Putting the Letter from James in Its Place: A Candid Assessment of Its Continuing Theological Value

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Abstract

This journal article undertakes a candid assessment of the continuing theological value of the letter from James. The incentive for doing so arises from the claim made by some within the Lutheran tradition that James and Paul either contradict or are at cross-purposes to one another. An additional motivation is connected with the assertion put forward by other Lutheran acolytes that in order to preserve the integrity of the gospel, James must be read through a Pauline lens. The major findings of this essay are threefold: (1) a careful and thoughtful reading of James challenges the notion that it either contradicts or undermines Paul's teaching about justification by faith; (2) there remains value in taking the letter of James seriously in its own right and objectively evaluating its theological importance in that regard; and, (3) the epistle's message of salvation is consistent with that found throughout the rest of the New Testament, including what

Jesus taught (as recorded in the Gospels) and Paul wrote (as found in his letters).

1. Introduction

As a permanent faculty member within the graduate programs division of the Institute of Lutheran Theology, I teach biblical theology courses. For instance, during the 2015 autumn semester, I taught a course dealing with the general or catholic (i.e. universal) epistles. I especially remember a two-week duration in which I had the students consider the theological argument and themes of the letter from James.

Of particular interest was the way in which James and Paul deal with the issue of justification by faith. Corresponding issues include the relationship between faith and works, as well as the dynamic tension between law and gospel. In one research paper assignment, I had the students wrestle with the meaning of such phrases as the 'perfect law that gives freedom'[2] (1:25; 2:12) and the 'royal law' (2:8). I especially wanted them to deliberate how the latter related to a Lutheran understanding of the gospel of grace.

Within the Lutheran tradition,[3] there are some who think James and Paul either contradict or are at cross-purposes with one another.

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[1] The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the 2011 version of the NIV.

[3] The longstanding debate within Lutheranism concerning the canonicity of James is well documented, as noted in the following representative works: Adamson (1989:ix–xii); Brosend (2004:12–15); Chester and Martin (1994:3–5); Laato (1997:43–5); McCartney (2009:1–2); Reumann (1999:129); Wall (1997a:3–4, 293–5). For an overview of how James has been interpreted throughout church history, cf. Johnson

According to this view, interpretive pride of place should be given to Paul. There are other Lutheran acolytes who, while affirming the inspiration and canonical status of James, insist that it must be read through a Pauline lens. Supposedly, Paul's letters should overshadow what James wrote, even if this results in creating a canon within a canon.[4] Otherwise, as the argument goes, there is the risk of undermining the core Lutheran doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator* (Latin for 'at the same time righteous and a sinner').

Yet, it remains questionable whether the preceding sorts of constructs are either accurate or valid. Indeed, one major claim of this journal article is that a careful and thoughtful reading of James challenges the notion that it is goes against Paul's teaching about justification by faith. A second assertion is that there remains value in taking the letter from James seriously in its own right and objectively evaluating its theological importance in that regard. A third contention is that the epistle's message of salvation is consistent with that found throughout the rest of the New Testament, including what Jesus taught (as recorded in the Gospels) and Paul wrote (as found in his letters).

Admittedly, the preceding matters have been debated for centuries among Protestants (as well as those belonging to the Catholic and Orthodox traditions). Also, the dialectic between justification and sanctification remains of interest to the general readership of *Conspectus*. After all, the interpretive and theological implications of one's view on these interrelated issues have repercussions for ministry within various ecclesial contexts, including those located in the global

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(2004:39–83); McKnight (2011:9–13). For a concise survey of how contemporary specialists have assessed the criticism Luther made of James, cf. Harner (2004:23–6).

[4] For a critique of this hermeneutical method, cf. section 6 below.

south. It would be pretentious to think this modest-sized essay somehow resolves the debate; instead, the more realistic goal is to offer an alternative perspective, one that undertakes a candid assessment of the continuing theological value of the letter from James.

2. Background Considerations Related to James

In 1:1, the author is identified as 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.'[5] Nonetheless, the question arises, which James? After all, there are four people with the name of 'James' mentioned in the New Testament—James, the son of Zebedee (an apostle), James the son of Alphas (an apostle), James the father of the apostle Judas (not Iscariot), and James, one of the younger half-brothers of Jesus.

The death of the son of Zebedee in AD 44 (cf. Acts 12:2) rules him out, for the date would have been too early for the letter's composition (possibly before AD 50).[6] Furthermore, the authoritative manner in which the writer spoke suggests that he could not have been either of the lesser-known individuals who were named James. That leaves the Lord's half-brother as the most likely writer of the epistle (cf. Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3; Gal 1:19).

[5] The following are the representative secondary sources that have influenced the discourse on the person of James: Adamson (1989); Bauckham (1999); Blomberg and Kamell (2008); Brosend (2004); Davids (1982); Dayton (2009a); Dibelius (1976); Gillman (1992); Hagner (1992); Hiebert (1979); Laws (1980); Martin (1988); McCartney (2009); McKnight (2011); Moo (2015); Motyer (1985); Painter (2001); Shanks and Witherington (2003); Stulac (1993). For a reconstruction of the literary and historical context of the traditions about James outside the New Testament, cf. Painter (1999). For a deliberation of the significance of James within early Christian history, cf. Dibelius (1976:51–7); Eisenman (1997:70–90); Johnson (2004:1–23); Martin (1988:xlii–lxi).

[6] Unless otherwise noted, the dates appearing in this journal article reflect the New Testament chronology appearing in Barker (2011:1577–8) and Carson (2015b:1905–6), respectively.

The following are several highlights in the life of James: initially, he was sceptical about Jesus (John 7:2-5); Jesus appeared to James after the Resurrection (1 Cor 15:7); James joined the apostolic cohort (Acts 1:14); he was renowned for his outstanding character and piety; James had a reputation as a rigorous keeper of the Mosaic Law; he was recognised as a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal 2:9); James advised Paul (Acts 21:18; Gal 1:19); James wrote the letter that bears his name; he led the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:13); and, James was martyred for the Christian faith (according to Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 2:7–8; and Josephus, *Ant.* 20.9.1; around AD 62).

