

UNIT 2B: NEW TESTAMENT 49: James and 1 Peter

James

The writer of this epistle identifies himself as “James, a bond servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” but James was such a common name in Judaism at the time, and there are few other clues in the text itself, that we would do well to listen to Tradition concerning authorship and ascribe this to St James the brother of our Lord and first Bishop of Jerusalem (sometimes called James the Just).¹ This is the testimony of Eusebius in *Ecclesiastical History*, writing in the fourth century. Although there is no surviving reference in Christian literature to this epistle until the close of the second century and its value was sometimes disputed until the third, Eusebius's judgement has prevailed.

The attribution of this work to St James of Jerusalem is entirely consistent with its theological themes. From the beginning, when St James addresses the 12 tribes scattered abroad (1:1), and right through the epistolary teaching which has close parallels with that of his Brother and our God, a Jewish Christian milieu is clearly presupposed. This is St James as leader of the Jerusalem Church writing, as one Biblical commentator has phrased it, “as pastor to instruct and encourage his dispersed people in the face of their difficulties.” The message that St James brings is not an easy one: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (1:2). As St Isaac of Syria has written: “The way of God is a daily cross. No one has ascended to heaven through [an] easy life.”²

Corroborating this focus on Jerusalem, the agricultural and meteorological references in chapter 5 have no relevance or bearing outside of Palestine. The date of writing has to be early, because there is no sign yet of the fundamental break

¹ In Tradition, St James (the Hebrew of Iakov for Jacob) was the son of St Joseph and his first wife, Salome, according to *The Lives of the Holy Apostles*, “The Life and Sufferings of the Holy Apostle James,” 269,270 (Buena Vista. CO: Holy Apostles Convent, 1998); cited by *Acts, Epistles and Revelation* (Buena Vista: CO, Holy Apostles Convent, 2003), p. 441.

² St. Isaac of Syria, *Directions on Spiritual Training*; cited by Johanna Manley, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox* (Menlo Park, CA: Monastery Books, 1990), p. 628.

with Judaism. Clearly, this is a letter that vividly portrays the life of the Jerusalem Church, probably in the period 55 to 60 A.D. shortly before its Bishop was martyred in A.D. 62. As such, it is probably one of the earliest new Testament books to be written although some have commented on its excellent Greek as indicating a later process of editing, perhaps even in the latter part of the first century A.D.

When we consider the theology of St James, a comparison between his teaching and that of Christ and then of St Paul is most instructive. The direct parallels between Jesus and James are striking, particularly in relation to St. Matthew's Gospel which has a similar Palestinian theological background:

Similarities between the teaching of Jesus and James.	
God is the source and giver of all good gifts	Matthew 7:7–11 James 1:17
Christians must pay attention to God's word but also be prepared to put it into practice	Matthew 7:24–27 James 1:22
Christians should share God's mercy with others	Matthew 5:7 James 2:13
Christians should endeavour to make peace in the world	Matthew 5:9 James 3:18
'Love your neighbour as you love yourself'	Matthew 22:39 James 2:8
If this teaching is followed, the true nature of the Christian will be impossible to hide	Matthew 7:16–18 James 3:12
Followers of Jesus can pray to God in the knowledge that he will answer	Mark 11:22–24 James 1:6
God is the only judge and Christians too will have to give an account of their deeds to him	Matthew 7:1–2 James 4:11–12
Christians should make promises that others can accept and trust, because they intend to keep them, instead of trying to emphasize their sincerity by using unnecessary oaths	Matthew 5:33–37 James 5:12

It is when we contrast St James and St Paul on the relationship between faith and the law or works that sparks begin to fly, of course, within some Protestant traditions; indeed, Luther called James an “epistle of straw.” James 2:24 (“You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only”) is clearly striking a different note than that of Romans 3:28 (“Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law”). However, this alleged contradiction is not what it seems, for in St Paul faith is explored in the sense of being a personal act of trust in God, whereas in St James another complementary sense is used, namely, the intellectual proposition that God exists. So when St James goes on to say “even the demons believe and tremble” (2:19), he is not deprecating faith, but rather he infers that faith has to be something more than an intellectual proposition—a saving faith that manifests itself in deeds (1:25). Thus in James 1:22 St James urges his readers to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourself.” As St Isaac of Syria points out:

So long as a man makes efforts, striving to force the spiritual to come down to him, it resists. And if in his arrogance he dares to lift his eyes to the spiritual and strives to reach it by his understanding out of its proper time, his sight soon becomes dimmed and, instead of reality he sees images and phantoms... If the sight of the mind is not cleansed by practice of commandments and by works ... it cannot become a true seer of Divine contemplation.³

St Paul and St James were addressing different problems here—St Paul, the problem of self-righteousness as to the performance of the Law; St James—the problem of nominalism in belief—that is a belief that was no more than a name and that was unfruitful in works.

