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Christology in the Epistle of James

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The challenge of doing biblical theology in our day comes, at least in part, from those who say that our commitment to systems and traditions pre-determine our exegetical outcomes. We have systems that originate primarily from interpreting Pauline texts. So, when we go back to those texts, we quite naturally find support for our systems there. Our exegesis is pre-determined by our theology. One way of breaking away from this criticism is to take a serious, theological look at a NT book like James, which has remained neglected by most protestant NT analyses, beginning with Luther's famous disparaging remark, proclaiming James 'a right strawy epistle'. James remains virgin territory when it comes to theology. Paul's categories don't work, so James must be allowed to establish its own.[1] This is really as it should be for all biblical theology.

This study will address doing theology in James generally but will focus on the role Jesus Christ plays in this work. Whether this can even qualify as christology in Pauline terms is questionable. However, James involves Christ in his epistle in more ways than are normally recognized, and I hope to bring this out in clear and personally challenging ways.

Before I come to Christ in James, it will be helpful to set the stage by interacting a little with the current debate among evangelicals and others regarding how to approach biblical theology in a postmodern world.

Evangelicals and Theology Today

If postmodernism teaches us anything, it teaches us to not allow theology to simply be a cognitive enterprise any longer. This has only put us at odds with each other anyway. Although the denominational

1 John Reumann, 'Christology of James', in *Who Do You Say That I Am? Essays on Christology*, eds. Mark Allan Powell and David Bauer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 135.

wars of the 19th century are pretty much over, the debris of division between evangelicals remains in some theological areas. The nasty rhetoric seems to be subsiding, but we still categorize ourselves as lining up in the divided camps of Calvinist/Arminian, Premill/Amill/Postmill, infant/adult baptism, and cessationist/speaking in tongues.

Indeed, our differences over matters of biblical theology seem silly in a day when the entire theological enterprise is at stake, when the very concept of sentences having a determinable meaning is under fire. Everything we hold dear is caught up in the postmodern avalanche. Just as squabbling infantrymen unite when attacked by a common enemy, so the contemporary challenges of our world bring us together to defend what we all hold dear: God, meaning, truth, the Bible.

Ellen Charry in her effort to claim exegetical turf for theology in our day seeks to remind us that the central theological task is and has always been pastoral, assisting people to know God, and by knowing him to be enabled to strive toward the excellence of his character in their own lives and, indeed, to genuine, personal happiness and joy in living.[2] She argues persuasively that up until the enlightenment when the human mind took center stage, theologians such as the well-known Calvin and the less-known Basil of Caesarea,[3] recognized this to be their calling. She labels such an enterprise to be 'sapiential theology', or theology which, through understanding Scripture, enables everyday Christians to live wisely and well. It was a marriage of mind and heart, or mind and spirit. So it must be today.

Vanhoozer makes a similar point when he calls for theology to be about the business of 'character formation'.[4] Such an enterprise must begin with interpreters themselves. Wisdom theology cannot be past on to others with much credibility if interpreters have not struggled with it themselves. As Vanhoozer states, 'The struggle with the text is ultimately a spiritual struggle—with the text and with ourselves'.[5] As Goldingay reminds us, biblical interpreters too often forget 'why they were first interested in the Bible'.[6] We try so hard to distance ourselves in order to remain objective that we no longer allow ourselves to be 'gripped by and involved in what we study'. Such neutrality is a

2 Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 115, 5.

3 Charry, *Renewing*,115, 199.

4 Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 406.

5 *Ibid.*, 381.

6 John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 252.

decision against responding to the pastoral call of the text.

This brings us to the very practical concern of how are we to proceed in creating this 21st century wisdom theology. How are we to treat the text? The consistent answer from those who are writing in this area is, instead of treating the text as an accumulation of sterile facts and sifting through them to rational, theological conclusions, we should treat the text as we would a friend whom we love and respect. In doing so, we listen carefully to everything it wants to say before dissecting its terms. As C. S. Lewis says, we need to enjoy the text as the text first.[7]

This means devotional reading,[8] reading the entire epistle, letting the whole draw us in before we ask questions about the parts. It means coming to grips with the big issues, the overarching message which is incontestable before we focus in on the bits and pieces which call for detailed research and over which readers may disagree. This means respecting context and searching to recognize the genre,[9] the cross-cultural structure upon which the document is built. It means asking questions about word meanings, word choices, the significance of grammatical indicators of the language, but remembering that the text can only answer with what it has already said. It means asking the text if our interpretation is an appropriate estimate of its words because we love our friend so much we don't desire to knowingly misrepresent her.[10]

