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Early Anabaptist Interpretation of the Letter of James

I. INTRODUCTION

Probably no other New Testament book has suffered as much from the impact of Martin Luther's pen than the Letter of James. Although Luther did articulate many positive things about letter (and preached from it on a few occasions when it appeared in the lectionary), his declarations that it was a "right strawy epistle,"¹ and that he would like to toss "Jimmy into the stove,"² have had lasting effects on the reception of the text. As is well known, Luther's exasperation with James was based upon his perception that James understood justification to be based upon works; a notion which Luther understood to be flatly against Paul and the rest of the Bible. The reformer was also frustrated with the fact that James has no mention of the death and resurrection of Jesus and thus, in Luther's view, did not preach Christ. He acknowledged that the writing, which he understood to be pseudonymous, came from some pious man given its emphasis upon good works, but such virtues did not rescue James from being relegated to the back of his German New Testament.³

¹ Luther described the Letter of James in this way in the preface to his translation of the New Testament, published in 1522. See *Luther's Works* 35: 362 (American edition; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972). His description of James in this preface may have been in reaction to the praise James received from Andreas Bodensine von Karlstadt, who was at one point a colleague of Luther but later at odds with him. See T. George, "'A Right Strawy Epistle': Reformation Perspectives on James," *RevExp* 83 (1986): 23. It is noteworthy, however, that in the preface to the 1534 edition of his Bible, Luther did not employ the "right strawy epistle" phrase to describe the letter.

² *Luther's Works* 34: 317.

³ George, "'A Right Strawy Epistle,'" 23.

Luther rejected authentic authorship of James, but his position on this issue was not new as questions about who wrote the letter had dogged James since at least the time of Origen, who considered it to be by James of Jerusalem, or James the Just, but also indicated an awareness that others wondered whether this James was the author.⁴ Such skepticism may be the main reason why James does not appear on some of the early canonical lists, and only emerges as scripture in the western church in the fourth century, in Hilary of Poitiers' *De Trinitate* (4.8.26). The question of authorship, however, remained an ongoing issue through the centuries, and even those reformers who appreciated James, such as John Calvin, doubted that James of Jerusalem was the author.⁵

Yet once James was deemed canonical, James' relationship to the letters and ideas of Paul appeared regularly in exegetical treatments of the letter, and most patristic and medieval interpreters did not perceive tensions between James and Paul on the issue of faith and works even when they acknowledged that there were differences between the two.⁶ Few full-fledged commentaries on James appeared, but Jas 5:14 was regularly referred to as evidence of biblical precedent for the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.⁷ During the Reformation, various writers questioned the association of Jas 5:14 with this sacrament, but maintained, despite Luther's assessment, that James and Paul were compatible.⁸

The reception of James during the Reformation, both positive and negative, underlines two different approaches to Scripture among the reformers during this period. Lutheran exegetes pointed to the primacy of Paul's letters and the notion of salvation by faith at the centre of

⁴ Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 19.23.

⁵ J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 277.

⁶ Augustine, for example, noticed distinctions between James and Paul but did not view the distinctions to be a source of conflict. He apparently wrote a commentary on the letter but it is no longer extant. See P. Bergauer, *Der Jakobusbrief bei Augustinus: und die damit verbundenen Probleme der Rechtfertigungslehre* (Vienna: Verlag Herder, 1962), 62–65. In the 1500's a Carthusian named Dionysius produced a commentary on James in which he compared Jas 2:14–26 to various verses in the Pauline corpus, including Rom 3:20 and Gal 3:9–11. He argued that when James refers to the law it is to a moral law whereas Paul is referring to ritual law and therefore the two authors are not at odds (G. Dahan, "L'exégèse médiévale de l'épître de Jacques," in *L'épître de Jacques dans sa tradition d'exégèse* [ed. M. Arnold, G. Dahan, and A. Noblesse-Rocher; Études d'histoire de l'exégèse 4; Paris: Cerf, 2012], 96).

