



Texts in Context

It's Not Easy Being James

JAMES LIMBURG

It's not easy being James—if you are a Lutheran, that is. I remember as a boy in Sunday school and confirmation classes being quite proud of having the same name as a book of the Bible. But then I went to college, took some religion courses, studied Martin Luther, and somehow being James was no longer so cool. Luther, after all, considered the book of James “an epistle of straw.”

LUTHER AND JAMES: “AN EPISTLE OF STRAW”

The reformer's judgment on the Letter of James is well known. At the conclusion of his introduction to the New Testament, Luther comments, “Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”¹

Luther shared his dislike for the epistle on other occasions, too. Once in Wittenberg in 1542, he made some remarks about James while relaxing at the dinner table. Perhaps these were offhand comments made just after finishing a stein of beer, like a modern-day politician talking without realizing the microphone was on. Said Luther, “We should throw the Epistle of James out of this school, for it doesn't amount to much.”²

In fairness to Professor Luther, however, we ought to cite his more carefully

¹Martin Luther, *Preface to the New Testament* (1522), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960) 362.

²Martin Luther, *Table Talk* (1542), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 54, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 424.

Times have changed. For Luther, it was essential to challenge a religion of works with the voice of the gospel. But now grace is cheap and we need to hear James's call to be doers of the word.

formulated comments in his published “Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude”: “Though the epistle of James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and consider it a good book.”³

I repeat: as a Lutheran who attended both a college and a seminary bearing the reformer’s name, it’s not easy being James. After that “epistle of straw” business (which occurs in almost anything written about Luther), one feels like something of a second-class citizen.

THE LETTER OF JAMES: SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE TEXT AND CONTEXTS

James, Kierkegaard, and Elmer Gantry

If there were a major Lutheran voice to counterbalance the Reformer’s negative comments about James, it would be that of Søren Kierkegaard. Here are two comments from his journals: “On Sunday May 18, I preached in Citadelskirken. It was on my first, my favorite text: James 1.”⁴ And on another occasion: “If a person were permitted to distinguish among Biblical texts, I could call this text [James 1:17–21] my first love.”⁵

Kierkegaard was passionate about James. In fact, one major modern commentator on the Letter of James prefaces each chapter of his commentary with a quotation from Kierkegaard.⁶ I first heard the name of Søren Kierkegaard in a college course on “Christian Literature” taught by Gerhard Belgum. Among the books for the course was Kierkegaard’s *For Self Examination*.⁷ The book begins with a sermon on Jas 1:22–27 entitled, “What is required to look at oneself with true blessing in the mirror of the Word?” Themes from that sermon eventually became a model for my own teaching of the Bible.

In 1959–1960, I was on my seminary internship year in Santa Monica, California. One of the requirements was to develop a reading list and to write up reviews of things read. I chose to begin each fall day (before the secretary arrived) by reading Kierkegaard, working through his books one at a time. The most influential for me in that context was his *Attack upon Christendom*. I quote from the review I submitted in October of 1959:

Hard medicine for the priest! Merciless satire and criticism. K. emphasizes the contrast between the Christianity or “Christendom” (state-church Denmark) with its 1000 well-paid, well-fed priests, “each of whose wife is plumpness itself” and the Christianity of the New Testament.

³Martin Luther, *Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude* (1522), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 395.

⁴*Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vol. 6, part two, 1848–1855, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) 416.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Richard Bauckham, *James* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁷Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination*, trans. Edna and Howard Hong (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1940).

In the preface to this book, the translator, Walter Lowrie, referred to Kierkegaard's "marked preference for the Epistle of James, which Luther dismissed as an 'Epistle of Straw.'"⁸ I underlined that comment and began to note Kierkegaard's comments about James.

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At the time I was in Santa Monica reading *Attack upon Christendom*, the movie *Elmer Gantry*, starring Burt Lancaster, was being filmed just down the street. One evening, several of us walked down to the Santa Monica pier to watch the filming, even hoping (without success) to get into a crowd scene. I bought the book by Sinclair Lewis, read it with great enthusiasm, and recommended it to my friends. I wrote in my internship journal that "every pastor ought to read through both *Attack upon Christendom* and *Elmer Gantry* once a year, to keep from becoming phony!" That judgment still holds.

