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James

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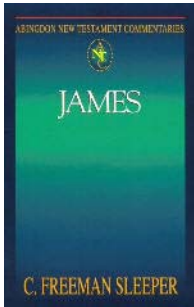
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Sleeper, C. Freeman

James

Abingdon New Testament Commentaries

Nashville: Abingdon, 1998. Pp. 152, Paperback, \$20.00,
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The Abingdon New Testament Commentaries series (ANTC) aims to provide “compact, critical commentaries” that assume no knowledge of Greek for theological students and, secondarily, for upper-level college students and church leaders (“Foreword,” by general editor V. P. Furnish, p. 9). C. Freeman Sleeper’s slim volume on James functions well within these strictures, presenting a treatment of the introductory issues and the commentary proper, as well as a select bibliography and index of subjects, all within 152 pages.

The twenty-nine-page introduction is organized under five headings: “Literary Issues”; “The Letter in Its Literary Context” (which deals with the thought-world of James through an exploration of its points of contact with the canonical and extracanonical Jewish and Christian literature); “The Letter in Its Social Context” (i.e., intended audience); “Authorship and Dating”; and “Themes in the Letter.”

James is presented as a protreptic discourse (i.e., a “general call to a life of virtue”), written in the style of a diatribe and in the form of a letter (16-18). After its epistolary salutation, the text falls into three major sections: introduction (1:2-27), main body (2:1-5:6), and conclusion (5:7-20). Apart from this broad outline, Sleeper finds no “logical progression” in James (20); the letter appears rather to consist of “notes, in random order, on several topics” (19). The text is likened to “a lot of loose beads strung together,” with the various themes presented in the introductory section (Sleeper counts sixteen) picked up and elaborated at random points elsewhere in the letter.

The intended audience is described as “Jewish Christians living outside Judea” (cf. 1:1), and perhaps especially in Alexandria, “who were familiar with the Greco-Roman moral tradition” (31-32). The majority of them were poor (see, e.g., 33). Little more can

be determined, though Sleeper does say in passing that 1QS illuminates “the kind of community for which James was intended” (23). (This is a remarkable claim, and one that is frustratingly elliptical, particularly given the contrast drawn between the two elsewhere in the commentary [79]). Sleeper inclines toward seeing the letter as the work of a pseudonymous author, writing from Antioch around 75-85 CE. Its “main purpose” was to “preserve that tradition of hellenistic-Jewish Christianity” associated with James of Jerusalem, “whose contributions were in danger of being lost as Jewish Christianity was beginning to disappear” (40-41; cf. 45, where its purpose is said to be “to instruct the recipients about Christian moral character”).

“The thought world closest to James” is said to be “that of hellenistic-Jewish wisdom literature” (23), and its major themes reflect “a hellenized Jewish Christianity” (41). “As elsewhere in the wisdom tradition,” James’s focus “is on practical wisdom” (42); nonetheless, one can find in it some theological “raw material,” such as its use of the title “Lord” for God and Christ and its references to several attributes of God (41). On the other hand, “[t]here is no single view of human nature” in James (42), though a consistent emphasis on personal responsibility is fundamental to its ethical outlook.

There are two particularly distinctive elements of the commentary proper. The first, dictated by its inclusion in ANTC, is the treatment of larger literary units rather than the line-by-line exegesis more typical of the genre. This format greatly enhances the readability of the commentary. (The benefit is partially offset, however, by the fact that a translation of the text of James is not provided in the commentary; the reader must turn continually from commentary to Bible in order to follow the exegetical analysis.) The other is its use of “Christian character” as leitmotiv in the presentation and exegesis of the various literary units of James. Inspired by William Brown (*Character in Crisis* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996]), this feature gives the entire commentary something of a pastoral flavor.

As contributors to the ANTC are to avoid “technical academic debate” in favor of illustration of the processes and results of critical biblical exegesis (“Foreword,” 9), it is not entirely surprising that one finds little in the way of provocative new readings of James here. Sleeper’s “beads on a string” approach to the text is rather reminiscent of Martin Dibelius’s influential “paraenesis” model (*James* [11th ed.; rev. by H. Greeven; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976]; see Sleeper’s discussion of Dibelius on 18-21), though Sleeper does allow for slightly more order in the text than the latter: “Even if we think of the book as a lot of loose beads strung together, we have to admit that the author strung them in this particular pattern rather than a different one” (19).

It is likely the result of Sleeper’s use of this model that one finds remarkably little attention given to analysis of James’s religious thought (cf. in this respect, again, Dibelius). Sleeper, for example, observes the oft-noted fact that “Paul’s concentration on

the death and resurrection of Christ is completely missing” in James, as is the “Holy Spirit,” but the significance of this for understanding James’s theology is unclear (41-42). In the end, the reader is left to wonder what, if anything, the various tidbits of theological “raw material” Sleeper mines from James might add up to.

It is one of the more unfortunate aspects of the volume that the comparison of James’s “thought world” with that of “hellenistic-Jewish wisdom literature,” which would seem to be of fundamental importance in this regard, is given little in the way of clear explanation. The novice reader for whom this series is intended will likely find this comparison so vague as to be unhelpful: the characteristic features of this “thought world” that James exhibits are not spelled out, while works as diverse as *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *Psalms of Solomon*, “some passages” from *1 Enoch* and *2 Baruch*, Philo, and “[s]ome of the documents found at Qumran” are all said to exemplify it (23). Judging from the frequent asides regarding the (supposed) marginal role of apocalypticism in James (e.g., 49, 50, 54 [cf. 57], 56, 88, and esp. 72), one might guess that the comparison is meant to emphasize James’s relation to wisdom literature *over against apocalypticism*; but if so, the dichotomy is less than explicit. Whatever the case, while Sleeper elsewhere does a good job of briefly observing divergent scholarly views on key issues, the uninformed reader will leave this volume largely unaware that an increasing number of scholars would dispute the claim that apocalyptic eschatology has only a peripheral role in James’s thought.

Whatever one makes of Sleeper’s conclusions, this volume should serve its target audience well as an entrée into the critical study of James. With few exceptions (e.g., the rationale for the final choices made among the otherwise clearly delineated alternatives regarding 1:18 [58-59] and the meaning of “righteousness” in 1:20 [61]), the commentary exemplifies well the reasoned, deliberate movement from text to interpretation that ideally characterizes critical biblical studies. Sleeper is ever aware of his role as teacher; the book is admirable for its explicit efforts to discourage simple acceptance of “expert readings” (including his own!) and to encourage the readers’ own active efforts toward interpretation (e.g., 15-16, 79-80).