It is important to see that St James linked the realisation of Divine justice to the experience of faith. Thus a literal translation of 2:5 is: “God chose for Himself, did He not, the poor of the world, rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He

³ St Isaac of Syria, *Directions on Spiritual Training*, Text 150, 151; cited by Manley, pp. 629-630.

promised to those who love Him?”⁴ Furthermore, every Jewish Christian to whom St James is writing (that is, to every member of “the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad” [1:1]), as well as future readers of this letter who are all urged to fulfil “the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (2:8). This term “royal law” is used only here in both the Old Testament and the New Testament; and its significance has been considered further in the Biblical template at the end of this E-Quip lecture.

A very important verse in this letter that requires careful reflection is 5:16, which is translated literally as “the entreaty of a righteous man has much strength when it is energised.” The Greek verb here, *energoumenē* is “the present participle of *energeō*, in either the middle voice (‘in its energising’) or the passive voice (‘when’ or ‘as it is energised’).⁵ St Maximos the Confessor has explained that “The divine energy dwells within man, and God energises through him.”⁶ St Gregory Palamas further elaborates this idea: “God in His completeness divinises those who are worthy by uniting Himself with them, not through the hypostasis—that belonged to Christ alone—not through the essence, but through the uncreated energies.”⁷

The Church Fathers here are making “a distinction between God’s Essence or Nature, which is inaccessible unknowable, and incommunicable; and His Energy, which is inseparable from His Essence, and in which He goes forth from Himself, manifests, communicates and gives Himself.”⁸ St James is drawing out how the choice that an individual human being makes in favour of God “divinises the soul,” bringing “the believer into deepening mystical union with God,” in the form of

⁴ See footnote 1 above; p. 443.

⁵ See footnote 1 above, p. 448.

⁶ St Maximos the Confessor, *Ambigua*, P.G. 91:1076C; cited in reference given in footnote 1 above, p. 448.

⁷ St Gregory Palamas, *Against Akindynos*, v. 26; cited in reference given in footnote 1 above, p. 448.

⁸ Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: a Concise Exposition*, translated and edited by Hieromonk Seraphim Rose and the St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Third Edition (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005), p. 55n. For a detailed exposition, see Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), pp. 86-89.

effective and powerful personal prayer.⁹ What is proposed by St James and elaborated by numerous Church Fathers is not a state of mystical union with God that few human beings can reach. Rather, as St Gregory Palamas has phrased it:

Every man worthy of it participates differently in the great gift of the [Holy] Spirit. This corresponds to the degree of his own purity, mingling with the harmony of that Beauty [of the Holy Spirit]. But even he who has but little and that little obscure compared to the endowments of others, also unites himself to the whole or the very divine light. ... That unique light belongs indeed to the unique Christ.¹⁰

Appropriately, St James closes his letter (5:17-20) with a similar theme to that of St Gregory Palamas—that the prayer of the prophet Elijah, “a man with a nature like ours,” and the sincere prayer of a person “who turns [one] sinner from the error of his ways” are both efficacious—that is, certain to produce the intended result.

1 Peter

The first epistle of St. Peter has been reliably ascribed to the Apostle from the first century. 1 Clement refers to it (A.D. 96) as does St Polycarp (A.D. 70-155). Teaching in the epistle has close parallels to Christ’s teaching in the Gospels of St Matthew and St Luke, as set out in the table below. St Peter seems to write with first-hand knowledge of the trials of Christ (2:21-24) and his crucifixion (5:1). The letter is written to churches in Asia Minor in the context of Nero's growing harassment and later persecution of the Church of Rome with the intention of strengthening Christians in other parts of the empire if they also have to face similar trials. The letter must have been written fairly close to the outbreak of Nero's

⁹ The quotations are drawn from the Orthodox theologian Father John Anthony McGuckin’s outstanding *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004). The entry on “Grace” is on pp. 148-151 and focuses on grace in “the Greek Christian conception” as “a basic way of connoting the divine energy present in the Christological mystery that effects the world’s restoration and deification.” It should be noted that Father McGuckin is not writing specifically about St James the Just and that the entry on grace stresses that it is necessary to consider the key “theological base concepts before it is applied to the moral and mystical process of entering deeper communion with God”—as has been done in the text of this lecture. These wider theological issues will be considered in further E-Quip lectures.

