



The Letter of James and the Season of Advent: Common Themes

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The early weeks of Advent give Christian people an opportunity to come back into contact with biblical themes often skimmed over during the rest of the year: we are travelers in this life, always on the lookout for a home. The biblical categories for this identity are pilgrim and prophet. At the same time Advent, like all holy seasons, gives us another chance to seek God more earnestly.

Early in the season most of the liturgical readings hark back to the Old Testament and its concerns for justice and future judgment. Then come readings more focused on the messianic promise and our relationship with a personal God. Somewhat surprisingly, the letter of James has something to say about all of these themes, for it, perhaps more than any other Christian writing, marshals Old Testament themes under the New Testament banner. Unfortunately, the message of James has often been relegated by preachers and pamphleteers to the realm of polemics and partisan doctrines. Historically, James has been argued over more than meditated upon.

In this essay I hope to hear what James would have to say about Advent, especially in its traditional themes of pilgrimage, prophecy, and piety. Three passages

Common themes of pilgrimage, prophecy, and piety in the letter of James and the season of Advent make the book a valuable source of preaching and meditation in our preparation for Christmas.

especially draw our attention to the identity of God and, by implication, to our own identity in relation to him: James 1:1; 4:4–6; and 5:10.

GOD IS OUR HOME

James 1:1: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.” Right from the beginning the recipients of the letter are addressed as pilgrims and foreigners in this earthly life. Biblically speaking, the Diaspora tribes were the Jews scattered in areas outside their homeland. One can imagine how hard it was for the biblical Jews to maintain their identity outside Palestine, where language and culture had naturally reinforced their sense of being separate from the outside world. James now calls his audience the heirs of those Diaspora Jews. And so we, his modern audience, are to imagine our own lives as a constant struggle to maintain our special identity, to maintain the customs of our homeland.

My mother is Czech and has tried (with limited success) to get everyone in our family to pride themselves in the literature, music, and food of her mother country. But the old world is so different from the world in which her children grew up! James wants us to remember that we should never consider ourselves to be citizens of this world and to adopt its identity. Rather we are outsiders, pilgrims, strangers to the values and culture of this world.

It is conceivable that the author has adopted the name of “James” as a reminder of his Diaspora status.¹ Writings were often sent off in the religious world of late Second Temple Judaism under names calculated to persuade audiences that their authority should be accepted. James in Greek and Hebrew is written “Jacob,” and who is better qualified to address the “twelve tribes” than the Old Testament father who begot them? Who better to represent the whole Diaspora audience than the one whose best years were spent away from his native land? This is the one who said to Pharaoh, the archetypal resident of this world, “The years of my earthly sojourn are one hundred and thirty years; few and hard have been the years of my life. They do not compare with the years of the life of my ancestors during their long sojourn” (Gen 47:9); and later he ordered his son Joseph to bring back his bones to his native soil when his family returned.

If it is conceivable that James is a subtle hint to us that we are also pilgrims, then it is no wonder that the first chapter of the letter of James is filled with teachings about trials, temptations, and struggles to maintain identity in an alien land. In Gen 28–32 we read about Jacob, namesake of James. His life was filled with such afflictions and tests, caused by the Diaspora world around him (Laban and Pharaoh), by his own decisions and passions (his duplicity and deceit in dealing with his

¹Even the Church Fathers had ambivalent attitudes about “James,” because, as Jerome put it, the epistle seemed to be “published by someone else under his [the apostle’s] name” (*On Illustrious Men* 2.2). Later Eusebius called the epistle of James a “disputed book” and “held by some to be spurious” (quoted by R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* [London: Tyndale, 1956] 18).

father, Isaac, and his brother, Esau), and by God himself (the dream at Bethel and wrestling with the angel at the River Jabbok).

The New Testament Jacob first identifies himself and his pilgrim audience and then immediately speaks of trials and tests (James 1:2–4). A similar theme emerges later in the first chapter when trials are connected to temptations and desires (1:12–15).

Then, later in the chapter, the letter addresses the other pilgrim theme mentioned above: how to maintain a religious identity in an alien world. James urges us to stay “unstained by the world” (1:27). The audience may be deluged by a foreign culture replete with its own styles and fads, but James does not want them to forget about who they are (1:23–24) or be deceived about their religious origins (1:22, 26).

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The alternative to assimilation is deliberate recognition of our home and ancestry: “Do not be deceived, my beloved. Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:16–17). James says that we are from above, we have God as our Father, and our connection with our home and ancestry cannot be eradicated by change.