In this enterprise, then, we cherish the human authors of the text as well as the God who has chosen to speak through their limited insights, their varied grasp of language, their own pet peeves, and their own human failings. We come to the text within the context of our trust in God and our faith in Christ. We believe that the biblical text has messages of wisdom and truth we need to hear and understand, messages that are for our benefit. We come to the text secure in the knowledge that God loves us. He desires for us to come to know him personally through this text. To read the text at distance, or with so-called healthy, academic scepticism without also reading it as a message from a caring friend is to misread it and truncate our theological calling.[11]

Reading and interpreting the text like this at least has a chance of catching the attention and interest of postmodern people who long

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7 C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), 123.

8 Charry, *Renewing*, 240-245.

9 Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 338-350; Goldingay, *Models*, 178.

10 Goldingay, *Models*, 221; Vanhoozer, Meaning, 32; Lewis, *Criticism*, 101-102; Thiselton, *New*, 33.

11 Goldingay, Models, 235-237.

to be affected by God before they can be effected by him. If we prioritize wisdom theology over rational theology perhaps we can also be more easily drawn to love one another, despite our denominational loyalties, in the name of the Lord.

In terms of the Bible, it is important to remember that texts were written in order to change the people to whom they were directed. And so it should be for us. Thiselton calls this the 'horizon of expectation'.[12] In terms of theology, reading the Bible only to reinforce the theological insights of past traditions, whether denominationally or otherwise, is to make the Bible a relic of the past, to hang it on the wall as a trophy. To truncate its power to speak to current issues and personal issues is to emasculate it.

We need, therefore, to be ever ready to be taught by our reading of Scripture. We need to anticipate that our worldview and our traditions will be challenged from time to time.[13] And we need to be open to change of mind, change of heart, and change of will. Readiness to learn from Scripture also means being ready to learn from each other to allow ourselves to be persuaded against our theological grain, to tolerate even those who challenge us but don't convince. As Vanhoozer states, 'We should strive to be at peace with other interpretive communities.'[14] As C. S. Lewis counsels, we need to 'get out of our skins' to see the text anew and for it to challenge us.[15]

Theology in James

This brings us to the central point of theological discussion, the Epistle of James. In light of where we have come in doing theology in a postmodern age, rather than being an odd choice on which to focus our theological attention, James is strikingly appropriate. No book of the NT is oriented more toward wisdom theology than James. This is the one book of the NT which most critics claim to be wisdom theology, to being purposely put into the genre of wisdom literature.[16] Strikingly ignored in books of New Testament theology in favor of Pauline epistles, James has always been highly prized by early theologians of the Eastern Church. It is the book most commonly preached from in one indigenous, independent church in Nigeria, adjudged most appropriate as an entry point for modern-day Buddhists into

12 Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zonder- van, 1992), 34.

13 *Ibid.*, 176.

14 Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 299.

15 C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), 101.

16 There is lots of discussion on this, but see Richard Bauckham, *James* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 29-111.

Christianity,[17] and has the potential to be the epistle best able to attract the interest of people in a post- modern world in the west. Always a popular Bible study book for small groups because of its 'practical' message, it has promise for yielding good fruit for those who probe it as a friend who wishes to share his wisdom theology.[18]

Andrew Chester, in his assessment of James' theology voices the negativity typical of those who probe James. Searching the tiny epistle for equivalent theology to that of the comparably encyclopedic Pauline epistles, he laments its paltry accounting of God, Christ, baptism, and worship, its failure to mention the Holy Spirit at all, and its bashing of faith.[19] Dunn remarks on the 'undistinctively Christian character of the letter', even entertaining the plausibility of the old thesis of Massebieau and Spitta that James originally was a Jewish document into which a clever redactor added the words 'Jesus Christ' to 1:1 and 2:1. Such negative assessments of James' theology, I believe, come from using inappropriate standards determined by Pauline epistles and Pauline theology.