Concerning the recipients of the letter from James, it is addressed 'to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations' (1:1).[7] The Jewish tenor of the epistle, coupled with the reference to the 'twelve tribes', suggests a predominately Jewish, rather than Gentile, audience.[8] These Jewish Christians may have been descendants of those who were uprooted centuries earlier after the Assyrian conquest of Samaria (722 BC) and the Babylonian overthrow of Jerusalem (586 BC). Subsequent to Stephen's death (AD 35), many Jews living in Jerusalem who had become Christians, travelled to places such as Phoenicia, Syrian Antioch, and

[7] The following are the representative secondary sources that have influenced the discourse on introductory matters concerning the letter from James: Adamson (1989); Bauckham (1999); Davids (1982); Dayton (2009b); Dibelius (1976); Hiebert (1979); Laws (1980; 1992); Martin (1988); Moo (2015); Motyer (1985); Painter (1999); Penner (1996); Stulac (1993); Wall (1997a; 1997b).

[8] For an assessment of the Jewish worldview, beliefs, and way of life discernible in the letter from James and how it fits within its first century AD cultural context (particularly, the Judaisms of Qumran, the Rabbis, and the Jacobean community), cf. Eisenman (1997:31–50); Evans (2001); Neusner (2001; 2005). For a comparison of the moral system in James with other Greco-Roman and Judaic texts, cf. Strange (2010).

Cyprus (cf. Acts 8:1; 11:19). James, as one of their shepherd-overseers, endeavoured to provide them with pastoral consolation.

The reference in 1:1 to the 'twelve tribes' reflects the author's conviction that the end-time hope for the return of God's chosen people was now being fulfilled for believers in Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. This eschatologically-oriented message matches James' self-designation as a bondservant of the Father and the Son. Broadly speaking, the topics addressed in James focus on the theme of living under the new covenant. Indeed, the author alludes often to both Old Covenant Law and to Jesus' new covenant teachings. During Jesus' first advent, he inaugurated the kingdom of God (2:5). Also, through Jesus' words and works, he clarified the foremost ethical priorities of the divine kingdom.

An assessment of the scholarly discourse[9] points to the divine kingdom including God's presence and rule over human hearts, regardless of where and when they live. This kingdom embraces all who walk in fellowship with the Lord and do his will. The kingdom is governed by God's laws, which are summed up in humankind's duty to love the Lord supremely and love others unreservedly. Moreover, this kingdom, which was foretold by the prophets and introduced by Jesus, would one

[9] The scholarly discourse on the divine kingdom is vast. Concerning what the biblical and extra-biblical literature teaches about the kingdom of God, cf. Bivin and Tilton (2015); Duling (1992), Marshall (2009), and McClain (2001). In terms of what the four Gospels reveal about the divine kingdom, cf. Green (2013). With respect to Paul's letters and the kingdom of God, cf. Kreitzer (1993). The theme of God's kingdom, as developed in the later New Testament, is examined in Kim (1997). For a treatment of how the theme of God's kingdom fits within the biblical narrative of the history of redemption, cf. Schreiner (2013). Concerning how the divine kingdom theologically relates to the atoning sacrifice of the Son at Calvary, cf. Treat (2014). A comparison of the three leading millennial views of the kingdom can be found in Walvoord (1983). For two views regarding the connection between the kingdom promises and the testaments, cf. Kaiser (1991); Waltke (1991).

day displace all the kingdoms of this world, following the return of the Redeemer. God's kingdom is the society in which believers ultimately find perfect congruity, but its realisation awaits the end of the age.

3. The Biblical Concept of the Law

The Hebrew noun *tôrâ* is often rendered as 'law'.[10] While in some contexts this legal nuance is present, it is too narrow and rigid to insist on it in all places where *tôrâ* occurs. The more basic meaning of the noun is 'instruction' or 'teaching' and denotes a way of life, that is, one characterised by rectitude and virtue. The purpose of the Torah, then, is not merely to present a fixed number of laws embedded within it. Rather, as divinely revealed instruction, the Torah is the prologue to the redemptive story found in the Judeo-Christian canon. In whole and in part, the Torah presents God's will for his children on how to live in an upright manner.

Similarly, the Greek noun *nomos* is often rendered 'law'.[11] In some contexts, *nomos* refers to a formalized set of rules prescribing what people must do. These can range from ordinances and commands to customs and traditions sanctioned by society. In the New Testament, the noun usually refers to the Pentateuch (namely, the first five books of Moses), but it can also denote the Old Testament as a whole. While the Greek noun primarily refers to that which regulates behaviour, it can also denote the promise of God (cf. Luke 24:44). Additionally, the term refers to a word of instruction that is divine, not human, in origin and that indicates the path of righteousness and blessing.

[10] The information in this paragraph is a revision of material in Lioy (2004:13).
[11] The information in this paragraph is a revision of material in Lioy (2004:15).

Within both Judaism and Christianity, the Ten Commandments (as recorded in Exod 20:1–12 and Deut 5:6–21) hold a premier status.[12] Also, the Decalogue is regarded as the moral law, or the basic list of God's universal ethical norms for proper human conduct. Moreover, the Ten Commandments are considered the theological foundation for all other ordinances and directives in scripture. Accordingly, James 1:25 and 2:12 use the word 'law' to denote the ethical teachings of the Old Testament, especially as expressed in the Ten Commandments (cf. 2:10–11).[13]

This is the same law that Jesus said he came to fulfil, not abolish (Matt 5:17), and which finds its culmination in him (Rom 10:4).[14] Jesus perfectly obeyed the law and brought to pass its types and prophecies. Also, in Jesus, the law finds its significance and continuity. Through the Saviour's ministry of teaching and his redemptive work on the cross, those who are united to him by faith are able to understand and apply the precepts of Scripture, as expressed in the law.

During the first century AD, specialists in Judaism debated which of their many commandments were the greatest. When an expert in the interpretation of the Mosaic Law asked Jesus for his opinion, the Saviour declared that loving God with all one's heart, soul, and mind was the foremost injunction (Matt 22:39; cf. Deut 6:5). The second premier directive was to love one's neighbour as oneself (Matt 22:40; cf. Lev 19:18). Jesus noted that the entire Old Testament was based on these two commands.

