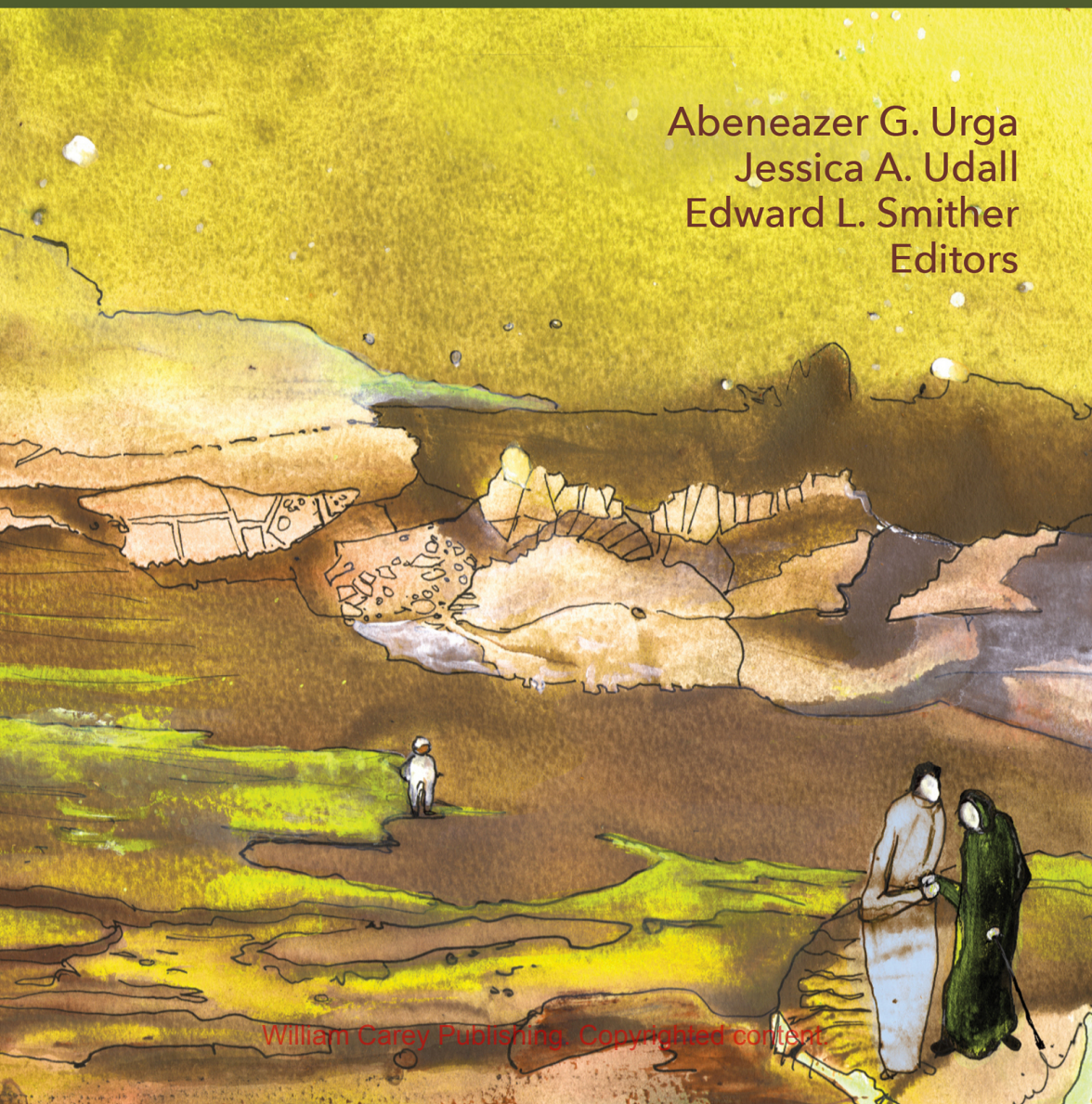
Reading James Missiologically

The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of James

Abeneazer G. Urga
Jessica A. Udall
Edward L. Smither
Editors



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Chapter 1

Holistic Mission

The Vision of Mission in James

Allen Yeh

Martin Luther infamously wanted to reject James from the Bible because he thought it reeked too much of works righteousness. Thus, James has been a point of contention between Protestants and Catholics for centuries, hearkening all the way back to the Reformation. This chapter will argue that—while Luther himself eventually came around and did not interpret James wrongly in the end—Protestants today still "swing the pendulum too far in the opposite direction" and misunderstand Luther's *sola fide* as cheap grace. James's holistic mission (as seen in 1:27) and his use of Abraham (not as oppositional but as the interpretive key) vitiates the notion that James somehow contradicts Paul. Original (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century) evangelicals like John Wesley and William Wilberforce, all the way up to modern (late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century) evangelicals like C. René Padilla, Samuel Escobar, and John Stott with the *Lausanne Covenant*, exhibit this holistic mission (also known as integral mission or *misión integral*). True Christianity always has at least two dimensions: social justice and personal morality, or love of neighbor and love of God. Unfortunately, the "Great Reversal" of early and mid-twentieth-century evangelicalism bifurcated the gospel. But James—with exegetical commentary from Catholic and Protestant theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Elsa Támez—helps Christianity recover a holistic mission today. This chapter will also draw support from the book of Acts, namely the Jerusalem Council (chapter 15), which James himself adjudicated, as well as the holistic mission of the apostles and deacons (chapter 6).

James holds a unique place in the biblical canon for several reasons. First, it was written by the half-brother of our Lord Jesus. Given that Jesus never penned any still-extant document, the fact that one book of the Bible comes from a close genetic relative gives this book special consideration. Just to be clear, the special consideration has nothing to do with royal genealogies, apostolic succession, or anything along those lines. It simply is a matter of historical interest and makes James worthy of a second look because he cannot be discounted as a peripheral figure in the history of Christianity. Second, why would James even require a second look? In large part, this is due to the views

