

# Finding a Central Thread in James

BY DAVID M. MOFFITT

The three studies of James reviewed here bring together in refreshing ways what many scholars hold asunder—substantive historical analysis, exegetical work, and constructive theological engagement. This holistic approach helps us to become doers of the word, not only better hearers of it.

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**T**he letter of James is often neglected in modern biblical and theological scholarship. Many scholars think this brief and unassuming epistle, with its assortment of general moral directives and only two passing references to Jesus, pales in comparison to the canonical contributions of such luminaries as Paul and John. Moreover, James's obviously Jewish perspectives on faith, works, and justification leave these scholars, particularly in the Protestant world, a bit cold. James appears to offer little of historical or distinctive Christological value.

James may never command the kind of attention that the Johannine and Pauline literature do, but renewed interest in the Jewish roots of early Christianity and the diversity of opinion among early Christians has encouraged fresh reflection on this epistle, along with other outlying canonical and non-canonical texts. The three studies reviewed here—Patrick J. Hartin's *A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999, 204 pp., \$23.95), Luke Timothy Johnson's *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004, 300 pp., \$32.00), and Richard Bauckham's *James, New Testament Readings* (London: Routledge, 1999, 256 pp., \$44.95)—represent this recent trend. While each book has distinctive emphases, they share two sig-

nificant themes: contra the influential view of Martin Dibelius (1883-1947), James is not a random, unconnected collection of moral teachings; and James should be freed from being read primarily in terms of its apparent contradiction of Paul.



Patrick Hartin has four goals in *A Spirituality of Perfection*: to demonstrate that James has a unifying theme of perfection, which Hartin argues can best be understood as integrity; to discern the spiritual impulses of the letter and thus understand James's spirituality; to explain how James's ethical exhortation relates to the eschatological themes in the epistle; and to explore some ways in which James's spirituality of perfection can inform the active faith of contemporary Christians (pp. 9-11).

Hartin develops his case by examining the uses of "perfection" language (*teleios* in Greek) in ancient literature, including in biblical texts. In the Old Testament he claims to find "three essential aspects...[of] the biblical notion of perfection that [the word *teleios*] endeavors to capture" (p. 26). These are first, "The idea of wholeness, or completeness, whereby a being remains true to its original constitution"; second "The giving of oneself to God wholeheartedly and unconditionally, which includes a relationship between God and God's people"; and third, "The wholehearted dedication to the Lord that is demonstrated above all in obedience to God's will" (p. 26). Throughout the book Hartin treats these three elements as the "essence of [perfection's] meaning" (p. 36, cf. pp. 58-60, 89-92).

The idea that the word "perfection" has an essential, biblical meaning hobbles Hartin's argument. From a historical-linguistic point of view to speak of "the biblical notion" of a word is already questionable, since the collection of texts in the Septuagint represents an artificial and limited snapshot of the Greek language. More to the point, however, the conclusion that these three characteristics of the term "perfection" represent the *essence* of the term's meaning is problematic. Rather, Hartin has created a composite picture of various meanings of "perfection" culled from distinct and different contexts.

In spite of the problems inherent in Hartin's initial word study, he helpfully reminds readers to allow space for James to be James and not be too quick to force James into conversation with Paul. Further, Hartin rightly highlights the importance of the eschatological frame in which James's exhortations stand. He also suggests some ways that James can inform theological dialogue today.

The larger thesis of the book — that perfect faith in James is about integrity between belief/speech and action, and that this theme unifies the letter — is largely persuasive. What Dibelius took to be a disparate collection of exhortations is, as Hartin claims, more likely to be a unified ethical discourse aimed at encouraging a holistic understanding of faith. Integrity or coherence between belief and action is the mark of perfection in James.



Luke Timothy Johnson's *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God*, a collection of previously published articles, is a valuable resource for students of James. While some of these essays are quite technical and will be easier to follow for those who have a good working knowledge of Greek, the larger points of the articles are clear and accessible. In a few of these studies Johnson pursues the possibility and potential significance of the traditional position that James the brother of Jesus authored the text. He offers careful and insightful discussions on the relationships between James and Paul, and their epistles. Other essays trace how the letter of James appropriates the Old Testament and how it was received in early Christianity. The importance of the letter's Hellenistic context for understanding various elements of its rhetoric and content forms one of the overarching themes and points of method to which Johnson returns throughout the collection.