⁷ L.T. Johnson, *The Letter of James. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 37A; New York: Doubleday, 1995), 342.

⁸ For example, Zwingli, like Luther, did not think that Jas 5:14 supported the sacrament, and he reconciled James and Paul by arguing that each author was writing to different groups of people who were facing dissimilar sets of questions. See M. Arnold, "L'épître de Jacques dans quelques Bibles et commentaires protestants du XVI^e siècle," in *L'épître de Jacques*, 106–09.

which is the Christ. This position reflected a perspective that there was a hierarchy among texts, which, given its priorities, would place James as subordinate to Paul, or in contradiction to Paul and thus of little value. Other exegetes, such as Calvin, thought it imperative to consider the intention of the authors as well as their respective audiences, and on this basis, view the different authors as complementary as opposed to contradictory given that they were writing to different groups of people whose concerns were not identical.⁹

Prior to the emergence of the “Radical Reformation,” therefore, a complex array of perspectives on the Letter of James had emerged. Certainly all Anabaptist interpreters did not read and understand the Bible in equal fashion.¹⁰ However, despite the fact that they firmly maintained the Protestant notion of justification by faith, the Letter of James was consistently highly regarded by the members of this movement. As the following will explore, specific verses in James were understood to uphold and assist in justifying the positions of Anabaptists on a variety of issues, and aspects of James reflected the actual experiences of men and women, especially those who endured violence at the hands of the authorities because they refused to recant of their faith. James, in addition to many other biblical texts, appears to have contributed meaningfully to making sense of these ordeals. It is important, as well, to observe that some Anabaptists connected various verses in James to some of the teachings of Jesus. Given the centrality of the life and witness of Jesus for Anabaptist hermeneutics, the perceived associations between James and Jesus’ teachings must have made James more appealing.¹¹ Finally, the Anabaptist theological conviction that a true believer must manifest a commitment to faith in his or her daily life; that not only justification, but sanctification, was essential to the Christian vocation, found support in the Letter of James. It is all of these factors combined, and in the context of both internal debates between members of the movement as well as arguments with those on the outside, that we witness the Letter of James as a significant source of meaning and authority for some early Anabaptist voices.

⁹ Ibid., 116–17.

¹⁰ J.D. Roth, “Community as Conversation: A New Model of Anabaptist Hermeneutics,” in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology* (ed. H.W. Pipkin; Text Reader Series 5; Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 35–50.

¹¹ Parallels between James and the teachings attributed to Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount in both the Gospel of Matthew and Q have been noticed for some time now. For a history of the discussion of these parallels see D.B. Deppe, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Epistle of James* (Chelsea, MI: Bookcrafters, 1989); P.J. Hartin, *James and the Q Sayings of Jesus* (JSNTSupp 47; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); and more recently, A.J. Batten and J.S. Kloppenborg, eds., *James, 1 & 2 Peter and Early Jesus Traditions* (LNTS 478; London: Bloomsbury / T&T Clark, 2014).

II. EARLY ANABAPTIST BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

As Anabaptism began in a range of contexts and in response to a variety of developments within Christian theology and practice, one must be careful not to overly generalize about the movement's approach to the Christian Scriptures. Anabaptism comprised a broad group of people, united by their insistence upon adult baptism after a confession of faith. As is well known, the movement developed in different directions throughout Europe, resulting, eventually, in a diverse range of groups that exist today including the Brethren, the Hutterites, the Mennonites and the Amish. Their readings of the Bible developed in the context of debates with Roman Catholics, with Protestant reformers, and with other Anabaptists. They emerged in the midst of suffering and persecution, in congregations and not seminaries, and often among poor and uneducated people.¹² These contextual features played a role in their reception and interpretation of the Bible.