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of the father of the Protestant Reformation himself, Martin Luther. Luther, in his understandable zeal to advocate for the four *solas* (especially *sola fide* and *sola gratia*), nearly discarded James from the Bible. Of course, this would have gone against one of his other *solas*—*sola scriptura*—so thankfully Luther did not take it to that extreme. Third, because of Luther and others, James is often pitted unfairly against Paul, as if the two men's theologies are somehow contradictory (they are sometimes characterized unfairly as works vs. faith) instead of both inspired by the Holy Spirit. Fourth, given the sheer volume of Pauline biblical production, James stands seemingly alone in terms of authority. Not that quantity is equivalent to attestation, but there is a kind of *hapax legomenon* effect at work here. It is often easier to establish the meaning of a particular type of theology if one can "triangulate" (draw from three or more sources) rather than simply work from one "proof text." James seems to suffer from the lack of his own writings.

This chapter aims to undo many of these misreadings of James and in the process begins by "backing into" the truth. It will prove what is right by first proving what is wrong. This is actually how most cases of theology in history came about: A response to heresy helps to codify orthodoxy, as seen from the examples of the first four ecumenical councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon) and their responses to heretics (Arius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, Macedonius, Pelagius, etc.), which gave rise to such doctrines as the Trinity, original sin, and the two natures of Christ. The second part of this chapter will explore how theology inevitably also comes from crossing cultures, hence "missions is the mother of theology."[1] So the function of this chapter is to use the twin engines of heterodoxy and missions to lead to proper theology. This is borne out by church history as well as Paul's missionary journeys.

James as the Brother of Jesus

Despite the fact that James was the son of Joseph and Mary, his sibling link to Jesus did not initially benefit him. According to Mark 6:3–6:

> Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home." He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.[2]

1 Kähler, *Schriften zur Christologie und Mission*, 190.

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The suggestion here is that James was likely the eldest of the children of Joseph and Mary, given his order in the family list. Also, his proximity to Jesus—having grown up together—ironically lent to his disbelief because presumably he and his siblings saw Jesus as too "human." Thankfully this did not prove to be a lasting phenomenon. This trajectory is similar to that of Nicodemus, who initially could not accept Jesus's call to be "born again" (John 3:3–4) and thus could not comprehend the magnitude of the most famous verse in the entire Bible just a few paragraphs later (3:16), but he eventually became a faithful disciple and even helped Joseph of Arimathea procure a grave for the body of Jesus (19:38–42). James—despite his inauspicious beginnings—later became the bishop of the believers in Jerusalem and lent his leadership to the burgeoning early church.[3] His apparent conversion is recounted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8:

> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Though not the most important of the disciples, James the brother of Jesus did get his own mention. He is clearly to be distinguished from James the Greater (son of Zebedee, who was the earliest of the apostles to be martyred in Acts 12:2) and James the Less (son of Alphaeus), as both of them are included in the Twelve (1 Cor 15:5). James the brother of Jesus was granted an audience with the risen Lord in verse 7 and apparently followed him from that point forward.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther, the "father of the Protestant Reformation," was not able to judge James (a very Jewish book) on its own merit but saw it through the lens of Paul (interpreted as a champion of Hellenistic philosophy, the "pinnacle" of intellectual theology). He dismissed James as "an epistle of straw" because it had "nothing of the nature of the gospel about it." He wrote, "Away with James… . I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the

3 Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 234.

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stove… . It is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works."[4] Renowned Reformation scholar Timothy George expressed the perspective that Luther "found … a canon within the canon by which the whole text of Holy Writ was to be evaluated."[5] Luther thankfully did not throw James into the fire but instead placed it near the end of his Bible close to the apocryphal books, which he completely rejected. In other words, James was—to Luther—a lower status of canon.[6]

New Testament theologian N. T. Wright, drawing on the work of E. P. Sanders, offers a few helpful correctives to Luther. Even if one does not want to offer a full-throated defense of the New Perspective on Paul, it is important to understand that Wright has some solid rebuttals against the traditional Protestant view. First, Wright views Paul as more Hebrew than Greek, in contradistinction to Luther. This helps to align Paul and James much more closely to each other rather than in opposition.[7] It also smooths the continuity between Old and New Testaments.[8] Second, Wright challenges Luther's work as being based on eisegesis (the opposite of exegesis), where someone reads into a text the meaning they want to assign it instead of drawing out the original authorial intent from the text. Luther's theological battles against the Roman Catholic Church were so momentous that it is understandable why that would inform his every interpretation, but it is also unfair to simply "map" sixteenth-century theological battles onto the first century. Luther's contention that the sixteenth-century Protestants and Catholics represented the first-century Pharisees and Christians, respectively, is dubious. It is an overly simplistic read of the first-century context to say that history was simply repeating itself.[9]

Wright says of Luther, Calvin, and the Reformers: "The greatest honor we can pay the Reformers is not to treat them as infallible—they would be horrified at that—but to do as they did."[10] In other words, ostensibly the Reformers would want us to derive theology from Scripture and not from would-be "saints" in the history of the church, even themselves.

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4 George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 84.

5 George, 84.

6 George, 84.

7 Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 12–13.

8 This is similar to my argument in the companion volume to this book that Hebrews is most authentically viewed through an Old Testament/Jewish lens. See Yeh, "Christ Outside the Gate," 37–52.

9 Wright, *Justification*, 112.

10 Wright, 22–23.

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James vs. Paul

The apparent difficulty with reconciling James with Paul is actually the advantage. When comparing texts such as Romans 4:1–5 with James 2:14–26, one cannot simply argue away the apparent "contradictions" between the two passages as simply referring to different things, especially since they both specifically cite Abraham and thus prove how much both authors' Jewishness causes them to delve deep into the Old Testament.

Compare Romans 4:1–3:

> What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

with James 2:20–24:

> You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

Although these two passages, when compared side-by-side, seem to directly conflict with each other, it turns out that Abraham is the interpretive key and not the problem.

The Romans 4 passage refers to earlier Abraham's faith journey. The Abrahamic covenant, as initiated in Genesis 12, explores how Abraham—by faith—followed God from Ur of the Chaldeans to the promised land and thus was the recipient of the Lord's promise to be the father of many nations with the concomitant responsibility to be a blessing to them. This is one of the first explicit calls to mission in the Bible, and the foundation of the Jewish impetus to be "a light to the Gentiles" (Isa 42:6; 49:6; cf. Luke 2:29–32). Scholars estimate Abraham was around seventy-five years old at this time.

The James 2 passage refers to an older Abraham as seen from the explicit reference to the "sacrifice" of Isaac (Gen 22). Given that Isaac was born when Abraham was one hundred years old, and according to Josephus,

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