Let me highlight three points that Johnson makes in the final essay, "The Importance of James for Theology," which is a fruitful discussion of the ethical and theological contributions James can make to contemporary Christianity. The first is that "James grounds moral behavior in God rather than in the distinctive Christian set of experiences and convictions rooted in Jesus Christ." James's marked emphasis on theology proper and its corresponding "lack of explicit Christology," Johnson avers, are assets for Christian engagement in a pluralistic world. The paucity of explicit reflection about Jesus makes the document "a precious resource for ecumenical conversation, not alone between Christians and Jews, but also among all those belonging to monotheistic faiths, and perhaps even all those who interpret reality religiously" (p. 248).<sup>1</sup>

I am not persuaded that this claim does justice either to James or to an understanding of theology proper. Johnson is surely correct to note that the ethical exhortation in James, perhaps especially James's emphasis on caring for the poor, provides points of contact with the ethical traditions of other religions. Johnson's emphasis on the language of humanity as the "image of God" (not of Christ) in James 3:9 is also valuable (p. 249). What troubles me are the grounds from which he tries to develop such points. What can theology proper mean for a Christian if it is not fundamentally Trinitarian and thus always already inclusive of Christology? Even when one focuses on canonical texts such as James (or the Old Testament for that matter) in which that Christology is not explicitly discussed, how does one neatly divide theology and Christology?

Additionally, the fact that James does not explicitly mention Jesus apart from James 1:1 and 2:1 does not as easily underwrite the kind of divide that Johnson posits. Johnson does not, for instance, speak to the fact that Jesus is called "Lord" in 1:1 and 2:1. Yet the use of this title with Jesus at the outset of the letter would seem to suggest that the definite, absolute occurrences of

the title throughout the rest of the letter point back to Jesus (e.g., 1:7; 4:15; 5:7–15). The occurrences of the title in chapter 5 are especially intriguing in this respect. When in 5:7–8 James speaks of the “coming [*parousia*] of the Lord,” it is hard to imagine that he, as an early Christian, intends anything else than the return of the “Lord Jesus Christ.” It may be objected that in 5:10–11 the term “Lord” must refer to God the Father (cf. 1:17, 3:9) – that is,

the God of Israel. More likely though, this language is indicative of the kinds of linkages in identity that early believers in Jesus were claiming between Jesus and the God of Israel. Indeed, the very introduction of the letter – where James describes himself as the slave “of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1) – implies a close relationship between God and Jesus. Yet even if the historical validity of these points should be dis-

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missed, the fact remains that James continues to be read today because of its presence in the Christian canon. One cannot, it seems to me, easily extricate the letter from this larger literary and theological frame of reference.

A second point worthy of special note concerns how Johnson turns James’s link between what one says and how one behaves into a brilliant reflection on Christian speech ethics. Taking his cue from Richard Bauckham’s brief account of speech ethics in James (to which I will return below), Johnson highlights the relation between creation and speech in James 3:1–12. Humans, like God, have the power to create by way of naming. “Language,” Johnson writes, “is a world-creating capacity, an awesome power by which humans can either structure life according to the ‘word of truth,’ so that humans are ‘a kind of first-fruits of his creatures’ (1:18), or make a structure of meaning in which God is omitted, ignored, or denied” (p. 251). I do not know if Johnson would be happy with the suggestion that human language is an expression of the divine image, but his insight here suggests this conclusion. Human speech may not create *ex nihilo*, but Johnson’s observation about the creative power of human speech is nevertheless right on target.

Thus, as Johnson points out, *language in the Church matters*: “The church has the responsibility to challenge, rather than be co-opted by, the distortions of language in our culture, which is a virtual babel of linguistic confusion and misdirection” (p. 251). Language is anything but neutral. I was reminded of this fact when I heard of congregations distributing “tickets” for Sunday

services. In at least one case a key rationale for this practice was to ensure that attendees had seating and thus “the best experience possible” (for some services were later described as “sold out”). Though at first glance this seems to be an innocuous practice, the problem is that such language derives its meaning from a linguistic discourse distinctly inappropriate for the Church. This language depends upon and propagates a structuring metaphor that runs counter to the discourse of worship – that of attending a show.<sup>2</sup>

The structuring metaphor of worship traditionally has been that of service (or, attending) to God. Thus, the focus of the discourse of worship has been properly theological, directing the Church toward the offering to God of praise, blessing, money, time, and so on. The discourse of attending a show, by contrast, is distinctly anthropological in focus: it directs our action toward the entertainment of the observing audience. To invoke the discourse of attending a show, therefore, is much worse than uttering a gauche theological malapropism. Such language has the power to recreate the Church’s constitutive activity of worship in the distorted image of the culture.

A third noteworthy observation in Johnson’s concluding essay is that James challenges the Church to be a community in solidarity with its neighbor. In particular, James highlights the need of the Church to embrace the poor, the fatherless, the widows, and to visit and care for the sick. The Church shows itself to be a friend of God rather than of the world when it turns away from the self-protective “logic of envy and arrogance” and toward caring for those who are weak. The world tends to isolate the sick and leave them behind because the “resources devoted to [those who are ill] sap our strength and diminish us” (p. 257). In the Church, though, we must care for the poor and the sick, rather than exclude them. To do otherwise belies the reality of our profession of faith.

Johnson’s volume is an excellent resource. Not only does he cover a great deal of historical and exegetical ground in these essays, he also fosters reflection on how the letter of James continues to speak to the life of the Church today.