James, Bonhoeffer, and the conditione Jacobea

On November 18, 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in Tegel Prison in Berlin. When his friend Eberhard Bethge wrote, asking Bonhoeffer to baptize Bethge's expected child, Bonhoeffer replied, "But I hope that, if God preserves us, we shall at least be able to celebrate Easter happily together. And then, *sub conditione Jacobea*, I shall baptize your child." In my Bonhoeffer volume I once placed a question mark by that Latin expression.⁹ It turns out that *sub conditione Jacobea* is a reference to Jas 4:15, well known among scholars: "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that" (NIV).¹⁰

James, Hillary Clinton, and her favorite Bible passages

In a 1994 interview, then First Lady Hillary Clinton was asked if she had a favorite Bible passage. She replied:

At this point I am spending a lot of time thinking about the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly the Beatitudes, but really Matthew 5, 6, and 7. *Or the whole Book of James—because I, being a Methodist, am big on deeds as well as words.*¹¹

So the small Letter of James entered the national political scene as early as 1994.

⁸Søren Kirkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Boston: Beacon, 1956) xvii.

⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 131.

¹⁰For the expression, see also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, ed. Christian Gemmels, Eberhard Bethge, Renate Bethge, and Isle Todt (Guetersloh: Kaiser, 1998) 190, 300, 428.

¹¹See Kenneth L. Woodward, "Soulful Matters," *Newsweek*, October 30, 1994; at <http://www.newsweek.com/soulful-matters-189302> (accessed April 18, 2015). Emphasis mine.

James and Alcoholics Anonymous

In a book entitled *The James Club and the Original A.A. Program's Absolute Essentials*, the author, a certain “Dr. Bob” who was a cofounder of AA, traced the roots of the AA program to a study of “The Good Book,” especially the book of James, the Sermon on the Mount, and 1 Cor 13. The other cofounder of AA, Bill Wilson, said that James was the favorite book for the organization and added “many favored calling the AA fellowship The James Club.” He writes, “Yet the meat of this wonderful book [James] lies in its explicit formula for cure—especially the cure of the alcoholic.”¹²

In his book on James, pastoral theologian William E. Hulme quotes a version of the “serenity prayer” often used in Alcoholics Anonymous: “Lord, grant me the courage to change the things that can be changed, to accept the things that cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Says Hulme, “Although the prayer adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous is of relatively recent origin in its wording, its substance contains the gist of the Letter of James.”¹³

THE LETTER OF JAMES: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS¹⁴

Selections from James appear in the Revised Common Lectionary, including portions from series B, which come up in the calendar year 2015. I will discuss some of these here.

Pentecost 14 (August 30, 2015): How to Read the Bible as Word from God (James 1:17–27)

Søren Kierkegaard begins his sermon on this text in *For Self Examination*¹⁵ with a prayer and then announces, “Times are different.” He describes Luther’s time, when “everything had become works.” In that sixteenth-century context, Luther rediscovered and proclaimed the good news of salvation by grace through faith. “At that time,” said Kierkegaard referring to Luther, “the apostle James had to be shoved aside.”

As time went on, grace became cheap and Luther’s words were misunderstood. Kierkegaard writes: “So we take [Luther’s] word, his doctrine—and we are

¹²I have been unable to locate a copy of this book. The link is <http://dickb.com/JamesClub.shtml> (accessed April 18, 2015).

¹³William E. Hulme, *The Fire of Little Jim: Power for Growth from the Book of James* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 12–13.

¹⁴The position taken in this article is that the author of the letter was James the brother of Jesus, leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13–21), writing the letter in the 50s C.E., martyred just before the Jewish war of 65–70. For an accessible and balanced discussion on critical issues regarding James, see James Boyce at enterthebible.org; also Boyce in the *Lutheran Study Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009). A commentary by Luke T. Johnson provides more extensive discussion on these issues, reaching these same conclusions. See Johnson, *The Letter of James*, The Anchor Bible 37A (New York: Doubleday, 1995). Other especially significant commentaries in English include the massive volume by Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Epistle of James*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), and Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

¹⁵Søren Kierkegaard, “For Self Examination,” in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 394.

free from all works—long live Luther! *Wer nicht liebt Weiber, Wein, Gesang / Er wird ein Narr sein Leben lang.*” (Who loves not women, wine, and song / is a fool his whole life long.)¹⁶

Then Kierkegaard cites Jas 1:22: “Be not only hearers of the word, but doers of it.”¹⁷ In what follows, Kierkegaard spells out three important guidelines for reading the Bible, using James’s picture of the Bible as a mirror. The first: *You must not look at the mirror and inspect the mirror, but see yourself in the mirror.*¹⁸ You will discover that you are a sinner, needing help.