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[12] The information in this paragraph is a revision of material in Lioy (2004:6–7).

[13] For an examination of the law motif in James and its connection to the Torah, cf. Ruzer (2014:73–88); Wall (1997a:83–97).

[14] The information in this paragraph is a revision of material in Lioy (2004:137–8).

Concerning Paul, he no longer saw himself as being under the control and condemnation of the law (1 Cor 9:20); yet, the apostle stated that he was 'subject to the law of Christ' (v. 21). Schreiner (1993:544) surmises that the preceding phrase most likely refers to Jesus' ethical teachings, which reiterated the moral standards found in the Old Testament (cf. Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 14:34; Eph 6:2–3). Paul asserted that every directive recorded in Scripture was summed up in the command to love others as much as we love ourselves (Rom 13:9). Verse 10 states that when believers make every effort to treat others with the sensitivity and compassion of the Saviour, they do what is prescribed in the law. In short, love is the essence and fulfilment of the law.

The apostle repeated the same truth in Galatians 5:14, when he wrote that believers, by loving and serving others, satisfied what the law required. Expressed differently, God's people are closest to pleasing him when they are unconditional and unreserved in showing compassion and kindness toward others. The directive recorded in Leviticus 19:18 is the supreme commandment in terms of defining how people should treat one another. This dictum is also royal, for among all the commandments given by God (who is the sovereign King of the universe), it sums up the entirety of the law.

In concord with Jesus and Paul, James 2:8 builds on the preceding theological truth by stressing that the 'royal law' would become the guiding principle in the future messianic kingdom proclaimed by Jesus at the onset of his earthly ministry (cf. Matt 4:17; Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:43). The author of James observed that believers are doing well when they love others as much as they love themselves. The point is that believers cannot heed the most important directive in scripture and at the same time discriminate against others (cf. 2:1).

Though it is disputed, one view is that the Lutheran confessions set forth a threefold theological use of the Law:[15] (1) a civil use: to restrain evil in the world through punishment (cf. Rom 13:1–7; 1 Tim 1:8–11); (2) a soteriological / pedagogical use: to point out sin and the need for salvation (cf. Rom 7:7–12; Gal 3:19–24); and, (3) a moral / normative use: to provide a guide for sanctified living among the regenerate (cf. Rom 7:25; 13:8–10; 1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2, 15–16). In contrast, the purpose of the gospel is to provide forgiving grace through the ministry of the Word and the sacraments (i.e. baptism and the Lord's Supper).

4. The Biblical Concept of Wisdom

The letter from James shares common theological elements with the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, Second Temple Judaism, the Gospels, and the Pauline corpus. The Greek word for wisdom, *sophia*, occurs four times in James (1:5; 3:13, 15, 17) and serves as a useful, implied concept to group all the various subjects discussed in the letter. In turn, James applied Jewish wisdom, as it was developed and controlled by the ethical teachings of Jesus (mirroring what is recorded in the gospels), to various pastoral issues.

In the first-century AD Greek view of reality, wisdom was equated with understanding how to live to achieve the so-called 'highest good' (Latin, *summum bonum*);[16] in other words, the wisdom of one's decisions and behaviour depended on evaluating it in light of the pragmatic, temporal goal of experiencing a maximal existence (e.g. obtaining self-fulfilment, experiencing pleasure, minimizing pain, and

[15] For a concise, substantive deliberation of the threefold theological use of the law within Lutheranism, cf. Engelbrecht (2011); MacPherson (2009); Murray (2008).

[16] The following are the representative secondary sources that have influenced the discourse on the Hellenistic view of wisdom: Blanshard (2006); Goetzmann (2014); Ryan (2014); Wilckens (1971).

so on). Similarly, in contemporary parlance, the notion of 'wisdom' is equated with theoretical intelligence, human speculations, cleverness, and providing secular, utilitarian advice about how to be successful.

In contrast to the preceding views, the biblical notion of 'wisdom' is defined by a fear of the Lord (cf. Job 28:28; Pss 34:11; 110:11; Prov 1:7; 9:10; 31:30; Eccles 12:13) and a faithful submission to his will (cf. Isa 11:1–2; Mal 3:5).[17] Fearing the Lord does not mean responding to Him in cringing terror; instead, it refers to honouring, trusting, and obeying him. Furthermore, a God-centred sagacity is demonstrated by heeding the commandments of scripture, which for the Israelites was codified in the Mosaic Law. Correspondingly, wisdom, as understood in scripture, leads to life, whereas folly ends in death (cf. Prov 26:27; 28:10; Ps 7:14–16). Ultimately, divine wisdom is incarnated in the Son (cf. 1 Cor 1:24, 30).

The writer of James builds on the preceding Hebraic mindset when he explains what it means for the believer's entire person to be characterized by wisdom.[18] His operational premise is that everyone is an indivisible entity, in which the labels 'soul' and 'spirit' are used to refer to the ontological unity that characterizes one's material and immaterial existence.[19] The opposite of such a cohesive mindset would be individuals who vacillate in their resolve to live for God and behave

[17] The following are the representative secondary sources that have influenced the discourse on the Hebraic view of wisdom: Goldberg (1980); Rudolph (2005); Scott (2007); Wilson (1997).

[18] Concerning the intertextuality between the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, Second Temple Judaism, and the letter from James, cf. Adamson (1989:363–9); Bauckham (1999:29–35); Chilton (2005:307–16); Davids (2001:77–83); Kirk (1969:32–8); McCartney (2009:45–9, 280–92); Shanks and Witherington (2003:152–6); Witherington (2007:485–91); Wall (1997a:35–8, 88).

[19] An overview of the first-century AD Jewish perspective known as 'ontological holism' can be found in Lioy (2011:28–29).

in ways that conflict with his will. Expressed another way, these are people who flip-flop between heeding the injunctions of scripture and acquiescing to the value system of pagan society (cf. 1:5-7). Such a disposition is associated with folly and manifested in those who live as practical atheists (cf. Pss 14:1; 53:1).