No one doubts the keen theological insight of Paul and how indebted Christianity is to his prolific NT voice. Yet, we must respect the difference that James brings to the table. First, Paul's writing is occasional. There are problems, very often theological-laced, that he is obsessed to dislodge in the churches to which he writes. His audiences are always in the majority Gentile, not raised in the most basic concepts of one, loving, caring, dis- ciplining God. Not only is James possibly not occasional,[20] it assumes that its audience shares its theological convictions, which are foundational to every Jewish home. Proving them or defending them is simply not of concern. Now, when it gets to the practical implications of its theology for Jewish Christians everywhere, this is where James shines.

Christology in James

Since it is the christology of James that is most usually disregarded, it will be the focus of this short study. Three major aspects are revealed in James regarding the author's understanding of Christ: (1). he is the church's teacher; (2). he shares the quality and offices of God; (3). he remains functionally active in the church.

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17 Goldingay, *Models*, 106.

18 Reumann, '*Christology*', 136.

19 Andrew Chester and Ralph P. Martin, *The Theology of the Letters, of James, Peter, and Jude* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 45.

20 Richard Bauckham, *James* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 25-28.

Teacher

The indebtedness of James to the teaching of Jesus has long been recognized and consistently documented.[21] What is so striking to everyone is that James never overtly tags any of his numerous allusions to Jesus' teaching nor even sayings that are very near to quotations, like James 5:12, as being from Jesus. Jesus' teaching appears to have gone long past memorization on the part of the author and likely the readers as well. It has become integrated into the teaching of the author himself. This is no mere rabbinic student reciting verbatim the teaching of his respected mentor. This is a mature teacher himself who is so familiar with Jesus' teaching that it interlaces his speech like the words of torah. More than that, the audience in view is assumed to be mature enough as disciples of Jesus to be so immersed in Jesus' words that they have no need to be coached regarding the allusions either.

The most helpful directive in James to the primary source of his teaching is the highly suggestive adjective to describe the law of neighbor love he espouses. Why in 2:8 does he call it 'royal' and not just 'God's' as he prepares to quote Lev 19:18? The resounding answer from interpreters is that he is thinking about Jesus' most common topic of teaching, the kingdom of God.[22] The fact that James 1:25 refers to this same law as 'the perfect law of freedom' makes it unlikely that James has in mind Jewish torah in either instance. It causes one to wonder, when James 2:8 quotes the focus of the royal law as 'Love your neighbor as yourself', whether the author thinks he is just quoting Lev 19:18 and/or he is thinking of Jesus himself quoting it and making it the foundation of his kingdom ethics.

Without repeating it, James makes neighbor love the foundation of the ethics of the epistle as well – from not showing favoritism (2:1) to not slandering one another (4:11-12), from not grumbling at each other (5:9) to visiting the sick (5:14) and restoring a believer who has

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21 Dean Deppe, 'The Sayings of Jesus in the Epistle of James' (Ph.D. Thesis, Free University of Amsterdam, 1996), documents over 175 different allusions from Jesus tradition claimed by 53 scholars since the beginning of critical scholarship. See also Peter Davids, 'James and Jesus', in *Gospel Perspectives* V, ed. David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 63-85.

22 Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 115; Robert W. Wall, *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James*, New Testament in Context (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 123; Ralph Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 168; Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 115; James Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 115.

left the Christian community (5:19-20).

So, James honors Jesus' teaching in a totally different way than the Gospels. Certainly there is a place in the life of the church for words and deeds of Jesus to be gathered up and preserved in stirring evangelistic tracts. However, there is also a place for embodying his words[23] and teaching in our own lives as James has exhibited. This is a striking sapiential message from this little book.

God

The article by Hurtado in *DLNT* when it comes to the 'christology' of James, although typically brief, sets up a useful way to evaluate the christological teaching of James.[24] It separates references into those which associate Jesus with attributes and offices of God in the OT and those which suggest attributes of Jesus from the NT, particularly the gospels. Though his listing is inaccurate in places (as will be pointed out as this study proceeds), it is a useful approach which will be followed in this study.