Before engaging the question of Anabaptist approaches to Scripture, it is worth reviewing aspects of what historians would identify as common features of early Anabaptist theology. Here it is important to note that there is discussion about whether or not one can determine consistent theological features given that this movement emerged in different contexts, and in response to a range of issues that developed out of the Protestant Reformation. Was there an early Anabaptist theology? For the purpose of this article, I will build from the insights of C. Arnold Snyder, who cautions that although there were significant differences in degrees of emphasis among these early leaders, one can describe a common core of theological characteristics. It was with the passage of time when the various groups grew to be more solidified with impermeable boundaries that Anabaptism became what some historians have described as "polymorphic."¹³

In general, as outlined by Snyder, it is evident that the Anabaptists shared many of the traditional Christian doctrines as articulated in some of the ancient creeds, despite the fact that these creeds did not figure in their worship life. But with other Protestant reformers, they rejected sacramentalism, accepted the principal of *sola scriptura*, as well as the conviction that justification was by faith through grace.¹⁴ Where they were distinct from Protestant groups, however, was in their emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the ongoing faith of the

¹² S. Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Studies in the Believers Church Tradition; Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000), 10–11.

¹³ C.A. Snyder, "Beyond Polygenesis: Recovering the Unity and Diversity of Anabaptist Theology," in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

person, including in the reading of Scripture. Although the Bible was the most important source of authority, Anabaptists generally thought that its interpretation required the work of the Holy Spirit to guide believers in their understanding of the texts and thus one can speak of a “necessary *spirit/letter* linkage as constitutive of Anabaptist belief.”¹⁵ This emphasis upon the Spirit applied both to the inner life of the believer as well as to his or her outer life of discipleship.¹⁶ In addition, this notion that the Holy Spirit continued working in the daily life of the believer was an important dimension of Anabaptist soteriology. To be sure, they insisted upon salvation by faith through grace, but such faith must bear “visible fruit in repentance, conversion, regeneration, obedience, and a new life dedicated to the love of God and the neighbour, by the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ In this way the Anabaptists were closer to some of the late medieval reformers within the Roman Catholic Church who underlined a life of obedience and discipleship, and who stressed, as the Anabaptists did, that one had free will. The true believer was a person who yielded inwardly to the power of the Holy Spirit and outwardly to both the discipline of the community and the suffering and potential martyrdom inflicted upon them by an antagonistic world.¹⁸ As many of these people experienced exile, or imprisonment and eventual execution, the hostility of the ‘world’ was an unequivocal reality.

Finally, central to Anabaptist theology was ecclesiology. Here, the community of believers was sustained by water baptism, discipline, communion (as a memorial) and worship together. Community also meant economic, political and social fidelity and in some cases demanded the ultimate price; that of dying for one’s beliefs, or martyrdom. Indeed, the phrase “baptism by blood”; meaning that one was to die to self and rise in Christ, was materialized in the gruesome torture and execution of many 16th century Anabaptists throughout Europe.¹⁹

These general features of early Anabaptist theology and praxis had implications for the movement’s interpretation and application of the Bible. Historians and theologians have attempted to describe consistent features of Anabaptist hermeneutics, with some emphasizing certain features such as the significance of a balance between the Inner (unwritten) and Outer (written) Word,²⁰ or the importance of the role of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For a discussion of how the notions of the “inner” and “outer” applied to Scripture for the Anabaptists, see W. Wiswedel, “The Inner and Outer Word: A Study in the Anabaptist Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, 51–70.

¹⁷ Snyder, “Beyond Polygenesis,” 14.

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹ Ibid., 15–16.

²⁰ H.S. Bender, “Bible,” *Mennonite Encyclopedia* 1 (1955): 322–24.

the congregation and the interpretation of the Bible as a communal enterprise.²¹ Both John Roth and Stuart Murray have summarized what they perceive to be some of the main features of sixteenth century Anabaptist interpretation although they do not suggest that interpreters universally accepted these features.²² Nonetheless, Roth and Murray have described the following characteristics: 1) the Bible is self-interpreting even to those who are not educated, and points of tension or contradiction between or among some verses could be resolved by referring to other passages throughout the Bible; 2) the life and teachings of Jesus are the hermeneutical keys to understanding Scripture as a whole; in other words, the Bible must be read christocentrically; 3) appropriate interpretation could not be separated from discipleship and obedience particularly to the teachings of Jesus; 4) the Old Testament is distinguished from the New Testament, and greater authority is granted to the New Testament especially with regard to the use of violence and the swearing of oaths; 5) there is a distinction between the Inner and the Outer Word of God's revelation; and 6) the Bible should be interpreted in a congregational setting.²³