5. The Interrelationship between the Mosaic Law, Faith, and Good Deeds

The issue of the Mosaic Law, faith, and good deeds, especially as it relates to the teachings of James and Paul, warrants particular attention. Evidently, some among the readership of James boasted about their 'faith', but failed to demonstrate it through loving acts to the disadvantaged (2:14).[20] For James, belief in the Son expressed itself in displays of assistance toward the needy. The idea is not that people are saved by doing good works; rather, the reality of their faith is validated by living uprightly and ministering to the destitute. In the absence of these two factors, claims to faith are suspect. Genuine faith that leads to salvation obeys the scriptural injunction to love others unstintingly.

James targeted those who voiced empty platitudes, yet did nothing to help poverty-stricken individuals. In this case, those in need required food and clothing (v. 15). If the religious individual merely left the destitute with a hollow pious greeting, it did the latter person no good (v. 16). The more charitable response was to join meaningful deeds with well-intentioned words. For instance, the wealthy believer could be a source of divine blessing by helping to clothe the naked and feed the hungry.

[20] Portions of the discourse in this section are a revision of Lioy (2013:203–8).

The focus is on a broad concept of intellectual assent versus genuine belief. Intellectual assent is 'dead' (v. 17) and useless, being devoid of charitable acts. An active faith, however, is vibrant, being characterized by concern and compassion for others. The iconic figure of the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin, observed that while faith alone saves, the faith that saves is never alone.[21] James wanted to move his readers from an atrophied and apathetic faith to one that was robust and vibrant. That is why he stressed the necessity of faith in the Son expressing itself by means of good 'deeds' (v. 18).

James anticipates an imaginary objector declaring, 'You have faith; I have deeds'.[22] The idea is that there are two equally valid types of faith, namely, one that simply believes and another that acts on that belief. James challenged the idea that genuine, saving faith has no effect on the way a person acts. In short, trusting in the Messiah is authenticated by doing kind deeds for others. When such faith is planted in the soil of kind acts, it has an opportunity to thrive.

Next, the author commented on the presumed value of merely believing in the existence of God by noting that this by itself does not result in eternal life. After all, even the demons are monotheists, for they affirm that there is only one God and it causes them to tremble with fear (v. 19; cf. Deut 6:4; Mark 12:29). The obvious conclusion is that 'faith without deeds is useless' (Jas 2:20), for dead orthodoxy is barren of eternal fruit.

[21] The exact quote from Calvin (1547) is as follows: 'It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone'.

[22] In this portion of the letter from James, the author used a common first-century AD style of communication called the diatribe. His pointed interjections to an imagined dialogue partner were not primarily meant to attack but to instruct and admonish (cf. Bauckham 1999:57–60). For a consideration of the basic rhetorical features in and structure of James, cf. Thurén (1995); Watson (1993); Witherington (2007:388–93).

To reinforce his point, James presented illustrations from the lives of two prominent Old Testament characters—Abraham (the patriarch) and Rahab (the prostitute). James introduced each example by means of a rhetorical question with which his readers were expected to give full and hearty agreement. In the case of Abraham, when he was about 85, he believed God's promise concerning a son to be born through Sarah (Gen 15:5).[23]

Verse 6 indicates that the patriarch regarded the Lord's pledge as being reliable and dependable. Indeed, the patriarch was confident that God was fully capable of bringing about what he had promised. Consequently, Abraham's faith was 'credited … to him as righteousness'. Put another way, the Lord considered the patriarch's response of faith as proof of his genuine commitment and evidence of his steadfast loyalty. Paul referred to this verse in Romans 4:3 to stress that an upright standing before God comes through faith, not by means of obedience to the law (cf. Gal 3:6). As Abraham's life illustrated, God unconditionally pardons the believing sinner on the basis of Jesus' atoning sacrifice (Rom 3:25–26).

Years later, when Abraham was about 116, he submitted to God's test to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:1–19). This was an act of faith on the part of the patriarch (Heb 11:17–19) in which he demonstrated that he feared God (Gen 22:12). In keeping with what was noted above about the fear of the Lord, this meant that Abraham followed the Creator in unmitigated obedience. James 2:21 explains that the patriarch's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, proved that his faith was genuine and that he existed in a right relationship with God. It was not the deed

[23] For a comparative analysis of the theme of Abraham's faith in Galatians 3, Romans 4, Hebrews 11, and James 2, cf. Longenecker (1977). The author explores how the various New Testament writings dealt with the relationship of merit to the patriarch's faith, especially within the context of literature arising out of Second Temple Judaism.

that justified Abraham; instead, he showed himself to be justified through the saving faith that was manifested in his virtuous deed. Verse 22 says that the patriarch's faith and actions worked together, with his actions making his faith complete.

James 2:23 and Romans 4:3 both quote Genesis 15:6 when referring to Abraham's justification. Paul maintained that God counted the patriarch to be righteous because of his faith. James stressed a related truth, namely, that Abraham vindicated the reality of his previously existing faith and his upright status before God by obeying the Lord. Specifically, the patriarch showed by his actions that he genuinely was God's friend (cf. 2 Chron 20:7). This indicates that Abraham so pleased God by his life that the Lord showered the patriarch with his favour in a distinctive way.

A superficial reading of James 2:24 seems to teach that people are justified by what they do and not by faith alone. Moreover, some have been confused by the author's concept of justification here, and how it relates to Paul's teaching on the subject (cf. Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; 3:11); yet, a careful analysis of scripture indicates there is no real disagreement.[24] Laato (1997:77) clarifies that 'James and Paul differ from one another terminologically'; yet, they remain in agreement 'theologically'. Likewise, McCartney (2009:272) observes that while James and Paul utilize 'shared vocabulary and examples of Judaism',

[24] Varying approaches concerning the relationship between the teachings of James and Paul on the issue of justification can be found in the following representative secondary sources: Adamson (1989:195–203); Bauckham (1999:113–20); Chester and Martin (1994:46–53); Brosend (2004:78–82); Dibelius (1976:174–80); Davids (1993); Dayton (2009b:461–2); Laato (1997:71–81); Laws (1992:625–6); McCartney (2009:53–6, 272–9); McKnight (2011:259–63); Moo (2015:59–65); Painter (1999:265–9); Penner (1996:47–75); Shanks and Witherington (2003:156–62); Witherington (2007:466–70); Verseput (1997:105–15); Wall (1997b:555–6).

they do so in ‘different ways’ and against the backdrop of ‘quite different problems’.