The most prolific title for Jesus in James is 'Lord'. Its application to Jesus is unquestionable in 1:1 and 2:1 since it directly modifies 'Jesus Christ' in both places. Out of the twelve unmodified uses of 'Lord' in James, eight most certainly refer to God (1:7; 3:9; 4:10; 4:15; 5:4; 5:10; 5:11— twice). Hurtado's placement of 4:15, 'if the Lord wills', as referring to Jesus is followed by no other interpreter. Certainly, it is deference to God's providential hand over events which is in view here. Hurtado also assigns 5:10, prophets speaking 'in the name of the Lord' and 5:11, the Lord being 'full of mercy and compassion' to Jesus. Again, no interpreters support this.[25] No NT prophets are in view in this passage, and surely it is God who interacted with Job and to whom he demonstrated his benevolence. Such interpretation by Hurtado calls for Chester's criticism 'to resist attempts to argue for more than is really there'.[26]

Even discounting Hurtado's analysis, this leaves four places in James where an unmodified 'Lord' refers to Jesus ((5:7, 8, 14, 15), making a total of six. The significance of James applying to Jesus the Septuagintal word for Yahweh who covenanted with Israel cannot be overstated. Yet, in doing this, James parallels what must have become

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23 Tony Cummins, 'Orality and Embodiment: The Presence of Jesus in the Letter of James' (Unpublished Paper, Society of Biblical Literature Meeting, 1999).

24 Hurtado, 'Christology', *DLNTD*, 173.

25 Reumann, 'Christology', 134, tentatively considers 5:11 as referring to Jesus but supplies no rationale.

26 Chester, *James*, 43.

common practice among early Christians, since the referencing Jesus as 'Lord' is commonplace in the NT. In sharing this title with God, James implies Jesus' share in the honor and respect which in Judaism was reserved for God alone. More will be said later about the significance of the four specific references to Jesus as Lord.

A second term shared Jesus shares with God is 'the name'. In 5:10 the prophets are described as having spoken 'in the name of the Lord', meaning God in that context. However, in 5:14, it is church elders who pray and anoint the sick 'in the name of the Lord', surely referring to the name of Jesus, whose trademark miracles involved healing the sick and in whose name his disciples heal in Acts (3:6; 4:30; 16:18) and in the gospels (Mark 16:17; Matt 7:22; Luke 10:17). In 2:8, the 'good name', signifying ownership of believers which is slandered, or blasphemed by non-believers, surely is also the 'Christ'. After all, believers are called 'Christians' early on in Antioch (Acts 11:26), so their identity in Christ is in public for all to see and to berate if they wish. Very likely, it is the rite of public baptism which is in view as the point when the name 'Christ' is officially 'pronounced as a surname' over believers.[27]

'The Name' for Jews was certainly the unspoken name of God, rendered Lord in the Septuagint. But 'the Name' for Christians is Christ. James uses 'the name' to refer to either, just as he does the title 'Lord'. That the name of Christ can be blasphemed just as the name of Yahweh further underscores that Christ is to share honor that was previously withheld by Jews for God alone.

The third and last title James uses in reference both to Jesus and to God is Judge. In 4:11-12, he speaks of there being only one Lawgiver and Judge. . . who is able to save and destroy. After the monotheistic pronouncement about God put into the mouths of demons in 2:19, it is difficult to think that anyone but God is in mind here, even though the 'law' which he depicts God as assessing in believers is judging 'your neighbor'. However, despite James's pronouncement that there is only one Judge, it appears to most that he applies the term Judge to Christ, just a few verses later in 5:9. In a context of awaiting the 'Lord's coming', an idea which dominates NT ideas about Christ, and speaking of this judge 'standing at the door', a picture also drawn of Christ in Matt 24:32; Mark 13:29; and Rev 3:20, it is difficult to avoid understanding James to refer to anyone other

27 Moo, *James*, 109; Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1980), 102; Davids, *James*, 113; Martin, *James*, 67.

than Christ, though interpreters are more divided on this one.[28]

Such tendency to reckon Christ as God's designated agent for God's judgment dominates NT thought. James' ambivalence on this point is understandable in this light. Association of the role of judge with Christ's expected return seems inevitable. For him to condemn those who rejected him and to sort out the genuine believers from the faulty ones also seems appropriate and is seen also in 2 Cor 5:10. But with this designation of Christ as judge comes another major shift from Jewish to Christian thought. Because of his successful messianic mission, God now bestows upon him this supreme office.