Despite these discernible characteristics of early Anabaptist hermeneutics, and as Roth has observed, not all early members and leaders came to the same conclusions about the meaning and use of Scripture. Indeed, their differing interpretations were contributing factors to the schisms and divisions between and among groups as the movement continued into the seventeenth century. In other words, although one can discern a pattern of emphases within early Anabaptist approaches to the Bible, the actual doing of interpretation could vary in practice depending upon a range of contextual circumstances. Roth helpfully describes Anabaptist approaches to biblical interpretation as a "shared conversation" in which there existed debate and tension as opposed to "normative principles," and while such a conversation need not dismiss the significance of an ideal, it underscores that this was a dynamic model of biblical interpretation, not a static one.²⁴ Therefore, although it is important to be aware of these hermeneutical features, when turning to the use of a particular biblical text by members of the early Anabaptist movement, one must be careful not to simply apply a series of principles when one encounters appeals to the text. Rather, one could begin with an interpretation of Scripture, and determine whether and how it

²¹ J.H. Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 41 (1967): 291–308.

²² Roth, "Community as Conversation," 36–37; Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*.

²³ For a discussion of how these hermeneutical characteristics play out in the writings of a second generation Dutch Anabaptist, Pieter Jansz Twisck, see J.W. Lowry, "Pieter Jansz Twisck on Biblical Interpretation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 75 (2001): 355–69.

²⁴ Roth, "Community as Conversation," 46–47.

reflects such principals. Such is the approach that I will use in examining Anabaptist interpretations of James.

III. EARLY ANABAPTISTS AND JAMES

Unfortunately no commentary on the Letter of James survives from the early Anabaptist period.²⁵ Yet James appears relatively frequently in the documents of various Anabaptist groups and individuals. A *Concordance* or “Bible digest” produced by some unknown Anabaptists and published in at least fourteen German language editions and one Dutch edition between 1540 and 1701, includes over fifty references to James, and the James citations are sometimes the focus of reflection for a given topic, such as service of God.²⁶ Given that James is a relatively short book, and competing with all of the other texts of the Bible, including the Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal books (which the early Anabaptists considered to be Scripture), the number of references to James is significant.

As mentioned earlier, Jas 5:14 was regularly invoked by patristic and medieval writers as biblical precedent for the sacrament of extreme unction or the Anointing of the Sick. One might suppose that this text would have raised concern among Anabaptists, who rejected all sacraments. However, like some of the other Reformers, the oil of Jas 5:14 was not rejected as a negative thing. One of the famous martyrs of the movement, Michael Sattler, is reported to have stated at his trial that this oil was a creature of God and as such a good thing. What he objected to was the sacramental use of oil by priests and others as if the oil could become a means of grace. Such a usage was not acceptable, “for the pope never made anything good. That of which the Epistle of James speaks is not the pope’s oil.”²⁷ Thus James posed no problem to some of these leaders as they engaged in arguments with their interrogators regarding their viewpoints which in this case concerned Roman Catholic beliefs and practices.

Jas 5:12 was a key verse which leaders appealed to as justification for why people should not swear oaths. The verse is explicitly cited by Peter Riedemann in his *Hutterite Confession of Faith* which he wrote while in prison from 1540–42.²⁸ Jacob de Keersgieter cites Matt 5:34–37

²⁵ George, ““A Right Strawy Epistle,”” 382, n. 45.

²⁶ See, for example, G. Fast and G.A. Peters, trans., *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001).