A prime example of the above is the concept of ‘justification’, which appears in both the writings of Paul and the letter from James. For Paul, ‘justification’ means to declare a sinner not guilty before the Father by means of faith in the Son and his death in the sinner’s place. Because the Messiah died to atone for humankind’s iniquity, the repentant sinner can enjoy a standing of righteousness before God. In James, the concept of ‘justification’ is taken one step further to include the validation of one’s faith in the sight of God and others. Expressed differently, the upright status of believers with God is vindicated by the way they choose to live.

Both James and Paul affirm that those who are born again possess saving faith. For instance, at the Jerusalem Council (circa AD 48), Peter notes that it is ‘through the grace’ (Acts 15:11) of the Saviour that the penitent are ‘saved’. In turn, James endorses Peter’s statement (vv. 13–18). Likewise, in James 1:18, the author states that the Father gives believers spiritual ‘birth through the word of truth’ (i.e. the gospel). Similarly, Paul declares in Ephesians 2:5 and 8 that it is ‘by grace’ that people are ‘saved through faith’. Moreover, according to Galatians 2:9, ‘James, Cephas, and John’ affirm the gospel message Paul taught.

From a Lutheran perspective, the Spirit uses the means of grace to bring about a change in a sinner’s disposition. More specifically, the Spirit works through the proclamation of the gospel to foster a metamorphosis of one’s view, feeling, and purpose in life. This radical transformation results in the penitent turning to God with a corresponding turning away from sin. The natural consequence of saving faith is a lifestyle that actively promotes and demonstrates righteousness (cf. Rom 10:8–15).

Rahab the prostitute is the second example put forward by James of genuine, saving faith. Joshua 2:1–21 records the episode in which Rahab hid the Israelite spies and sent them safely away by a different road. Like Abraham, Rahab was shown to be righteous when her trust in God prompted her to act in a way that met with his approval (Jas 2:25). God was pleased with Rahab's virtuous deed, because she operated in faith (cf. Heb 11:6, 31). James 2:26 reveals that the connection between genuine, saving faith and godly deeds is as close as that between body and spirit. When the spirit (or breath of life) is separated from the body, the latter dies (cf. Eccles 12:7). Likewise, faith that is barren of any fruit is equally dead. Oppositely, living faith manifests itself in good works advocated by God's moral law.

6. The Christological Emphases Found in James

On one level, while engaging James, it is constructive to recognise the interpretive primacy and controlling influence of the gospel. This includes centring the hermeneutical enterprise on the person and work of the Messiah and regarding him as the redemptive link between the Old and New Testaments (cf. Luke 24:27, 44–47; John 5:39; Acts 13:27).[25] The endeavour also affirms the priority of a Christ-centred, cruciform theology (such as that found in the writings of Paul).[26]

[25] A thoroughgoing exploration of a gospel-centred hermeneutic can be found in Goldsworthy (2010). He maintains the following interrelated presuppositions: (1) This approach 'functions as the matrix for understanding the relatedness of the whole Bible to the person and work of Jesus' (p. 15); (2) Jesus' salvific identity and ministry provide regenerate interpreters with a 'single focal point' for making sense of 'reality' (p. 21); and, (3) Jesus 'mediates the ultimate truth about God in all things and thus about the meaning of the Bible' (p. 48).

[26] For a case study analysis of a representative passage in Paul's writings through the prism of his crucicentric thinking, especially in dialogue with a confessional Lutheran

On another level, it crucial to avoid lapsing into a gospel-monism, in which one's interpretation of scripture collapses into a narrow, sterile, and one-dimensional view of what God's Word supposedly teaches. Even Paul, in his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, affirmed the importance of proclaiming the 'whole will of God' (Acts 20:27). The apostle was emphasising the Creator's purpose and plan throughout salvation-history, as revealed in the entire Judeo-Christian canon.[27]

The preceding observations bring to mind the earlier discourse about a so-called 'canon within a canon. As Carson (1984) observes, this phenomenon is a kind of biblical 'reductionism'. It occurs when one portion of scripture (such as the four gospels or the Pauline writings) is overemphasised and valued, while other portions (such as the letter from James) are downplayed and treated with suspicion. The peril of this approach is that interpreters, by 'arbitrarily' placing the 'locus' of 'controlling authority' on what they favour over what they disfavour, stand in judgment of God. Furthermore, such a hermeneutical method calls into question the inspiration and authority of the Old and New Testaments (cf. Deut 4:2; 2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21; Rev 22:18–19).[28]

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perspective, cf. Lioy 2015. For a consideration of the cruciform theology found in the letter from James, cf. Davids (1980).

[27] For an explanation of the essence, contours, and significance of salvation-history, cf. Carson (2015a:236–9) and Lioy (2014:78–87). In terms of messianic themes and prophecies found throughout the Old Testament, cf. Kaiser (1995), Van Groningen (1990); Wright (1992). For a synopsis of how the letter from James adumbrates the redemptive storyline of scripture, cf. McKnight (2011:4–9). For a consideration of intertextual issues in the letter from James (e.g. Old Testament quotations, biblical allusions, etc.), cf. Popkes (1999).

[28] Various specialists have deliberated the phenomenon of a 'canon within a canon', especially as it relates to a Christ-centred hermeneutic (e.g. Hasel 1991:66–7, 107; Osborne 2006:360–1; Thielman 2005:36–7). This includes members of the SATS academic community. For instance, Peppler (2012:132–3) affirms that such an

Concerning the letter from James, a thoughtful reading of the epistle challenges the notion that it is at cross-purposes with Paul's teaching about justification by faith. (The latter is a major point advocated in the discourse of the preceding section.) As a corollary, there is value in taking the letter of James seriously in its own right and objectively evaluating its theological importance in that regard. The preceding endeavour includes considering the strong Christocentric emphases in James.