Kierkegaard spells out three important guidelines for reading the Bible, using James’s picture of the Bible as a mirror. The first: You must not look at the mirror and inspect the mirror, but see yourself in the mirror.

The second guideline for reading the Bible as word from God is to say, “*This is for me. I am the one it is talking about.*”¹⁹ When Nathan looked at King David after telling him about the rich man who had sinned against the poor man, Nathan said, “Thou art the man!” and the prophet’s story became a word from God addressing David as a sinner.

The third guideline: *One should not forget what one learned about oneself by looking in the mirror.* These guidelines are spelled out with further helpful illustrations to result in a helpful introduction for reading the Bible.

For many years, the motto on the first page of editions of Nestle-Aland’s *Novum Testamentum Graece* was a Latin phrase composed by J. A. Bengel in 1734: *Te totum applica ad textum: rem totam applica ad te.* (Apply yourself wholly to the text, then apply the text wholly to yourself.)²⁰ This motto, combined with Kierkegaard’s sermon, became my own guide for teaching the Bible.

Also Pentecost 14 (August 30, 2015): What Is True Religion? James among the Prophets (James 1:26–27)

In the summer of 1968, our family was living in Richmond, where I was working on a dissertation involving the prophets and social justice. I spent weeks chasing down every occurrence of the words for “justice” (*mishpat*) and “righteousness” (*tsedaqah*) in the Hebrew Bible. As I studied these texts, I discovered that I kept running into widows, orphans, and the poor. Somehow “doing justice” (Mic 6:8) had to do with concern for these people.

¹⁶Ibid., 395.

¹⁷Ibid., 396.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., 398–399.

²⁰John Christian Frederic Burk, *Memoir of the Life and Writing of John Albert Bengel*, trans. Robert Francis Walker (London: William Ball, 1837) 236.

What the prophets said about justice and righteousness became very relevant, because outside my window in the seminary library people from all over the south were marching and singing, “We shall overcome.” The “Poor People’s Campaign” was on its way to Washington, DC, and true religion, according to Jas 1:27, has to do with these people.

Where does this concern come from? It sounds as if James has been listening to the words of the prophets. Listen to Amos, for example (2:7; 4:1; 5:10–13, 21–24; 6:4–8), or Isaiah (1:10–17, 21–26; 3:13–15), or Micah (3:1–4; 6:6–8). These prophets cry out for justice to “roll down like waters.” And “doing justice,” the biblical idiom, means taking up the cause of the powerless. In 1:27, James speaks about caring for the widow and orphan; we would expect him to include the poor, since those three are so often linked together in the Bible (Isa 10:1–4). Stay tuned for a message from James 2.

Pentecost 15 (September 6, 2015): Step to the Back of the Bus! James among the Poor (James 2:1–18)

Here James shows himself to be a teacher and uses a couple of illustrations to make his point (2:1–7 and 14–18). The theme as announced in 2:1 is favoritism, expressing itself in neglect of the poor. Imagine a well-dressed rich man entering the synagogue and being ushered to the best seat in the house. Then a poor man in shabby clothes comes in and is not given a place in a pew, but is directed to the “standing room only” section. “You have favored the rich man and neglected the poor! Don’t do it!” James is saying.

There is a special concern for poor people, even poor beggars, running through the entire Bible, and continuing in Jewish tradition. As I hear this story from James, I can hear the voice of Elie Wiesel, telling stories about poor beggars. Here is my recollection of one of them:

Rabbi Zishi was the most learned teacher of his day. He was famous because of his insight into spiritual things but also because of his habit of going about dressed like a beggar.

Once the rabbi was travelling to address some of his followers in a neighboring town. He got into a train car and sat down. Then two wealthy gentlemen, dressed in expensive suits, got on the train and started looking for a place where they could sit together. Seeing what they thought was a poor beggar sitting by himself, they rudely told him to move to the rear of the car. He did, and the two gentlemen sat down together, lit up their expensive cigars, and began discussing world affairs.

When they arrived at their destination they noticed a crowd waiting at the station, apparently to meet some famous person on the train. They were amazed when they saw the crowd rush forward to meet the man they took to be a poor beggar. Then they learned that this man was the learned scholar, the gifted speaker, the famous Rabbi Zishi.

