

## PENRALLT BAPTIST CHURCH, BANGOR.

### The Epistle of James: Notes for Theology Students

Everyone begins with Luther's famous denouncement of the Epistle of James as being an "epistle of straw" but that is a pity. It reflects less on the epistle than on Luther's early and very polarised teaching on faith. Even in Wittenburg, a powerful ally raised his voice to caution Luther against teaching a parody of faith which was little more than intellectual assent. Carlstadt was disturbed by his rejection of the Epistle and warned "Beware that you do not take a paper and loveless faith for the greatest work."<sup>i</sup> For all I know James might have said something similar to Paul, but to base our study on this aspect of the book is too limiting. There were different streams of thought on the subject in the Early Church as there are today, and James writes out of one them. As a conservative theologian it took me a long time to admit that such streams of thought existed in the Early Church at all, but I have come to acknowledge their existence and have found my own study of the New Testament to be enriched accordingly. There were no denominations as such, but to a hypothetical observer travelling round the Roman Empire the differences in practise and theological emphasis of the different churches would have been very striking. The lack of formal administration would have ruled out the existence of a denomination, but different churches were led by powerful leaders who all had their particular emphases. There is no such thing as a "pure, simple Early Church" and I will be taking the line that this book represents the teaching of one specific group within the Early Church. A Colossian church leader, for example, would have presented a very different outlook on life. It is that assembly of stained glass which makes Christianity so varied, bright and stimulating.

For me the question of authorship defines my approach to this book: "James who?" If the book told us who James was, life might be simpler. The Early Church attributed it to James, the brother of Jesus, although Eusebius acknowledges: "Admittedly its authenticity is doubted, since few early writers refer to it, any more than to 'Jude's', which is also one of the seven [epistles] called general. But the fact remains that these two, like the others, have been regularly used in very many churches."<sup>ii</sup> So we have the profile of a book which did not achieve widespread distribution but was known and accepted by the bulk of the early churches. And they attributed it to James the brother of Jesus, the leader of the Jerusalem church who, according to Josephus, was martyred in 62 A.D. on the command of Ananus the high priest ( grandson of the Biblical high priest of the same name) who was stripped of his office by King Agrippa as a punishment for this unauthorised execution.<sup>iii</sup> The Epistle fits with Eusebius' description of James (derived from a second century work by Hegesippus, admittedly a somewhat dubious source) as an austere man, respected by the local Jewish community, and also the New Testament view of him as a respected and firm leader of the Jerusalem church. To be honest, apart from James the Righteous, brother of Jesus, no other "James" stands out as an alternative. Cases can be made, of course, and theologians earn their living by disagreeing with each other, but I can see no reason for abandoning the traditional view, while flagging up the doubt expressed by Eusebius.

Once the authorship has been accepted, then we find ourselves negotiating the narrow valley of a Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem, walking carefully so as to avoid persecution ( Josephus' account is elegant testimony to their success in that direction: James' execution was deemed illegal). The Hellenistic elements had long left the city in the wake of Stephen's martyrdom, so the church was conservative, strongly attached to law-observance and keen to demonstrate a life style which went beyond law-observance to a kingdom-affirming morality. The concern with "wisdom" fits well that milieu and also with "The Two Ways" which forms part of *The Didache*, which I take to be a first century Syrian document. This kind of practical (pastoral) theology was clearly popular in that part of the world.

The number of books I have used is fairly limited, but I have particularly enjoyed the work by David Hutchinson Edgar, *Has God Not Chosen the Poor? The Social Setting of the Epistle of James*, which has a very extensive and useful Bibliography. His summary of the self-depiction of the author of the Epistle of James concludes that:

1. The author places himself under the supreme authority of Jesus and therefore implies the divine authorisation of what he writes.
2. He is a teacher who expounds the will of God to his hearers.
3. He draws upon Old Testament Scripture while also including strong and frequent resonances to the teachings of Jesus.
4. He is close to the traditions of these Jesus traditions.<sup>iv</sup>

Andrew Chester has a nice short summary of James' theology of eschatology, faith, ethics, suffering, rich and poor, love and mercy, law, wisdom, sin and human nature, ministry, God, and Christ. He concludes that James' theology is "limited in many respects" but "rooted in the concrete, specific issues of how people live in relation to each other in everyday life."<sup>v</sup> And this, I think, defines our task in respect to this book. We must firstly delve into the issues as confronted by James, understanding what he meant by trials, who he understood to be "rich" or "poor", and what he expects our relationships to be with each other and with those outside the church. In other words, this is a book which presents particular problems of pastoral theology rather than Christian Doctrine. I know that many preachers major on the faith x works debate but I cannot see that as our main task.

The commentaries I have most used are:

Peter H. Davids, *James: New International Biblical Commentary* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, and Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995)

Alec Motyer, *The Message of James: The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester: IVP, 1985)

Derek J. Tidball, *Wisdom from Heaven: The Message of the Letter of James for Today* (Christian Focus Publications, 2003)

David Field, *Discovering James: Crossway Bible Guides* (Crossway Books, 1998).

Finally, why study the Epistle of James? Because I feel that the greatest challenge facing the church today is in the area of Pastoral Theology. The great debates of the past, Gnosticism, Arianism, faith x works, Calvinism x Arminianism, Liberal x Fundamentalism are in the past. They are worth studying of course, but they are not leaping out of the shadows to mug us. Today it is our exclusivism which is being challenged. How do we relate to people of different gender orientations, to couples living together, to ethnic diversity, to the class divides? We are in danger of splitting, not into denominational divides, but class, gender and ethnic divides. Believe me, I am not the only pastor struggling with these issues, and when I meet with other groups of ministers the plea is always raised for a new pastoral theology which allows us to work with people within the Christian fellowship as we talk through life-styles and ethics, rather than effectively barring them at the door. We need "Wisdom from Heaven". Join me in working through the issues and feel free to e-mail with comments, complaints or queries whenever you like: [minister@penrallt.org.uk](mailto:minister@penrallt.org.uk)

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Bangor, January 2004

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<sup>i</sup>George H. Williams *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), p. 40.

<sup>ii</sup>Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 2.23.24-25

<sup>iii</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* XX.ix.1

<sup>iv</sup>David Hutchinson Edgar, *Has God Not Chosen the Poor? The Social Setting of the Epistle of James* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 72-3.

<sup>v</sup>Andrew Chester & Ralph P. Martin, *The Theology of the Letters of James, Peter and Jude* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.44-5.