¹⁰ St Gregory Palamas, *Against Akindynos*, III,6; cited in full in reference given in footnote 1 above, p. 448.

persecution and obviously before St Peter's martyrdom in Rome sometime between A.D. 65 and 67. Even so, St Peter still bids the believers to pray for the Emperor (2:13, 17).

Similarities between the teaching of Jesus and Peter	
Christians should have an alert and watchful attitude	Luke 12:35 1 Peter 1:13
Christians have the privilege of calling God 'Father'	Luke 11:2 1 Peter 1:17
Christian conduct should cause non-believers to praise God	Matthew 5:16 1 Peter 2:12
Christians should not pay back evil for evil	Luke 6:28 1 Peter 3:9
There is joy to be had when the Christian is being persecuted for doing what God wants	Matthew 5:10 1 Peter 3:14
We will all have to give an account of ourselves to God on Judgement Day	Matthew 12:36 1 Peter 4:5
If Christians are insulted because they are followers of Jesus, they should be glad	Matthew 5:11 1 Peter 4:14
Christians should be characterized by humility, and God will make them great	Luke 14:11 1 Peter 5:6
Because God is caring for them, Christians should not be worried or anxious	Matthew 6:25–27 1 Peter 5:7

Some have seen in this letter an embedded baptismal liturgy from 1:3 to 4:11; and yet the literary unity of the epistle argues against this in the direct sense. More likely, St Peter has taken themes from the baptism service in relation to the death and Resurrection of Christ and applied them to the situation of his correspondents. St Peter sees the various trials that the Church is undergoing as testing the genuineness of faith in those who believe (1:6-7). Stability in that faith under stress is based on the redemption itself, preciously procured by the blood of Christ (1:19).

St Gregory the Theologian has given fuller expression to this reflection of St Peter upon the meaning of redemption. Rejecting the idea that the sacrifice of Christ was

offered as “a ransom” to the devil, St Gregory explains the purpose of the sacrifice of Christ:

. . . on what principle did the Blood of His only begotten Son delight the Father, Who would not receive even Isaac when he was being offered by his father, but changed the sacrifice, putting a ram in the place of the human victim? Is it not evident that the Father accepts the sacrifice not because He demanded it or because He felt any need for it, but because of the economy: because humanity must be sacrificed by the Humanity of God, that He might deliver us Himself and overcome the tyrant [i.e. the devil], and draw us to Himself by the mediation of His Son, Who arranged this to the honor of the Father, Whom it is manifest that He obeys in all things?¹¹

Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky has expanded these reflections from St Peter and St Gregory with an extended study of the meaning of two Greek words in the context of redemption:

The first [Greek word] *lytro-o* means ‘to buy off,’ ‘to ransom.’ In those times the world knew three forms of ransoming people, namely (according to Greek dictionaries), (1) ransoming from captivity; (2) ransoming from prison, for example for debts; and (3) ransoming from slavery. In the Christian meaning, the Apostles used this term to express the moment of the accomplishment of our salvation that is joined to the Cross of Christ, that is, the deliverance from the sinful world, from the power of the devil, the liberation from the curses, the liberation of the righteous from the bonds of hades. These are the same three forms of ‘ransoming’: ransoming from the captivity of sin, ransoming from hands, ransoming from slavery to the devil. The second [Greek] verb, *agorazo*, signifies ‘to buy for oneself,’ ‘to buy at the marketplace’ (*agora* means ‘marketplace’). This image utilised in this term refers only to believers, to Christians. ... This verb signifies that Christ has acquired us for Himself, as bought slaves belong to their Master. It remains for us to reflect upon the

¹¹ St Gregory the Theologian, *Second Oration on Pascha*, ch. 22; cited by Pomazansky, p. 210,

depth of this image, which was placed in the word by the Apostles themselves.¹²

The application of this understanding of the ransoming of slaves is made clear both for the Apostles and for us:

On the one hand, the name ‘slaves’ of Christ signifies a complete and unconditional giving over of oneself in obedience to Him Who has redeemed us all. Such precisely did the Apostles feel themselves to be. ... Such a self-awareness should be present, according to the teaching of the Apostles, in all believers.¹³

Furthermore, the result of this offering of ourselves to Christ has an immensely positive side—we are friends of Christ, if we do whatsoever He commands us (John 15:14). As Father Pomazansky stresses:

Of [Christ] we ask forgiveness of our sins; for the Heavenly Father does not judge anyone, but has given judgment over entirely to the Son, that all might worship the Son as they worship the Father. The Son Himself proclaimed before His Ascension: ‘All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth’ (Matthew 28:18). ... We are in the house of God; we are in the house of Christ. Therefore, for us it is easy and joyful, and saving to have communion with all the heavenly members of this house: with the Most Holy Theotokos, with the Apostles, the Prophets, the Martyrs, the Hierarchs, and the monastic Saints—a single Church of heaven and earth! It is for this that we have been bought by Christ.¹⁴

This sense that each Christian has “been bought by Christ” is certainly dear to St Peter, who opens his second letter with the statement that he is “a slave and apostle of Jesus Christ.”

