibles.
- Wisdom-prophecy genre: circle letter consisting of 5 chapters.
- Location: Greek language in the text points to eastern part of the Roman Empire: Syria, Asia Minor, or Egypt or perhaps Greece.

Who was James?

- Some scholars affirm that James, “brother of the Lord” (Gal 1:19) would have written the letter. Others argue that it was James who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13;21:18).
- The author originally Jewish/Christian with great knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures who also uses many of the sayings of Jesus and speaks about the practices of the early church (5:13-16).
- He could have been based in either Syria, Egypt, or Rome.
- What matters is not the person but his message for us today!

Who was he writing to?

- The “twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1) advising them how to survive a hostile Greco-Roman society and how to behave when confronted with values and practices differed from the Reign of God.
- Diaspora refers to Jews who lived outside of Palestine, in Asia Minor and other lands.
- Only James and 1 Peter use the term Dispersion/Diaspora.
- They may have been people who knew Paul: whether in churches founded by Paul or elsewhere.
- The author refers to men and women as his brothers and sisters (1:2; 2:1; 2:5; 2:14, 3:1; 5:12) envisaging a diverse community united in faith and support.
- The letter also attests to the diverse ways in which the early Christianity settled on some of its theological emphases as well as the Christian way of life.

Contested Letter

- Even though this letter was written at the beginning of 1C or 2C it did not form part of the canon until the end of the 4C.
- Martin Luther considered the Letter of James of lesser doctrinal value than the Gospels or Paul’s writings and moved it along with Hebrews, Jude and Revelation to the end of his German translation of the New Testament.
- There were questions about its authorship.
- Little mention of Jesus, Christology: despite using sayings of Jesus: Sermon on the Mount...

- James asserts faith without works is dead and a person is justified by works and not only by faith (2:24).
- Yet the letter survived!

Paul's Letter v the Letter of James

- Is having faith alone more valued than the practice of faith?
- Paul's letters are seen as 'theological' and highly regarded while the Letter of James focuses on putting into practice the Christian way of life which would appear to be less esteemed.
- The letter writing style is very different to letters we read today.
- At a first reading the themes appear to be unconnected.
- Is this a subversive letter?

Power of Seduction

- James is concerned about the way in which believers live away from their homeland.
- Greco-Roman Society was hostile to immigrants but it was also seductive.
- Greco-Roman values would appear to be acceptable to immigrants (2:2-4).
- 2:1-9 reveals that there was an attitude beginning to creep into the community of favouring the wealthy or prestigious people to the detriment of the poor.
- For James this attitude goes against the values of the Reign of God as taught by Jesus.

Faith without Works is Dead

- James invites the immigrant community to reframe their present experiences.
- As a follower of the prophetic-wisdom tradition, James rejects all forms of social discrimination.
- Faith without works is dead: Example of Abraham and Rahab.
- James is dedicated to an exhortation of severe judgement against the accommodation of some in the community to Greco-Roman Values.

Judgement in James 4:1-10

- James criticizes the immigrant community who are thinking egoistically for their own advantage and not following Jesus (4:1-3).
- Temptation of wealth separates people from their commitment to the needy.
- God, who is the abundant giver does not share those values.

Friends with God

- Call to purification: abandon corruption, murder, dirty business deals, "cleanse your hands" 4:8.
- Rid yourself of greed, arguments, jealousy, rivalry envy, etc.
- If they want to be friends with God- they cannot associate with 'worldly values'.
- Submit to God with humility (4:8-10).
- Friend of God or friend of the world? No in-between.
- James 4:4 Adulterers: those who are friends of the world are unfaithful to God.

Do the Right Thing

- For James 'worldly values' represent a society where greed, social discrimination cause harm to our planet and humanity.
- 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is to care...and to keep oneself unstained by the world.'(1:27).
- For James 'anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin' (4:17).

Double Mindedness

- One of the chief concerns addressed in the Letter of James is the issues of "double-mindedness" (1:5, 2:4, 4:8).
- Double-mindedness is an act of wavering in one's faith commitment and wavering in one's tangible support for the oppressed.
- The only way to avoid this according to James is to submit to God through spiritual discipline and prayer (4:7-8).
- Such a life is marked by a sense of integrity or wholeness (in an ethical sense) that strives for consistency between believing and speaking on the one hand and action on the other.
- Communal context: For James understanding of faith in the context of a community of individuals striving to become "mature and complete" lacking nothing (1:4).

God's Preference for the Poor

- Poor and the rich, the oppressed and the oppressors.
- Both Christians and non-Christians among the oppressed and among the oppressors.
- There is a clear relationship among poverty, oppression, exploitation and violence in this letter.
- Chapter 5: 4: Listen: to injustices being committed e.g. oppressors holding back salaries. See Lev 19:13...you must not keep back the labourer's wages.
- Deut: 24:14 Jer 22:13 James is rereading the tradition in the light of his own context.

The Oppressed

- Widows and orphans (1:27).
- No one to defend them, nor can they defend themselves.
- People in power take advantage: Mark 12:40.
- Community to whom the letter is addressed: poor who had nothing in the community (2:15) and poor who had a job but had not been paid.
- Double oppression of women: 2:15.