“From above” means that everything worth living for is from the place where God dwells. We should spend our time thinking and dreaming of our true home in heaven. This resident alien mentality is very much a part of any immigrant’s existence. Whenever I travel to the Middle East—and I have been there six times in the last eleven years—I am acutely aware of my own cultural identity, either through my clothes, my language, or even my height. I might as well be from above as try to blend in, and recent international events have never accentuated my distinctiveness more. The lesson of James 1: Would that my spiritual identity in this world were as evident as my cultural identity!

James’s next point—having God as our Father—speaks of our home and reminds us again of the role of parents: they are responsible for our upbringing in a strange world. It reminds us of Jacob who found his way back to his home through all his trials. After a sleepless night of wrestling with an angel, he looked upon his sibling rival, Esau, and said, “[T]o see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor” (Gen 33:10). Jacob had come to accept the years of his pilgrim existence with Laban as the dealings of God, who doggedly stuck with him and disciplined him. One of the most poignant scenes in the book of Genesis is that of Jacob blessing Pharaoh instead of striving against him, confessing his resignation to a life of sojourning (47:9–10).

Finally, there is “no variation or shadow due to change” with God. The thing that makes the life of a pilgrim so hard is constant exposure to strange cultural patterns. Somehow, somewhere, there needs to be a source of constancy for the traveler so that stability can be attained.

What is it that a family with young kids needs when it is traveling? Routine. Some semblance of order is particularly important for children who are thrown off schedule and eating all the wrong foods and behaving in all the wrong ways. What is it that keeps older folks from finding rest when they are away from home? It is the strange bed or the stress of a new environment. This is the reason pilgrims need a strong dose of stability in their new residence.

How does this sense of home, fatherly presence, and stability relate to the rest of the letter? Throughout the rest of the letter this “new” Jacob will speak about people most vulnerable to Diaspora stress: the widow, the orphan, and the weak. Among the weak would be the poor, perhaps the prisoner, the suffering and the sick, the errant of faith (James 2:5, 15; 5:4, 13, 14, 19). “Religion that is pure and undefiled” (1:27), James concludes, is concerned with people in these conventional Old Testament categories. They epitomize the existence of a Christian among the twelve tribes of the Diaspora.

GOD IS OUR FRIEND

The second convergence of James and Advent is the call for a deeper relationship with God as our friend and lover. That this call builds on the first theme is evident in these lines: “Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

For James, friendship is not based on mere creeds and formality. He has already said in 2:19 that even the demons have a certain correct formal faith. But there is no love lost between demons and God! Friendship rather works in the realm of tenderness and favoritism—that is why he uses such a strong word, “adulterers,” to describe wayward members of the twelve tribes of the Diaspora. Passion is involved, and passion drives its victims to go way beyond formality and externals. In fact, in chapter 2, James brings up two biblical demonstrations of passionate, perhaps irrational love: Abraham and Rahab.

Abraham was so caught up in friendship with God that he was willing to go way beyond the formal covenant (Gen 12) so as to sacrifice his own son (Gen 22), and thus (says James), “he was called the friend of God” (2:23). Protestants and Catholics fight about faith versus works, but such categories are meaningless to friends. James is simply saying that formalities and boundaries are beside the point, for passion is not so rational and doctrinal. In the Semitic mind of James, one is either passionately in love with God or one is not; one is a friend of God and the other is a friend of the world; there is no in-between state of relationship.

Rahab is so incongruous an example of friendship with God that James must

be now in the throes of passion himself. Rahab was not among the twelve tribes of Israel. And she was a prostitute, a person that most of us would consider as a prime candidate for a friend of the world. And that is the point: God certainly takes strange lovers! If passion for God is demonstrated by such practices, then God is willing to reciprocate with “favor” (or, as the common translations have it, “grace”) for the humble (4:6). He loves those who show passion for God in their lives.

If passion is not in the relationship with God, then formality is not enough. This is stated repeatedly in such lines as “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (2:17). This point is well illustrated by a hockey story. Hockey coach and all-time great Wayne Gretzky was once asked to motivate one young player who had come to a training camp that Gretzky was sponsoring. After hearing how much talent the young man had, but how little he practiced, Gretzky simply said, “I can’t do anything. Great players have great passion. If they don’t spend all their free time practicing the sport, they will never become great players, no matter what techniques I teach them.”