²⁷ T.J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror* (trans. J.F. Sohm; Kitchener: Herald Press, 1950), 417.

²⁸ See J.J. Friesen, ed. and trans., *Peter Riedemann's Hutterite Confession of Faith* (Waterloo, ON; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 142.

and Jas 5:12 in his refutation of oaths while being interrogated by a Franciscan friar in prison.²⁹ The famous Schleithem Confession that was framed by Sattler in 1527 forbids the swearing of oaths, and although Sattler did not reference Jas 5:12 in the articles, later Anabaptists did.³⁰ The Schleithem Confession did refer to Jesus' instruction in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:34–37), but as has been observed, readers familiar with this teaching of Jesus would find in Jas 5:12 "an unmistakable allusion to it."³¹ Menno Simons must have recognized this allusion because he explicitly associates Christ' teaching not to swear at all with Jas 5:12 in his epistle to the Protestant Martin Micron in 1556. Here Simons defends his rejection of the oath at length.³²

In the collection of letters, chronicles and memorials about 16th and 17th century Anabaptist martyrs, known as the *Martyrs Mirror*, we find many references to James. In this famous compilation of documents, we witness the testimonies of Anabaptists who had been arrested because of their refusal to recant their commitments. Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the most commonly cited verses is Jas 1:12, which pronounces a blessing upon those who endure trial. Here, the letter states that when these blessed have stood the test, they will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. Such a teaching was meaningful to some individuals whose letters have survived and come to be included in the *Mirror*. For example, Jan Hendrikss wrote to his wife from prison at Delft in 1571, prior to being burned at the stake. In the letter he connects Jas 1:12 to Jas 5:11, the latter which refers to the steadfastness of Job, and instructs that his child should be patient in all tribulation and distress, just as Christ withstood such afflictions and suffering.³³ In 1569 a purse maker named Hendrick Alewijns was imprisoned at Middleburgh in Zeeland, where he wrote letters and hymns prior to his torture and eventual burning at the stake. Alewijns cites Phil 4:13 ("I can do all things in him who strengthens me") then refers to Jas 1:12 as he reflects upon God's promises to those who patiently endure through suffering. He later refers to Jas 1:2 and the notion that one must count it all joy when one meets various trials and be patient to the end; a theme that is reiterated with a quotation from Jas 5:7 only a few sentences later. Alewijns again refers explicitly to Jas 1:12 as a means of summing up the main message of his letter.³⁴ James' emphasis upon withstanding trials, endurance, and God's promises to those who

²⁹ Van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror*, 776.

³⁰ See *ibid.*, 37.

³¹ R. Bauckham, *James* (New Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1999), 92.

³² J.C. Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (trans. L. Verduin; Kitchener, ON / Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 924.

³³ Van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror*, 934.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 746.

withstand such trials, appears to have been deeply significant to this man as he languished in prison, anticipating a painful end.

Jas 1:27, with its emphasis upon true religion as encompassing care for widows and orphans, and keeping oneself unstained from the world, finds a receptive audience among some of these men and women who were no doubt experiencing “the world” as an extremely hostile place. While in prison in Dordrecht, Jan Wouters instructs his wife that if she must do business with society, she must keep herself unspotted from the world.³⁵ Christiaen Rijcen, who was burned at the stake at Hontschoten, Flanders, in 1588, wrote to his brother before he died, asking that the brother care for his wife, citing Jas 1:27 in support of his request, and reminding his brother to remain unspotted from the world.³⁶ Pieter van Olman, executed in Ghent in 1552, writes similarly of “the world” claiming that if anyone loves the world “the love of the Father is not in him.” He refers to Jas 1:27 but may also have had Jas 4:4 in mind.³⁷

