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Has God Not Chosen the Poor? The Social Setting of the Epistle of James

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Has God Not Chosen the Poor? The Social Setting of the Epistle of James

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The last two decades have witnessed the steady decline of Dibelius's vastly influential reading of James as an eclectic collection of admonitions, lacking anything more than a superficial "catchword" continuity and devoid of any coherent theology or generative social situation (*James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James* [11th ed.; revised by H. Greeven; trans. by M. A. Williams; Hermeneia; Philadelphia, Fortress, 1975]). In this revision of his doctoral thesis under Seán Freyne at the University of Dublin (1996), Hutchinson Edgar seeks to reexamine particularly this last issue through a rhetorical and social-historical analysis of the letter.

The first chapter begins with a critical survey of the variety of starting points chosen in past studies of James. The integrative approach of rhetorical analysis, particularly as exemplified by W. H. Wuellner ("Der Jakobusbrief im Licht der Rhetorik und Textpragmatik," *LB* 43 [1978]: 5–66), is deemed the most potentially productive. The remainder of the chapter delineates the specific sociolinguistic and rhetorical presuppositions that will inform Hutchinson Edgar's analysis. Language, he states, must be understood above all functionally, as "a sign-system to express and exchange meanings between people" (39). As such exchanges are both carried out in and expressive of specific social and cultural settings, a clear understanding of the socially constructed reality in which a given text was produced is of critical importance for understanding the meanings conveyed. In the case of an ancient text such as James, then, social-scientific studies of early Christianity are especially useful. Specifically, Hutchinson Edgar's analysis is marked by a heavy dependence on the work of Gerd Theissen (esp. *Social Reality and the Early Christians* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992]) and various studies by Bruce Malina.

The second and third chapters examine the way the text of James constructs the relationship between the participants in the exchange that it, as letter, represents. The

primary focus at this point is less the identity and characteristics of the historical persons involved than the author's depiction of himself and his audience (though some attention is given to the former question as well). The salient points are as follows. The worldview of the text is fundamentally Jewish but marked by "the particular interpretation of the Jewish order of life associated with the early Christian movement" (57), particularly as expressed in the sayings traditions preserved in the Synoptic Gospels. The author writes as an authoritative spokesman of God and "the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1) to a group that shares "the conviction of the authority of [the Jewish worldview] associated with Jesus and his movement" (100; see also 134) but who are nonetheless seen to be "inconsistent in their discharge of the practical consequences of this worldview" (105).

Special attention is given in this connection to the audience's treatment of the socially marginal members of the movement, specifically the "itinerant radicals" (118; see also 127: "itinerant prophets and preachers") to whom, it is argued, the designation "the poor" in Jas 2:1–13 refers. The "neglect" of such itinerants and courting of "earthly benefactors" suggested in this passage signals a "wavering dependence upon God" (134–35). It is this perceived problem in the audience's relationship to God (more than the defense of the itinerant prophets per se) that emerges as the author's primary concern. Chapters 4–6 then analyze James section by section "to investigate further the helpfulness, or otherwise, of the insights gleaned from the analysis of 2:1–13" (138) for understanding the "unfolding of [James's] literary and argumentative structure" (157).

The concluding chapter summarizes the findings of the analysis and draws out their implications for the perennial problems of James's authorship, date, and geographical location. Particularly given its excellent Greek, the work is likely pseudonymous (223). The author nonetheless stands close to the traditions of the Jesus tradition, especially Q (230; see also 66). While pseudonymity requires a date after the death of James of Jerusalem in 62 C.E., the tensions regarding itinerant radicals and other factors suggest that it was written prior to the outbreak of the Jewish revolt in 66. Such tensions would also seem to require a location in Syria-Palestine, where itinerant prophets were active.

Those familiar with recent work on James will find little here that is particularly groundbreaking. The book presents itself less as a sustained argument in support of a central thesis than as an exercise in rhetorical analysis—albeit one that leads to clear (and clearly stated) conclusions. This is particularly the case in the commentary-like exposition of the text in chapters 4–6, but even the earlier chapters generally begin with a description of a task to be carried out rather than a point to be argued (13 [and 41–43], 44, 96). It is not until well into the third chapter that one begins to glimpse what seems to be the book's core point regarding the tension between author expectation and audience behavior with respect to itinerant radicals.

Nonetheless, the sustained focus on rhetorical and social-scientific analysis of James, which is the primary contribution of this book, does produce a number of interesting insights. Among the more helpful and original of these is the use of a patronage model to illuminate James's characteristic hostility toward "the rich" (esp. 114–25, 135–36, 146–47). The implied audience is depicted as potential clients who must choose between God and "the rich" as two competing patrons. A central aim of the author is to effect an "undivided commitment to God" as "the supreme benefactor" on the part of the audience (146–47), and the relentless denunciation of "the rich" is a key element of his strategy. Also noteworthy is the reading of Jas 2:13–3:12 in light of the "three-zone personality" identified as typical of the ancient Mediterranean world by Malina and Rohrbaugh (166–81, 184; see *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992]), and the identification of 4:11–5:11 as a single, "carefully constructed unit" (187–88, 197–209).

The book is at its most provocative when it attempts to read James in light of Theissen's analysis of radical itinerancy in early Christianity (though see already S. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* [Sonoma: Polebridge, 1993], 178–88). Unfortunately, this is also where it is least compelling. If the interpretation of James's reference to the elect poor (2:5) as a purely religious concept with no socioeconomic implications represents "unwarranted reductionism" (111), their identification as "itinerant prophets" seems overly narrow in the absence of more explicit evidence, particularly given the fact that the author has just identified concern for "orphans and widows" (the "socially marginal" *par excellence*) as one of two pillars of "pure religion" (1:27). At any rate, the point is not demonstrated with sufficient force to be considered conclusive, as the author himself seems to recognize. (It is deemed "plausible" [133; see 134], "likely" [135], and "most likely" [120] throughout the discussion, so that one is mildly surprised to see it considered "established" in the concluding chapter [219].) All the more questionable, then, is its significance for the interpretation of passages such as 1:6–8 (145–46), 2:15–16 (169–70), 3:1–2 (177–78, with nn. 67 and 70), and 5:10 (207 n. 84), let alone for the date and provenance of the text.

These reservations aside, this book performs a valuable service by directing attention to the rhetorical dimension of this early Christian text. For those wishing to pursue such analysis further, this is a good place to begin. More generally, it will serve well as a readable companion to the standard line-by-line commentaries on James.