Admittedly, the name of Jesus is only mentioned twice in the epistle, specifically, in 1:1 and 2:1. This crude metric could lead to the incorrect inference that the author pays little attention to the Messiah and his redemptive ministry, especially when compared to the four gospels and the writings of Paul; yet, an exegetical analysis of James calls into question such a supposition.[29] A corresponding point is that whatever James states in his letter (e.g. concerning such matters as dealing with temptation, taming the tongue, and the relationship between faith and deeds) is grounded in the truth he affirms about the Saviour. These observations should give one pause in hastily relegating the teachings in the epistle to a virtual second-tier status, especially when compared to other New Testament writings (e.g. those found in the four gospels and the Pauline corpus).

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approach not only results in, but also requires a 'form of Canon within a Canon'. In response, Smith (2012:162–3) raises the concern of a 'two-tier approach to the scriptures', wherein the four Gospels (or any other portion of Scripture) are treated as 'superior revelation to the remainder' of God's Word.

[29] The following are the representative secondary sources that have influenced the discourse on the Christological data in James: Barker (2002:51–6); Bauckham (1999:138–40); Davids (1982:39–41); Hurtado (1997:173); Jobes (2011:185–94); Reumann (1999:129–35); Wall (1997a:27–34, 295–7).

A useful starting point is the direct reference in James 1:1. The author refers to himself as a 'servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ' (θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος). The NIV rendering notwithstanding, none of the Greek nouns have an article (i.e. they are anarthrous). One inference is that the references to 'God' and 'Lord Jesus Christ' denote two of the three persons within the Trinity, namely, the Father and the Son. A second under-appreciated implication is that the verse presents an exalted view of the Messiah. For instance, when James refers to himself as a bondservant of the Father and the Son, the insinuation is that the two equally exercise divine authority. Moreover, James sees himself as submitting to and worshiping the Father and the Son without any differentiation.

A second direct reference is found in James 2:1. Here the author identifies his readers (Greek, *adelphoi*, 'brothers and sisters') as those who have trusted in 'our glorious Lord Jesus Christ' (τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης). Because of their baptismal union with the Messiah, James urged them to eschew all forms of discrimination and preferentialism. There are several ways in which the genitival form of the Greek noun, *doxes* ('glory'), can be interpreted. One option is that the term is taken to be a genitive of sphere or place. If so, the grammatical construction draws attention to the exalted condition or nature of the Son. He conquered death, returned to heaven, and exists in a state of 'glory' at the Father's right hand (cf. Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33; 7:56; Phil 2:9; Heb 1:3).

A second option considers 'glory' as being appositionally related to the phrase rendered 'our Lord Jesus Christ'. If so, the Greek noun clarifies a specific aspect of the Son's personhood, namely, that he is the ineffable presence of God incarnate (cf. Col 1:15; 2:9; Heb 1:3). This observation brings to mind the way in which the rabbis later described the Lord's glory abiding with Israel as *shekinah*, from a Hebrew word

for 'dwelling'.[30] God's *shekinah* dwelt with the Israelites in the wilderness period, came to Solomon's temple when it was built, and then departed when the temple was destroyed. The evangelist in the Fourth Gospel depicts Jesus as God's *shekinah* returned to earth (John 1:14). In a similar vein, Paul said it was possible to see God's glory in Jesus of Nazareth when he was on earth, and that believers have the promise of sharing in that glory (Rom 5:2).

Both of the preceding options communicate an exceedingly high Christology. Be that as it may, numerous English translations render 'glory' as an attributive genitive.[31] The exegetical implication, then, is that *doxes* refers to some quality or characteristic of the Messiah and should be taken to have the meaning of 'glorious'. A logical query is the way in which James considers Jesus to be 'glorious'. Three possible responses are noteworthy: (1) Jesus unveils the inherent glory of the triune God (cf. John 1:14; Heb 1:3); (2) the glory of God enabled Jesus to rise from the dead (cf. Rom 1:4); and, (3) Jesus dwells in eternal glory (cf. John 17:5; Rev 1:5, 12–18).

Irrespective of how the genitival construction of *doxes* is to be syntactically understood, the author's pastoral emphasis remains the same. In particular, the diaspora community is summoned to put their faith in the risen and exalted Messiah. A further analysis of the letter from James indicates that the two overt references to Jesus are neither incidental nor peripheral to the writer's main argument; instead, 1:1 and 2:1 point to a Christocentric perspective that is woven tightly throughout the fabric of the epistle's discourse.

[30] The information in this paragraph is a revision of material in Lioy (2007a:27).
[31] E.g. Lexham, NET, NIV, NASB, NLT, and NRSV.

The preceding statement is validated by other discernible comments made in James concerning the Messiah. For instance, both 1:1 and 2:1 refer to Jesus as 'Lord' (Greek, *kyrios*). Admittedly, Hellenistic writers could use the noun, not to point to an individual's divine status, but to signal his place of high rank within society (comparable to the medieval appellation, 'lord of the manor'). For all that, hundreds of years before the Son's incarnation, the Septuagint consistently translated the Hebrew proper noun, *Yahweh,* as *kyrios*. Eventually, within Hellenistic Judaism, *kyrios* was consistently used to denote the covenant name for Israel's God.

Centuries earlier, after the chosen people returned to the Promised Land from 70 years of exile in Babylon, they renounced the polytheistic ways of their forbears and became staunch monotheists. For this reason, Deuteronomy 6:4 operated as a central tenet of their faith.[32] Otherwise known as the *Shema* (a transliteration of the first Hebrew verb appearing in the verse), Moses declares that the 'LORD our God, the LORD is one'. As the NIV margin notes, the Hebrew can be translated in several different ways. Other possibilities include the following: 'the LORD our God is one LORD'; 'the LORD is our God, the LORD is one'; and, 'the LORD is our God, the LORD alone'.

