

A Hypothetical Letter to Martin Luther Concerning the Epistle of James

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In reading your “Preface to the New Testament,” I see you refer to the Epistle of James as “an epistle of straw” in comparison to John’s gospel, Paul’s epistles and Peter’s first epistle.¹ You describe it as lacking the gospel in its content. Elsewhere you question the authorship of the text and accuse James of contradicting himself.² In your preface to your translation of James, you argue that it cannot be apostolic, and you go so far as to say that James was “some good pious man who took some of the sayings of the apostles’ disciples and threw them thus on paper.”³ For these reasons, you treat the epistle as something of a second tier Scripture, not quite dismissed but also not advocated to the general public. You see it as useful but not always profitable.

Since at least 1519, you have been critical of James because you feel it offers a works-based faith.⁴ When dealing with practical matters, however, you still cite it quite frequently. Is this because you believe it suited for Christian edification only? Do you find yourself weighing the usefulness of the book against its apparent deficits?⁵ It is one thing to question how his epistle fits in with the greater corpus of texts. You would not be alone in expressing concerns about the epistle. All the same, it seems to me that you are too quick to dismiss the epistle. I feel that I must ask you, Dr. Luther, if you have thoroughly considered your words? Is your rejection based solely on the strong divide you see between law and gospel?⁶ If so, I would ask you to reconsider the words of James 2:14-26.

¹ Euan K. Cameron, Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Interpretation of Scripture*, vol. 6 in *The Annotated Luther* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 422.

² Paul W. Robinson, ed. *Church and Sacraments*, vol. 3 in *The Annotated Luther* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 120–23.

³ Martin Luther, “Preface to James and Jude,” *WA DB* 7, 1522 ed. Cited online at “Pristine Grace,” <https://www.pristinegrace.org/media.php?id=1158>, accessed on May 28, 2021.

⁴ Jason D. Lane, “Luther’s Criticism of James as a Key to his Biblical Hermeneutic,” in *Auslegung und Hermeneutik der Bibel in der Reformationszeit*, *Historia Hermeneutica Series Studia* 14, eds. Christine Christ-von Wedel and Sven Grosse (Tübingen: De Gruyter, 2016), 113.

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 16 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 30–31.

⁶ Lane, “Luther’s Criticism of James as a Key to his Biblical Hermeneutic,” 124.

Many read this text and see works without predicating faith. You have cited Rome's reliance upon this text in this manner as a reason for your reticence. Such a myopic view of the text rejects the immediate context. James is clearly drawing on the previous section and speaks of faith in robust terms. He rejects a shallow faith, a verbal consent to ideas. He insists on faith as the true motivation of any works done in the name of religion. It is distinct from the deeds of work, which are the manifestation of faith. As you once wrote, "It is as impossible to separate works from faith as burning and shining from fire."⁷ I believe both James and Paul would agree with you on this sentiment.⁸

First, I must ask you to consider what occasioned James' message on the nature of works. When James addresses his Christian brothers with the question τί τὸ ὄφελος, he brings to bear the same question Paul presented the Corinthians in the context of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:32). What benefit exists in a faith that accomplishes nothing? For this is James's meaning in ἔργον. He does not mean sacramental actions or beneficent deeds. James clearly has in mind a faith that is active in character. Such active faith is evidence of the Holy Spirit's quickening (1 Pet 3:18-19). To love the brethren is to love God, and the one who loves God will love the brethren (1 John 3:4-10). Thus, James is not speaking of another gospel or a weaker gospel with works being the means of faith but rather a faith that is living and active. In his question about leaving a brother destitute, is not James drawing upon Jesus's eschatological parable of the king (Matt 25:31-46)? This the law of the king (νόμος βασιλικός, James 2:8). Where is the contradiction or the lessening of the message? His dealing with works is not *for* salvation but rather *because of* salvation. A faith that does not manifest the goodness of God in our actions is indeed dead. What living faith would not manifest the goodness of the living God?

Now, we must extend this thought. If one does not have living works, does one truly follow the living God? And if so, is that person saved?⁹ This is why such faith must be dead (James 2:17). There is no salvation in dead faith, and dead faith is that which might affirm truth but does not live it out. Such dead belief exists throughout the created order, but it accomplishes no real regeneration act (James 2:19). As James points out: τῶν ἔργων ἀργή ἐστίν. While ἔργον is that which has substance and accomplishes work, ἀργος is that which accomplishes nothing, has no tangible effect.¹⁰

⁷ Martin Luther, "Preface to Romans," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/prefacetoRomans.toc.html>, accessed May 30, 2021.

⁸ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, Wiley Blackwell Commentaries (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 177–78.

⁹ Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, NICONT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 162–63. McKnight deals with the subject of being saved through works, highlighting that faith and works are unified as a reflection of the oneness of God – a valid, little explored perspective.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 171–72.

Second, we should consider carefully the biblical examples James employs. The citation of Abraham's justification shows up first faith and then works as faith manifest. Abraham believed first and God justified him (Gen 15; James 2:23). His offering of Isaac was a manifestation of the belief, not a means of obtaining faith (Gen 22). What do we do then with verse 24, "a person is justified by works?" One must assume that James uses the term δικαιώω in a sense of justification before witnesses, in other words, before human observes. This is not justification before Christ, but justification before the world – the action of faith is the only faith they may observe (Matt 5:16). This is borne out in the example of Rahab. She acted to protect the Israelite scouts only because she already had a righteous fear of God (Joshua 2:8-14). Her faith may not have been perfect, but it was in God. Her faith prompted her to serve him, to do works. To whom did those works justify Rahab? Before the people of Israel and before Joshua, who recognized her works as an act of faith and included her in the people of Israel (Joshua 6:22-25).

Third, we must consider that James deals with faith and works in a relationship which comes to completion.¹¹ Faith brings about action. Works are the inevitable result of true faith. This type of progressive logic is present in Paul's works as well as James's (Rom 5:1-5). Jesus also speaks about faith having good results, bearing good fruit (Luke 6:43). James is not arguing that works produce faith, only that the living faith in a living God yields living results. Life yields life. Death yields death (James 1:15).

Dr. Luther, I emphathize with your desire to avoid association with the Roman Catholic means of understanding works. Their interpretation is deficient and deserving of the criticism you leveled against it in your discussions.¹² Thankfully, within the setting and context of the rest of Scripture, we see that James's arguments are not those of the medieval church, who sought to gain righteousness without truly being justified in Christ. He instead places his trust in a living God who transforms us in faith to become the agents of his goodness in the world. And he argues that our justification is then manifest in the eyes of those who observe us. In conclusion, we find that James is in keeping with the words of Jesus and Paul. His perspective is one that assumes such faith and calls the believers to manifest what is a reality in them. As such, given the acceptance and use of the epistle in the early church, one has no reason to doubt that James should be included in the canon.

¹¹ McKnight, *The Letter of James*, 176.

¹² In discussion, Luther said, "That epistle of James causes us so much trouble, because the papists latch onto it alone and leave all the rest [of Scripture]." Lane, "Luther's Criticism of James as a Key to his Biblical Hermeneutic," 113.

I thank you for taking the time to read this correspondence, and I trust you will receive it in the spirit it is written. We are called to clarity of teaching, of making plain for our hearers that which the Spirit has given to us in the Scriptures. This is our place as teachers of the Word.

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