The Characteristics of the Rich in James

- Unlike the poor, they dress elegantly 2:2.
- The rich are those who oppress the poor and drag them before the courts 2:6.
- They are not in touch with those who have nothing and are anxious to acquire more (4:13).
- They accumulate wealth (5:3): motivation of oppression.
- Jesus was against hoarding as this was always done at the expense of oppressed. (withholding salaries or paying just salary).
- They live luxuriously, devoted to their pleasures (5:5).

Withholding Salaries

- Labourers depend on their salaries/ day labourers.
- Slaves were at least given food.
- For many salaries were very low and the work was exploitive.
- Exploitive working conditions resulted in peasants dying.
- James accuses the rich of condemning and killing the just (5:6).

Challenge

- James is not setting up a dichotomy between rich and poor in the texts; rather, he is appealing to all in his global community (diaspora) to assume responsible relationships.
- Seek ways to redistribute the imbalance of wealth.
- To acknowledge fraudulent activities.
- To pay more equitable wages.
- To welcome the poor.
- To renounce arrogance, greed and gluttony.
- The imperative is to **listen** (2:5).

Wholeness and Hope

- Avoid favouritism, class distinctions and any other form of partiality (2:1 -1-3).
- James provides a paradigm for community accountability.
- All members are free of judgement and empowered to strive for wholeness and hope (2:13).

Second Session

Endurance and Patience in the Letter of James

- Two different Greek terms are used to describe patience in James with different connotations.
- *Ypomōnē* /endurance (1:2-4) and verbal form *ypomoneō* understands patience as an attitude of enduring, resisting, similar to Job...
- Job did not succumb...the more he suffered, the more he was strengthened, gained confidence etc.
- The other term *markrothumia* (5:7:9) and *makrothymē* synonym for perseverance or persistence: to be alert like the farmer who plants, waits and reaps the fruit of his/her labour
- Both terms are used in 5:10-11

Militant Patience

- Be careful not to become lethargic, apathetic, or passive.
- Accept the wisdom that they cannot change everything, and with confidence in God, they can endure suffering (1:5-6).
- To 'continue to sow' and 'cultivate the seedlings.'
- 'Be patient, until the coming of the Lord' (5:7), 'Be patient, strengthen your heart, for the coming of the Lord' (5:8), 'See, the Judge is standing at the doors' (5:9).
- What gives hope and strength is Lord is coming. Their suffering will come to an end...
- James (5:10-11) offers the example of the suffering of the prophets and of Job.

- They remained steadfast and did not turn away from God, and God turned to them, full of compassion and mercy.

Example of Job

- Job: he did not have patience in the beginning when he was arguing with his friends and with God about his unjust suffering.
- We can be like Job and question God when difficulties arise or when we see innocent people suffering, or governments who do not act justly.
- Militant patience does not mean to accept all injustice apathetically or to give up.
- It is a patience that awaits the right moment, in order once again to spring into action.
- Christians should live with the attitude of militant patience: like the one who tills the land like the landowner who planted the vineyard in Matt 21:33-41 they are to wait for the produce of the earth and for rain.

Hope for Justice

- They keep sowing, free of doubt, not caught up in mutual complaining.
- James is telling his audience that they must give an account of their deeds before God.
- In the light of their present reality, in which many attempts at just action fail and in which they are not consistently supported by others, the perspective of judgment is meant to encourage them.
- To hope for justice and to enlist oneself in this cause is not based on success of those engaged in the struggle but in the will of God.
- Therefore, people should not give up but keep on striving, like the farmers who keep on tilling the fields every year.
- Leave the rest in God's hands.

Prayer an Expression for Unflagging Endurance

- James describes prayer as basic to the life of Jewish-Christian communities
- Prayer signifies the cry of the defrauded (5:4), signifies people drawing nearer to God after they have cleansed their hands and purified their hearts (4:7-10).
- James criticised those who are selfish and have insufficient trust in God.
- James calls on all in the congregation to confess their sins and to pray for one another (5:16).
- He calls for confidence in the effectiveness of prayer, which is greater than we can imagine, and can even work miracles (5:16-18).
- In prayer people come near to God, God becomes the people friend.

Lessons to learn from James

- James emphasises that faith and works are inseparable.
- James illustrates that theological and ethical insights and truisms do not always endure: those on the margins were not always supported by all the members of the Christian community.
- It is a theme debated in the early church and in our communities today.

- Be in solidarity with those in need: faith that discriminates against the poor or does not help those who are in need does not save (2:1, 2:14-16). Do not have favourites!
- Resist the trappings of 'Empire'.
- Do not be a person of two minds. Be like God who is always generous, merciful and compassionate.
- How do we reflect on the relationship between faith and justice in our own lives and as a faith community?
- Be patient but not passive: examples of Job, the prophets. Persevere: God is love and always compassionate.
- Pray constantly.

Call to Community

- In our Western world there is so much emphasis on individualism, rather than community.
- James's letter reminds us that God calls us into relationship not only as individuals but as members of the Christian community.
- How does the Christian believer activate their faith together in response to the needs of the world?
- James's Letter reminds us that we cannot reduce our faith to a purely individualistic and private religion.

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