One meaning of the *Shema* is that Yahweh is the only real God. Also, the statement, 'the Lord is one' expresses not only the uniqueness but also the unity of God. There is no essential division or multiplicity in God. For this reason, the Israelites were always to worship only the Lord as their God and never divide their devotion between the one true God and any pagan deities (cf. Exod 20:1–6; Deut 5:6-10). James 2:19

[32] The information in this paragraph is a revision of material in Lioy (2008:409–10).

reflects this strong monotheistic perspective when it states, 'there is one God' (or 'God is one'; Greek, εἷς ἐστιν ὁ θεός).[33]

In light of what has been noted, it is astonishing that the author uses *kyrios* ('Lord') to denote both the Father and the Son. Indeed, the writer makes no attempt to explain how it is possible for *Yahweh* to be applied equally to the Father and the Son. Incidentally, an examination of the rest of the New Testament indicates that *kyrios* is often used to refer to Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Acts 2:36; Rom 10:9; Phil 2:8–11). The implication is that the four gospels and the Pauline corpus, along with the letter from James, applied God's covenant name to Jesus.

A comparison of James 4:12 and 5:7–9 offers another striking example of the exceedingly high Christocentric perspective found throughout the letter. The former verse declares that God alone is the righteous 'Lawgiver and Judge' (v. 12), and that only he has the authority to overrule or change his edicts.[34] This is true because as the 'Lawgiver', God is the author of the Mosaic legal code. Also, as the 'Judge', he is the administrator of the law. In short, he is both the legislator and enforcer of His eternal decrees. Accordingly, only He has the right and power to 'save and destroy'. Moreover, while the law given by the

[33] In addition to affirming the unity, or singularity, of God's being (cf. Mark 12:29), Deuteronomy 6:4 reveals that God is simple and unchanging in his essence. He is not composed of different elements, and nothing can be added to or taken away from him. Scripture also teaches the existence of three persons in the Godhead. This is called the doctrine of the Trinity (from the Latin word *trinitas*, which means 'threeness'). The notion of the three-in-oneness of God is nowhere fully formulated in the Bible; yet, scripture provides ample evidence to support the doctrine. It affirms that the Lord exists in three personal distinctions known respectively as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14). Each person is co-equal and co-eternal with the other two (cf. Isa 48:16; Matt 3:16–17; Lioy 2007a:101).

[34] The information in this paragraph is a revision of material in Lioy (2007c:421).

Lawgiver brings condemnation to transgressors, the righteous Judge is the only one with the authority to save the condemned offender.

In 5:7–9, James spotlights Jesus in His role as the sovereign Lord and righteous Judge.[35] The writer notes that at Jesus' Second Advent, all manner of economic and social injustice would be addressed. His eschatological agenda includes overturning and reversing every inequitable judgment the wicked rich make against His impoverished, socially-ostracized followers. The consequence is that James views the Son as united with the Father in the role of divine Judge. The implication is that Jesus exercises a prerogative reserved only for God in the Hebrew sacred writings (cf. Eccles 3:17; 11:9; 12:14). A correspondingly exalted Christology is found in Revelation 22:3, which reveals that the 'Father and the Son jointly share the responsibility of ruling and adjudicating from the celestial throne' (Lioy 2003:152).

A related phenomenon is that the letter from James restates didactic information attributed to Jesus in the four gospels, especially Matthew.[36] Indeed, an analysis of the relevant biblical texts indicates that James made use of a common oral tradition of Jesus' teachings. Nonetheless, while there are unmistakable conceptual and thematic links, no direct word-for-word correspondences can be found between what James wrote and what appears in the Gospels. Most likely, then, James composed his letter sometime before any of the four gospels were written.[37] If so, the implication is that James communicates an inspired tradition of the Messiah's discourse that predates the gospels.

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[35] The information in this paragraph is a revision of material in Lioy (2007c:426).

[36] For an assessment of possible sayings of Jesus' in the letter from James, cf. Adamson (1989:173–94); Bauckham 1999:93–108); Johnson (2004:136–54); Penner (1996:241–54); Shanks and Witherington (2003:146–52); Wall (1997a:22–3).

[37] The general scholarly consensus is that Mark's Gospel was written first (circa the mid-50s to the late 60s AD), with Matthew (circa AD 50 to 70), Luke (circa the 60s to

The use James makes of Jesus' gospel-centred teaching corresponds to, rather than conflicts with comparable didactic portions found in the gospels. This phenomenon in James points to another aspect of its high Christology. For instance, both James and the gospels portray Jesus as completely overshadowing Moses,[38] in which there is continuity and advance in God's redemptive plan. Also, in the Gospels, Jesus' teaching becomes the biblical standard for his disciples to heed. Similarly, in the letter from James, the restatement of the Messiah's words becomes an ethical compass for a displaced faith community in crisis. Furthermore, as in the gospels, so too in James, the author affirmed that what Jesus taught is the valid and correct benchmark for upright conduct among members of God's eschatological household. It just so happens that Paul articulates a corresponding view in his writings (cf. Rom 8:2; 1 Cor 9:19–21).

7. The Emphasis on Law and Wisdom in James

Consonant with what was articulated earlier, in Jewish thought, the Torah is understood to be divine instruction on how to live in a godly manner. An underappreciated truth is that a comparable emphasis can be found in both the gospels (e.g. John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10) and the writings of Paul (e.g. Eph 2:8–10; Titus 2:14). It is conceded that some might feel uneasy with the preceding observation, either out of concern for an incipient legalism being expressed or a semi-Pelagian view of one's relationship to God being affirmed.

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the 80s AD), and John (circa AD 50 to 85) being penned in the subsequent years and decades; cf. Bock (2002); Brown (1997); deSilva (2004); Strauss (2007).

[38] For a deliberation of the truth that Jesus completely overshadows Moses, cf. my forthcoming journal article titled, 'Making the case for Paul, not Jesus, as a new or second Moses'.

In response, the focus here is not on meriting one's salvation, especially since that is received by the Father's grace through faith in the Son. Incidentally, this truth is stressed in both the writings of Paul and James (cf. Eph 2:5; Titus 3:5; Jas 1:18). To clarify further, the emphasis is on God enabling believers to express the reality of their salvation through their upright conduct, which includes loving others unconditionally and unreservedly. This point is also stressed by Paul and James (cf. Rom 12:8–10; Phil 2:12–13; Jas. 1:27). In short, the letter from James voices a theological tenet articulated in the gospels and the Pauline corpus.