Jas 4:4 contrasts of friendship with the world versus enmity with God, and was also cited by these soon-to-be martyrs. Some of them associate the verse with teachings of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount. Hans Bret quotes Jas 4:4 in a 1576 letter to his mother from a prison in Antwerp, and connects it to Jesus’ teaching about walking the narrow way (Matt 7:13–14), and forsaking unrighteousness.³⁸ Interestingly, Bret also observes a link between Jas 2:26 (“faith without works is dead”) and Matt 7:17, 18, for he states that “where there is true faith, there will also good fruits appear [...] so it is also with man; he that has true faith will bring forth good fruits that are pleasing to the Lord.”³⁹ Jacques Mesdag perceives a parallel between Jas 4:4 and Matt 6:24 (“No one can serve two masters”) as he refers to both in a letter to his sister.⁴⁰ This perceived similarity between portions of James and the teachings of Jesus as presented in the Sermon on the Mount was not new, and had been noticed earlier in the Christian tradition, but given the importance of Jesus’ teachings for the Anabaptists, it makes sense that texts such as Jas 4:4 would appeal to them, especially given their context of persecution and suffering.⁴¹

One final illustration of how some of these imprisoned people found in James an articulation of their own experience and commitments, and

³⁵ Ibid., 911.

³⁶ Ibid., 1065.

³⁷ Ibid., 537.

³⁸ Ibid., 1049.

³⁹ Ibid., 1050.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 720.

⁴¹ On Jas 4:4 and Matthew 6:24 / Luke 16:13, see A.J. Batten, *Friendship and Benefaction in James* (ESEC 15; Blandford Forum, UK: Deo, 2010; repr. Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2017), 158–65.

of how they connected portions of James with the teachings of Jesus, appears in a letter found in what the *Martyrs Mirror* describes as a “small, old printed book.”⁴² In the writing, a prisoner cites the beatitudes from Matt 5:11–12, in which those who are reviled and persecuted are blessed and promised a reward in heaven. The author then refers to Jas 5:1–3, 6, in which the rich are exhorted to weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon them. Here, the rich are associated with those who persecute the blessed; they are those who have killed the just one who does not resist them. The prisoner identifies with the just one who does not fight back, while his is her persecutor is comparable to the rich of Jas 5.⁴³ As Jennifer Powell McNutt has helpfully explained, for these suffering Anabaptists, “James was cited to prove that the just do not resist violence even in the face of death since the persecutor will ultimately be judged in the end.”⁴⁴ I suggest that in addition, the linkage that the letter writer has made between the persecutors and the persecuted of Matt 5:11–12 and the rich and the just one in Jas 5:1–3, 6, reinforces the notion that some of these people perceived consistencies in the teachings of James and Jesus; namely that the persecuted will be blessed and the persecutors will be judged.

The above examples from the *Martyrs Mirror* are only a sampling and far from exhaustive, but sufficient, I hope, to demonstrate that as with many biblical texts, these persecuted Anabaptists found in James a voice that articulated and made meaningful their experiences of trial, endurance and alienation from “the world,” as well as their widespread commitment to nonviolence.⁴⁵ In some cases they perceived clear parallels between dimensions of James and the teachings of Jesus which would have surely increased their estimation of James’ teachings given the general Christological emphasis of Anabaptist hermeneutics.

Portions of James were also invoked in the context of debates among Anabaptists. One of the most contentious and difficult issues was the question of excommunication, or the doctrine and practice of the ban. Menno Simons wrote three treatises on this subject. In the third work, produced in 1558, Simons refers to James several times. Near the beginning he cites from Jas 3:13–18, which describes true wisdom from above, which is pure, peaceable, gentle and full of mercy and good fruit

⁴² Van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror*, 1012.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1016–17.

⁴⁴ J. Powell McNutt, “James, ‘The Book of Straw,’ in Reformation Biblical Exegesis: A Comparison of Luther & the Radicals,” in *Reconsidering the Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology in the New Testament. Essays by Theologians and New Testament Scholars* (ed. B.E. Reynolds, B. Lugioyo, and K.J. Vanhoozer; WUNT 2/369; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 160.