¹² Pomazansky, pp. 210-211. The key NT references to ransom cited by Father Pomazansky are 1 Cor 6:19-20, 1 Cor 7:23 and Revelation 5:9.

¹³ Pomazansky, pp. 211-212.

¹⁴ Pomazansky, pp. 212-213.

For St Peter (and for us) established in faith and hope, love between the brethren must be strengthened, even as the Word of God is preached (1:21-25). Receiving that Word as milk to newborn babes, the faithful are built up into Christ as a living stones into a spiritual house, in this constituting a holy priesthood in the continuity of Israel. The privilege of that priesthood offered to all believers is to proclaim Christ, who calls the Church into being as from darkness into light (2:1-10). Such a proclamation of belief in Christ is itself a personal choice, as the dispersed Jewish Christians of the first century would have immediately understood. By citing in 2:7-8, both Psalm 118:22 (“the stone which the builders rejected, this became the very cornerstone”) and Isaiah 8:14 (“a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense”), St Peter is reminding his listeners and readers of the privileges that their belief in Christ has bestowed upon them.

Twenty centuries later the words of these opening chapters of 1 Peter remain true in our own lives and beliefs:

... the chief idea of all the writings of the Holy Apostles [is] *I believe*. All Christian theologising must begin with this confession. Under this condition theologising is not an abstract mental exercise, not an intellectual dialectics, but a dwelling of one’s thought in Divine truths, a directing of the mind and heart towards God, and a recognition of God’s love. For an unbeliever theologising is without effect, because Christ Himself, for unbelievers, is ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense (1 Peter 2:7-8).¹⁵

Whatever the century, whatever the situation, we each make our own choices.

The ethical implications of this call to Christian living are thus clear in that the disordered passions must surrender to good works (2:11-20, 3:1-7, 4:1-6). St. Peter’s injunctions to servants, wives, husbands and Christians generally are interspersed with references to Christ's humiliation and sufferings as an example to

¹⁵ Pomazansky, p. 48.

be followed (2:21-25). The saving significance of Christ's sufferings are manifest in baptism "through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ," who has subjected all things to himself (3:18-22). Furthermore, St Peter stresses that baptism is "not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience" (3:21).

Today, especially with the wide prevalence of infant baptism, we view baptism primarily as a joining of a person to the Church. However, as one contemporary Biblical commentator has reflected: "The act of baptism is a commitment on the part of the believer in all good conscience to make sure that what baptism symbolises [i.e. the supernatural power of the Resurrection of Christ] will become a reality in the life [of that believer]." This was certainly the primary concern of St Peter, for it was only if the believer truly lived out the baptismal commitment that the person became a permanent member of the Church, both in belief and action. Then, as now, "the Resurrection of Christ," set forth in baptism, is [also] the pledge of our resurrection."¹⁶

In the closing part of his letter, St. Peter encourages the Church again to hospitality, mutual service and the use of God's gifts for the common good (4:7-11). His major theme, however, to which he now returns, is the suffering Church as an important aspect of the normal context of Christian experience (4:12 f.). To the elders of the Church to whom he writes, he counsels humble service, (5:1-4), as indeed he does to all Christians. Before the valediction, there is a final and sobering warning concerning the dangers of Satanic destruction that await those who are heedless and faithless (5:8-9). Interestingly, in the light of the fact that St John Mark was St. Peter's scribe in the composition of his Gospel, there is a touching reference to his spiritual son in the closing lines of the letter (5:13). In the closing sentence of the letter— "Peace be to you all who are in Christ"—St Peter is stressing that every baptised Christian is united to Christ; and this union with Christ is the source of many blessings.

¹⁶ Pomazansky, p. 224.

A Template for the Orthodox Interpretation of Biblical Texts

In accordance with the proposal of Fr. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos that Orthodox biblical interpretation ought to have a three-level approach, the following template is offered for preachers, teachers, bible study leaders, catechists and students of the Scriptures generally:¹

James 2:8: “If ... you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself,’ you are doing well.