Richard Bauckham’s *James* is part traditional commentary, part history of reception, part canonical examination, and part theological and philosophical reflection. Most impressive is the fact that Bauckham’s book accomplishes all of this while remaining so clear and readable.

In the prologue, Bauckham discusses Søren Kierkegaard’s programmatic use of the letter of James, especially the parable of the mirror (James 1:23-25) as a guide for reading Scripture and critiquing the Christianity of his day.<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard is referenced throughout the book and becomes a major dialogue partner again in the last chapter.

Bauckham makes a plausible case for the scenario that James, Jesus’ brother and head of the church in Jerusalem, wrote the epistle as a general

wisdom encyclical intended for various Jewish churches in the Diaspora. More importantly, though, he is careful to address the “So what?” question: this hypothesis explains, for example, why the moral exhortation is cast in such general terms.

The second chapter contains the book’s more traditional commentary material. As he is demonstrating how the epistle fits within the larger tradition of Jewish wisdom literature, Bauckham makes the important observation that wisdom and apocalyptic were not mutually exclusive categories in Second Temple Judaism. He goes on to discuss the variety of literary forms in James (for example, aphorisms, similitudes, and diatribe) and the literary structure of the letter. He highlights a number of passages in James that allude to sayings of Jesus or, more interesting still, adapt and revise sayings of Jesus. In James 2:5, for instance, the statement that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to be heirs of his promised kingdom looks like a “creative re-expression” (p. 86) of Jesus’ beatitude, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20, cf. Matthew 5:3). Comparing Jesus’ wisdom teaching as it is portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels and in James, Bauckham argues that James, in drawing upon the teaching of Jesus, is doing what other ancient Jewish sages did: they not only reflected on the prior wisdom traditions, they also added their own voices and perspectives to those traditions.

In the third chapter Bauckham examines the letter of James in its canonical context. He compares and contrasts James with a number of New Testament voices, but unsurprisingly spends the bulk of his time discussing the relationship between James and Paul. Bauckham helpfully challenges the tendency to evaluate “James’ theological and Christian value by the standard of Paul,” (p. 118) noting this has led to misconstruing the letter by placing disproportionate emphasis on James 2:14–26.

Bauckham challenges the assumption that James wrote the letter in order to rebut Paul. He shrewdly comments, “[T]he fact that the letter makes no reference to the issues of circumcision, food laws and other distinctives of the Mosaic law that are supposed to have been the focus of contention between Paul and the historical James makes this position difficult” (p. 119). James’s discussion of faith and works “is entirely intelligible and explicable, against a Jewish background, without reference to Paul,” Bauckham notes (p. 127). He concludes that both the apparent points of contact between James and Paul and their distinctive emphases are best explained by independent appeal to a common “Jewish tradition of discussion of Abraham” (p. 130). This is not to say that all tension between James and Paul can be easily resolved. In Bauckham’s view, however, the differences between James and Paul “should not be exaggerated at the expense of notable similarities, either in a historical reconstruction,...or by a canonical reading that highlights the distinctiveness of each canonical voice in order to demonstrate their complementarity” (p. 140).

In the final chapter on the theological appropriation of the letter of James, Kierkegaard returns as an active dialogue partner. Bauckham believes that Kierkegaard “leads us into the theological and existential dimensions of the text in a way that purely historical exegesis fails to do, so that...he helps to engage us with the text at a level appropriate to its content” (p. 172). Despite some interpretive missteps, Kierkegaard provides a helpful illustration of an interpretation of James that involves the very kind of action James calls for, which is moving beyond mental apprehension to the act of living out its message.

Bauckham suggests ways of applying James in the contemporary church on the themes of solidarity with the poor, speech ethics, and prayer. Bauckham’s insights on the power of speech to shape reality, especially to do harm (cf. James 4:11–12), are the basis for Johnson’s more developed reflection (which I praised above). In his discussion of prayer, Bauckham notes that prayer represents a challenge to the self-image of modern people. The illusion of control fostered by technological advances “has promoted a sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency to which prayer is alien” (p. 207). Prayer exposes this lie and reestablishes our dependency upon our creator. Bauckham’s understanding of prayer might be combined with Johnson’s reflection on speech ethics and developed further: prayer is a mode of speech that has the power to redeem reality (cf. James 5:15–16).

Each of the books reviewed here are helpful resources, with Bauckham’s *James* being the most impressive and comprehensive of three. What strikes me most about these volumes is the refreshing ways they attempt to bring together what many biblical scholars hold asunder — substantive historical analysis, exegetical work, and constructive theological engagement.

## NOTES

1 Hartin makes similar points in *A Spirituality of Perfection*, 6–7, 125, and especially 164–166.

2 I borrow the term “structuring metaphor” from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980). They define structuring metaphors as metaphors that “allow us...to use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another” (p. 61).

3 C. Stephen Evans explores Kierkegaard’s use of the parable in “Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word,” on pp. 62–69 in this issue.



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