⁴⁵ For an example of the use of Jas 3:18 (“And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace”) in one of the martyr’s letters, see van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror*, 867.

in contrast to that which is earthly, sensual and devilish. Simons warns his brothers and sisters to beware of those who boast of the truth but who do not reflect the characteristics of true wisdom.⁴⁶ Later on, he expounds upon the closing of James, in which the letter instructs its audience that if a person brings back a member who has erred, that person has saved a soul from death and hidden a multitude of sins (Jas 5:19–20). Here Simons entreats his own audience to distinguish carefully between those who have erred in ignorance and those who have done so on purpose. He cautions that James should not be construed as a “false comfort and support to frivolous and erring sinners.”⁴⁷ Using James, he seeks to navigate between a position that he understands to be too lax in its easy reception of sinners back into the community, and a hard line view that does not attempt to bring those erring members back into the fold. He concludes his exposition by indicating that he leaves it “to the godly to reflect whether these words of James so expounded are not left in their power and purity; for those worthy of exclusion are excluded, the erring are brought back, love is kept in force...”⁴⁸ By appealing to the Letter of James, therefore, Simons attempts to articulate how members of the community should understand and apply the controversial practice of the ban.

We have seen that in James, Anabaptist leaders found an ally in their efforts to ground their positions biblically. Such a foundation assisted them in refuting some of the teachings and practices of their opponents. Perhaps most explicit is Simons, who directly refutes Martin Luther’s description of James as an epistle of straw. It is worth citing Simons at length on this point:

The Lutherans teach and believe that faith alone saves, without any assistance by works. They emphasize this doctrine so as to make it appear as though works were not even necessary; yes, that faith is of such a nature that it cannot tolerate any works alongside it. And therefore the important and earnest epistle of James (because he reproves such frivolous, vain doctrine and faith) is esteemed and treated as a “strawy epistle.” What bold folly! If the doctrine is straw, then the chosen apostle, the faithful servant and witness of Christ who wrote and taught it, must also have been a strawy man; this is as clear as the noonday sun. For the doctrine shows the character of the man.⁴⁹

This comment by Simons indicates that he thought that the letter was written by James the apostle, but what frustrated him about the Lutherans was their emphasis upon faith at the expense of works. For the Anabaptists, a life of faith must be witnessed to by one’s actions; it

⁴⁶ Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 962.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 986.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 987.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 333.

must be a life reflective of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Timothy George observes a similar irritation in Melchior Hofmann, a German who eventually became an active Anabaptist in the Netherlands, and who in his “Ordinance of God” criticizes those who cry:

Believe, believe; grace, grace; Christ Jesus. And therefore it does not choose the better part, for its hope is idle and a great deception. For such belief cannot justify them before God, as the holy apostle James writes: Even so faith, if it has not fruits is in itself dead.⁵⁰

For these writers, the notion that one is justified by faith through grace does not warrant the neglect of doing good works. Anabaptist leaders such as Simons and Hofmann waged direct critiques against Protestants whom the radical reformers understood to be overemphasizing *sola fide*.⁵¹ The Letter of James furnished clear biblical warrant for expressing criticism of those who stressed belief at the expense of praxis. Simons appears to have the scene of Jas 2:1–7, in which a rich man enters the assembly and is offered the best seat while the poor man is dishonoured and ordered to sit on the floor, in his mind when he berates Christians who boast of having the Word of God and of being a true, Christian church. Such people strut about in gold, silk and velvet, and live in luxury and splendour with their treasures full, and yet they require the poor to ask for alms, and the poor, hungry, suffering and sick must beg for bread at their doors.⁵² His comments also strongly evoke the imagery and prophetic denunciation of the rich found in Jas 5:1–6.