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In the commercial world of imperial Rome, nobody stood on equal ground. Laws were not set up to equalize opportunity in the various trading ventures and cultural exchanges throughout the Mediterranean Sea. In fact, friendship was the most important factor for success, more important than ability and product or service. If you had a highly positioned friend who showed you favor, you had an open door for business and profit. In a strange land where you wanted to live, you relied on your “patron” or friend to defend you and make connections for you, more than on the local laws and structures. The whole thing rested more on what modern folks would regard as unfair favoritism and partisanship. This is closer to what James means by friendship with God: God favors those who are passionate about him.

Here is another story that may help to put James’ Advent word in a more palatable form. My now-deceased brother Sam was a Down’s syndrome member of our family. As he grew up, he required special time and attention from his family and caregivers. Outsiders who never spent time with Sam probably felt sorry for him and for us. However, Sam returned manifold whatever care he received, for he was irrepressively cheerful and grateful. Here is the question that James asks: Did we take care of Sam because he was a member of the family, or did we take care of Sam because we liked Sam? Certainly it was both. But James emphasizes the second part: we loved to be with Sam because he was passionate about us. We loved to be with Sam because he was our friend. At his wake service this “disadvantaged” fellow had some four hundred people in attendance, many of whom were strangers telling us in tears that Sam was their friend, too.

GOD IS JUDGE

Finally, James and the Advent season say that God is judge and vindicator. He will look out for all those mentioned earlier: the sojourner, the widow, the orphan, those defrauded or persecuted in court, and the special “friends.” In addition to these groups, James refers to a couple other categories of people, probably because they epitomize Christ and the Diaspora life mentioned above: the prophet and the martyr. The prophet and the martyr spiritually represent the Old Testament groups, and Christ represents them.² This theme of judge and vindicator is summed up in this short line: “See, the Judge is standing at the doors” (5:9).

The first few verses of the last chapter are a good summary of the prophetic books of the Old Testament with its concern for justice in the face of oppression and violence (5:1–6). In a remarkable shift of persona, James speaks like a “gloom and doom” prophet, as if in his mind’s eye he has already seen the end of the world. Earlier, he was more tentative in his address to the rich (for example, 2:6). Now he addresses the rich and powerful directly as if he were pronouncing a decree instead of preaching repentance.

In contrast to their idea that wealth and institutions will last forever, James says that the Judge will demand an accounting for their activities. Even martyrdom is evident in this world of haves and have-nots: “You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you” (5:6). Here, the eye of James’s mind is most clearly on Christ, the martyred “righteous person,” oppressed by the rich and powerful of this world.

“in the end, God will vindicate all of us who live as pilgrims, prophets, and friends of God”

Then the rest of the chapter deals with the likes of the solitary prophets who are like spiritual foreigners: righteous Job, who held out against all those who harassed him, and long-praying Elijah, who stood for heaven’s agenda over the world’s. These were all heroes in the Old Testament, and they are hall of fame members for the theology of the letter of James. In the end, the thing that holds all these models together is the sense that God will vindicate them all, and through them will vindicate all of us who live as pilgrims, prophets, and friends of God.

What is our job therefore as James closes out his letter? Under this theme of vindicator and judge he outlines three lessons:

(1) We are to live like the prophets (5:10). Perhaps we cannot have the same canonical stature, but we can live lives that speak of prophetic values and priorities. We can resist the world’s values and goals. This lesson has been implicit throughout the whole letter of James. In fact we can cut back on our dosage of worldly wisdom (3:13–16) that is at the heart of our trust in materialism and wealth.

²Prophets and martyrs are the identities that sum up the experiences of the people of God throughout history in the opinion of the writer of the book of Revelation (see such passages as Rev 11:18; 16:6; and 18:20, 24).

(2) We can pray like Elijah (5:16–18). There is always hope if we keep our prayers steady. Even the forces of nature (suffering, sickness, not to mention the weather!) and our personal desires (4:1–4) are subject to us, if we do not succeed in getting the attention of powerful human and institutional authorities. Prayer will allow us to hold out in the midst of the hostile forces.

(3) We can take care of each other (5:19–20). Pastoral care is never a waste of time. When someone takes time to listen and counsel, it has a healing effect on everyone. The last line, though hard to unravel, merely suggests that the whole effect of one soul taking care of other souls is greater than the sum of its parts. In effect, the spiritual dangers of the Diaspora world are deadly for the readers of the letter of James, and personal relationships of encouragement and support make a difference for the life of everyone in our care. ⊕

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