They felt terrible for the way they had treated the rabbi. They pushed their way through the crowd and came up to Zishi. “Rabbi,” they said, “we want to apologize. We treated you so terribly! We didn’t mean to insult you. But how could we have known? We thought you were a poor beggar. Please forgive us.”

“I can’t forgive you,” said Zishi, “because you didn’t insult me. You insulted a poor beggar. So the next time you meet a poor beggar, apologize to him.”²¹

This story sounds very much like the anecdote James tells in 2:1–7, making the point that one ought not treat people according to their outward appearance. It also calls to mind Rosa Parks, whose refusal to sit in the back of the bus in 1955 helped to set off the modern Civil Rights movement. The middle part of the chapter (2:15–17) illustrates the same concern for the poor with an anecdote reminding one of Hillary Clinton’s comments about being “big on deeds as well as words.”

Genuine Christian faith, it seems, will express itself in serving soup, passing out blankets, or giving a hand.

True religion, James tells us, has something to do with how we treat widows and orphans. Add to these powerless ones the poor, the aged, the stranger, and the homeless. Jesus made an astounding statement about these people. He said that the way we treat them is the way we treat our Lord (see Matt 25:31–36).

Pentecost 16 (September 13, 2015): What Can I Say? James among the Teachers (James 3:1–12)

Jesus was a teacher. The Gospel lesson for this day reports, “Then he began to teach them...” (Mark 8:31). When Paul lists the various vocational options for members of the body of Christ, he lists “first apostles, second prophets, third teachers...” (1 Cor 12:28). Apparently teaching is a vocation that one can choose, though the expectations are especially high (Jas 3:1).

Everyone, however, uses words. The misuse of words must have been a problem in the early Christian communities. The wisdom teachers of the Old Testament often speak about the proper use of words. For example: the power of a “good word” (Prov 12:25); the importance of *not* speaking (Prov 13:3; 17:28); the dangers of evil speech (Prov 16:27–28); the sin of bribery (Prov 17:8); the danger of foolish speech and gossip (Prov 18:7–8); the beauty of finding just the right word (Prov 25:11).

The apocryphal book of Sirach is especially rich with words about words: be quick to listen but slow to speak (Sir 5:10–6:1); avoid gossip (Sir 19:5–17); don’t slip! (Sir 20:18); timing is most important! (Sir 20:19–20); the danger of the tongue (Sir 22:27–23:15; 28:12–26).

James has a good deal to say about speech ethics. Teachers and preachers are always looking for good illustrations and images. Here are three that speak of

²¹This is a story from Hasidic oral tradition. It is included in my chapter, “Hasidic Stories,” in *Daily Readings from Spiritual Classics*, ed. Paul Ofstedal (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) 172.

something small that can cause big consequences: a bit controls a horse, a small rudder steers a huge ship, the flame of a match can ignite a forest of trees, and a blow from the tongue can crush the bones of an army (Sir 28:17–18). With speech we can praise God our Father—but also speak evil against a brother or sister. In writing about this theme, James is standing in the tradition of proper use of speech in the wisdom teachers (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Sirach). Note also the “speech ethics” theme throughout James: 1:19–20; 1:26; 4:11–12; 5:9; 5:12.

Pentecost 18 (September 27, 2015: in some lectionaries): James and Future Planning (4:7–17)

I conclude this tour of James in the lectionary by looking at a text that does not appear in the RCL but which is a favorite of mine. I have called attention to it in the comments about Bonhoeffer and the *sub conditione Jacobea*. The unit 4:13–17 is clear marked off with “Come now...come now” in 4:13 and 5:1 (the Greek is the same in both cases).

Approaching the future with humility is a characteristic of a biblical life style. Proverbs 27:1 puts it in aphoristic form, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day will bring.” Jesus told a story about a rich but foolish farmer who assumes he will keep on living forever (Luke 12:13–21). And Sirach speaks of the rich person who says, “I have found rest and now I shall feast on my goods!” But, says the text, “He does not know how long it will be until he leaves them to others and dies” (11:19). The same sentiment is expressed in Eccl 2:18–19.

In sum, the future should be approached *sub conditione Jacobea*, “under the Jamesian condition,” as Bonhoeffer expressed it. Or James himself: “You ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’” (4:15 NIV).

I knew a man who worked for a Chicago moving company called “Jamesway Movers.” The ad said, “Moving? Go the James Way.” Not a bad slogan for moving a household from one town to another. Or for all the moves one makes, throughout a lifetime.

Go the James way. ⊕

JAMES LIMBURG is professor emeritus of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.