A final designation of Christ in James, which many hold to be the most significant, must yet be observed. Far and away the most debated reference in James comes in 2:1 with the appearance of the word 'glory' in the genitive following 'our Lord Jesus Christ' (also in the genitive). Although the possibility that 'glory' modifies 'faith' (glorious faith) or the whole phrase (glorious Lord Jesus Christ), its placement at the end draws most to entertain the view that it is a deft reference to Christ's resurrection (of the glory), highlighting how he came to be Lord, or that is simply appositional to 'Lord Jesus Christ', associating him with the Shekinah glory of God.[29] Since James in no way follows up on either of these last two suggestions, it is difficult to decide between the two. The Shekinah glory would be slightly favored since the idea of not showing partiality clearly resonates with the OT characteristic of God.

If it is Shekinah glory, then this is yet another reference which assumes Christ's sharing characteristics with God, in fact sharing even his personhood. It would connect with the thoughts of John 1:1-18, Jesus making known the glory and presence of God in person. If it is an oblique reference to the resurrection, or how Jesus has demonstrated himself to deserve the title Lord, it would fall into the category of specifically Christian attributes to Christ in James.

What does the fact that James calls Jesus Lord, the name, the judge, and the Shekinah, suggest in terms of sapiential theology? Simply, that he deserves all the honor and respect we offer God. We should show this respect in worship and in the way we live our lives as Christ's servants.

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28 Davids, James, 185; Martin, *James*, 162; Moo, *James*, 225; side with Christ here, Laws, *James*, 213; and Wall, *James*, 257, defend God as judge.

29 Moo, *James*, 101; Wall, *James*, 108; Laws, *James*, 95; Davids, *James*, 106; Adamson, James, 104; Martin, *James*, 60; Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of James* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 81; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Page Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1995 221.

Functionally Active

Four references to Christ as Lord in James tell us more about the author's ideas than that he shares the offices of God. In 5:7-9, twice as 'Lord' and once as 'judge', James contemplates Christ's return. He does so in terms of the effect this should have on the Christian community. It should help them remain patient in the face of unjust suffering for the oppressors will get their due. It should also motivate them to not bicker with one another. In this sense, the Lord's imminent presence with them should impact their lives both inside and outside the church. Their trust in the reality of this return makes them act as if he is present already, active within them.

This present activity of Christ within the Christian communities is much more pronounced later on in 5:14-15. As the elders pray and anoint in Jesus' name, he remains ever present among them as the healer of their ailments, whether they be related to unconfessed sin or not. Although not examined much by interpreters, if the elders are praying in the name of Jesus, in 5:14, then their 'faith' mentioned in 5:15 must be in the power of Jesus' name to heal or at least that his name gives them access to God's power to heal. Then when 5:15 also mentions that 'the Lord will raise him up' this also most likely refers to the power instigated by the name of Jesus. Just as Jesus raised up many bedridden people, in his miracles, so he still raises up the sick through the elders of the church. Finally, the passive 'will be forgiven him' with regard to the ailing person's sin, most likely assumes Jesus to be the for-giver, or at least doing so on behalf of God. Just so, Jesus healed the paralytic man let down through the roof.

James may not have a reference to the Holy Spirit in James, but he certainly assumes the powerful presence of the risen Jesus within the Christian community. The sapiential theology for us is clear. Since Jesus is active among believers, we should not ever hesitate to call on his power to motivate us to live right, to help us when we need it, to forgive us when we lay our sin before him.

Conclusion

The advantage of attempting to do theology sapientially in our contemporary world is suggest by the theological exercise we have done in James. Instead of accenting how James' christology is so inferior to Paul's, we have been able to observe what James offers: an assumed christology shared with the Jewish-Christian community to whom he writes. Instead of accenting preformed theological categories, we have let James form its own categories. Instead of arguing about exegetical details, we have been able to recognize where serious dis-

cussion continues while still moving on to implications and applications which we can embody daily.

Abstract

Though generally ignored as a source for New Testament theology, the Epistle of James is an excellent starting point for developing theology which is not pre-determined by theological systems. Influenced by the postmodern situation of Western culture, the call from both evangelicals and non-evangelicals today is for theology to be pastoral, character building, to change people, and for exegetical theologians to grapple with the text personally in the process of conveying its significance to others. As a NT book in the genre of Jewish wisdom literature, James shines as a source for discovering pastoral theology like this. In examining the Epistle of James from this perspective, three aspects of the author's understanding of Christ are identified: (1). he is the church's teacher; (2). he shares the quality and offices of God; (3) he remains functionally active in the church.