Furthermore, the letter from James reiterates the thoroughly Christ-centred outlook found in the four gospels. A case in point would be John's treatise, in which he presents Jesus as the epitome of wisdom and the divine, incarnate Torah.[39] Since the Son, as the culmination of the Father's revelation to humankind (cf. Heb 1:1), transcends the Mosaic Law and all its associated institutions, it is Jesus' teaching that becomes the foundation for what it means to live for God.[40] As argued in the preceding section, this mindset is affirmed in the letter from James.

In accord with the preceding outlook, Paul asserts that the Messiah is the incarnation of divine sagacity (1 Cor 1:22–24) and that the fruit produced by the Spirit forms the heartbeat of Christlike conduct (Gal 5:22–25). What Paul reveals about the Spirit's role in the lives of believers is complemented by what James discloses regarding the qualities connected with godly wisdom for Jesus' followers.[41] By way

[39] A comprehensive evaluation of the Fourth Gospel's identification of Jesus as the epitome of wisdom and the divine, incarnate Torah can be found in Lioy (2007a).

[40] A detailed consideration of the moral law from a Christ-centred perspective can be found in Lioy (2007b).

[41] For differing perspectives concerning whether the concept of wisdom in the letter from James is functionally equivalent to Paul's emphasis on the Spirit and the virtues He produces in the lives of believers (esp. Gal 5:22–23 and Jas 3:17, respectively), cf.

of example, the Father lavishly provides the Spirit to believers. In turn, the Spirit furnishes Christians with discernment and prudence to remain devoted to the Saviour, regardless of the adversities they encounter.

As noted in section 3, James considers the royal law as the guiding principle of God's eschatological kingdom. Correspondingly, the royal law serves as the foundation for the varied ethical declarations throughout the epistle (cf. 1:25; 2:8, 12). As in the gospels, the letter from James regards the two foremost injunctions to be an unconditional love for God and an unmitigated compassion for one's fellow human beings (cf. Matt 22:37–40; Mark 12:28–31; Luke 10:25–28). By serving others sacrificially, believers demonstrate the validity of their claim to worship the Creator. Moreover, they fulfil the ethical commands of the old covenant, which finds re-expression in the new covenant.[42]

The prominence given in the letter from James on the royal law mirrors the shift in emphasis in the Gospels from the Mosaic Law to the good news about God's kingdom. This change in focus is done in the following ways: directing attention away from a slavish observance of the rituals and customs mandated in first-century AD Judaism (e.g. being circumcised, offering temple sacrifices, and maintaining ritual purity); encouraging believers to find solace in the gospel; stressing the importance of God's law being internalised (by the Spirit through the means of grace); and, enabling believers to pursue godliness, especially by serving others in a humble, sacrificial manner.

Baker (2008:296–302); Chester and Martin (199:43–4); Davids (1980:103); Kirk (1969:25–8); Laato (1997:75–6); McCartney (2000:58–9).

[42] An affirmation of the moral law's enduring relevance can be found in Lioy (2004:189–201).

In summary, James urges his readers to conduct their lives in a godly way, especially in light of their baptismal union with the Son. As a result of their new birth, they abide in his sacred presence and submit to his will. This reflects a regenerate mindset and lifestyle, one that thrives in the soil of the Father's saving grace. Jesus' followers welcome this new covenant form of existence, for they know that at Jesus' Second Advent, he rights all wrongs and acquits his followers. Ultimately, the Spirit uses the believers' God-given faith to motivate and enable them to behave in a manner that reflects what the Creator originally decreed for humankind at the dawn of time.

8. Conclusion

This journal article undertakes a candid assessment of the continuing theological value of the letter from James. The incentive for doing so arises from the claim made by some within the Lutheran tradition that James and Paul either contradict or are at cross-purposes to one another. An additional motivation is connected with the assertion voiced by other Lutheran acolytes, who maintain that in order to preserve the integrity of the gospel, James must be read through a Pauline lens. Supposedly, Paul's letters should overshadow what James wrote, even if this results in creating a canon within a canon.

This essay recognises that Lutherans are not alone in wrestling with the dialectic between justification and sanctification, including how James and Paul approach this recurrent issue. The intent is not to somehow resolve a longstanding area of dispute; rather, it is to put forward an alternative view. The latter involves working through the following points of deliberation: background considerations related to James; the biblical concept of the law; the biblical concept of wisdom; the interrelationship between the Mosaic Law, faith, and good deeds; the

Christological emphases in James; and the emphasis on law and wisdom in James.

As the discourse unfolded in the various major sections of the journal article, the teachings in James were analysed and compared with the teachings of Jesus recorded in the gospels and the writings of Paul. As a result of this endeavour, it is reasonable to conclude that when James is carefully and thoughtfully read, it is found to complement, rather than contradict and challenge, Paul's teachings on justification by faith. A second major finding is that there remains exegetical benefit in taking the letter of James seriously in its own right, along with objectively assessing its theological importance in that regard. A third determination is that the message of salvation found in James is consistent with that appearing in the gospels, the Pauline corpus, and the rest of the New Testament.[43]

Jobes (2011:198) aptly observes that 'for too long the Protestant church has not appreciated the unique character of the book of James and has been distracted by questions raised when James is read in the canonical context of the Pauline writings on soteriology'. Adamson (1989:423) opines that despite those who disparage the theological value of the letter from James, it has a 'steady stream of enthusiastic admirers'. In this regard, Johnson (2004:242) avers that 'throughout the history of interpretation, James has been most appreciated theologically when allowed to speak in its own voice'. In a similar vein, Wall (1997a:295) offers two salient observations: (1) 'James is a Christian writing that retains a distinctively Jewish ethos'; and, (2) the 'faith community' is prudent to 'hear' the 'voice' of the letter and acknowledge it as being 'canonical'.

[43] For a synopsis of contemporary scholarship dealing with the continuing significance of the letter from James, cf. Harner (2004:26–8).

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