Level	Process	In Tradition / Fathers (Theoria)	Applicable Now (Praxis)
Exegetical	Historical / Contextual <i>(using the full range of critical tools)</i>	Like St Paul (Galatians 5:14) and St Matthew quoting Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:19; 22:39), St James stresses the importance of Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Biblical commentators differ on whether this command is “royal” because Jesus is King (See Lawrence R. Farley, <i>Universal Truth</i> on James 2:8, p. 30) or because this command can guide all human relationships; and “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:8).	The command to “love your neighbour as yourself” is applicable to each person that comes into our lives, not simply a person who lives close by. However, precisely how we should “love” ourselves is not clear. Does the necessary love of self and others begin with respect for God?
	Allegorical / Typological <i>(as derived from Tradition)</i>	St Gregory the Great points out: “The command is to share two tunics with one’s neighbour; and if someone has only “a single tunic” that should not be shared because “half a tunic leaves the person who receives it naked, as well as the person who gives it” (<i>Homily 6, in Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT Vol III</i> , p. 189 -Lev 19:18).	St Gregory is proposing we should meet our own needs first before meeting the needs of others. This is a subtle reinterpretation of Leviticus 19:18. Is St Gregory right in this guidance or is he reducing the command?
Interpretative	Spiritual / Ethical	In <i>Communion and Otherness</i> (London: T & T Clark, 2006) Metropolitan John Zizioulas proposes: “The human being is <i>defined</i> through otherness. [A human being is] a being whose identity emerges only in relation to other beings, God, the animals and the rest of creation.... The freedom to be other involves the tendency to create a world other than the given one, that is, to bring about otherness in the radically ontological sense of the emergence of new identities ...” (pp. 39-40). Thus when we love, we too are changed.	“Love is not a feeling or disposition of the ‘self’ towards an ‘other.’ Rather, it is a <i>gift</i> coming from the ‘other.’... In love, [the ability to create a] relation[ship] generates otherness; it does not threaten it.” Cf. 1 John 4:19-21: “We love, because [God] first loved us.... The one who loves God should love his brother also” (Ziz55).

	Personal / Social	How Adam chose to deal with “the Other” is instructive: “By claiming to be God, Adam rejected the Other as constitutive of his being and declared himself to be the ultimate explanation of his existence. This gave rise to the <i>Self</i> as having ontological priority over the Other.” In this context, Zizioulas views otherness as “always a gift, it is grace” through which “the human being is constituted as other by a call from an Other, requiring response and establishing a relationship” (Zizioulas, p.43).	Like Adam, we too face a choice of how to define our existence in relation to other people and other values. We will receive many calls in our lives “from an Other.” We cannot meet all of these calls; and we will need to pray which calls are from the Lord and, therefore, require our response.
Transformative	The Call to Holiness	“According to the Greek Fathers, chiefly Irenaeus and Maximus, ... history is endowed with a <i>telos</i> , a goal.... The human being is called to bring creation into communion with God so that it may survive and participate in the life of the Trinity. To this call, Adam in his freedom answered with a ‘no’. It was Christ who fulfilled it, thus revealing and realizing in Himself what it means to be truly human” (Zizioulas, p. 43).	We are “constantly formed through [our] response to this call of the Other” (Zizioulas, p.43). The extent of the holiness we live out in our lives will be largely determined by our prayer life and our response to the call of the Other.
	The Call to Witness	“The priority of the self over the other has dominated Western philosophy almost from its beginning.... This sort of thinking is congenial to our fallen existence, in which the Self is the ultimate point of reference ... of the human being” (Zizioulas, pp. 43, 46).	Whether the call of the Other is transformative depends upon our ability to discern if a specific call of an Other is <i>a gift</i> from the Other that we should and can meet.

¹ In “*The New Testament, An Orthodox Perspective, Volume 1: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics,*” (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997, Ch. 7), Fr. Theodore sets out three levels serving a sound Orthodox hermeneutical process. These are: **1. Exegetical** - using all critical, contextual, textual and literary methods to determine “the level of understanding of the biblical text in its historical context of literary form and conceptuality ...” (p. 190). **2. Interpretative** – evaluating means derived from the exegetical stage as applicable contextually to the reader’s contemporary issues and concerns (p. 197). **3. Transformative** – experiencing life changing practical applications of insights derived from the previous two stages.

In ALL of these three levels, the Orthodox context must be the Church as the locus of divine revelation and inspiration. Here the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth as manifested in the biblical text, the teachings of the Fathers and the liturgical context. In Ch. 4, p. 115 f., Fr. Theodore explains the historical and spiritual exegetical approaches which, following the Fathers, must be applied throughout. Classically these have concerned the Antiochian emphasis on the “literal” or historical approach and the Alexandrian emphasis on the allegorical and typological interpretations that reveal the inter-connectedness of all Scripture in Tradition at deeper levels of understanding.