The Anabaptist hermeneutical stress upon discipleship and obedience as indicators that one is a true believer was also discussed with reference to James. Members of the movement agreed with Protestants that one is justified by faith through grace, but they stressed, distinct from Protestants, the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer who is possessed of free will. One may have faith, but evidence of that faith must be embodied by co-operation with the Spirit and manifested through actions and continued moral development. In other words, not only was justification by faith essential to Anabaptist soteriology, but sanctification through the work of the Spirit. In her study of several Anabaptist thinkers on this issue, Powell McNutt observes that some Anabaptists appealed to Jas 1:18 (“Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures”) in order to explore the idea that believers

⁵⁰ G.H. Williams and A.M. Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 201. Both Simons and Hofmann are cited by George, “A Right Strawy Epistle,” 28.

⁵¹ Powell McNutt, “James,” 167.

⁵² Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 559.

had received free choice and new birth, and in so doing, had become children of God.⁵³ This perspective is evident in the work of the early Anabaptist leader in Moravia, Balthasar Hubmaier. Hubmaier thought that Adam was possessed of free will prior to the fall, but the fall caused humanity to enter a state whereby humans could do nothing but sin. As Hubmaier wrote:

If we are to be free again in respect to the spirit and healed in respect to the soul, if the fall of the flesh is to be harmless, this *must, must, must* take place through a rebirth as Christ himself says (John 3:3), otherwise we shall never enter the Kingdom of God. God now of his own will begets us, as James (1:18) says, by the Word of his power, that we should be anew the first fruits of his creatures. In this Word, which Peter (1 Peter 1:23) calls uncorruptible seed, we become anew free again and sound, so that absolutely nothing corruptible is left in us.⁵⁴

James 1:18 assisted Hubmaier in thinking through this process of rebirth and this gift of freedom that was bestowed upon believers by God. This ‘restoration’ is not the cause of justification but its result.⁵⁵ Powell McNutt further demonstrates that in his writing, *Concerning the New Birth and the New Creature* of 1556, the Dutch Anabaptist Dirk Philips cites Jas 1:18 to undergird his understanding that “a true believer will manifest their belief through moral transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit, who actively works towards the sanctification of the believer.”⁵⁶ Additionally, the verse appears in Philips’ *Church of God* where he stresses rebirth through the Word and the ongoing pursuit of the righteousness of Christ as a witness and outcome of genuine faith.⁵⁷ For Philips, a process of rebirth and a continued progression of sanctification through the Holy Spirit were necessary for the believer and he clearly found in Jas 1:18 expression of support for such a position.

In his “Reply to Gellius Faber” of 1554, Menno Simons also refers to Jas 1:18 as he boldly critiques what he calls the “church of Antichrist.” At one point he attacks the leaders of this church, who live in fine houses, with their ornaments and rings, silks and satin, and their

⁵³ Powell McNutt, “James,” 163.

⁵⁴ Williams and Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 130.

⁵⁵ Powell McNutt, “James,” 163.

⁵⁶ Ibid. For Philips’ text, see D. Liechty, ed. and trans., *Early Anabaptist Spirituality. Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 202.

⁵⁷ Powell McNutt, “James,” 165. Philips wrote: “Although the salvation promised to man has been wrought by Jesus Christ the Saviour, and although the forfeited life has been redeemed by the blood of the unique sacrifice, and is offered to all men by the gospel (Titus 2:13; Heb 2:2; 10:18–20), nevertheless, not all men enjoy this eternal salvation and eternal life, but those alone who in this life here are born again by the Word of Jesus Christ, who allow themselves to be sought and found by the light of the divine Word, and who obey the voice of their Shepherd (1 Peter 1:23–25; James 1:18–19; John 3:3; 8:32; 12:46); who are enlightened with the true knowledge of God and his will and in sincere faith accept the righteousness of Christ” (Williams and Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 234).

women and children, who are called “the evangelical theologians, and ministers of the Holy Word; alack and alas, of the comfortable and carnal gospel!”⁵⁸ In contrast, the “church of Christ is begotten by the Spirit and Word of Christ [...] James says, Of his own will he begot us with the word of truth.”⁵⁹ The true church must be begotten by what Simons describes as the “rightly preached Word, through the Holy Spirit, and conceived in the hearts of the believers.”⁶⁰ One could infer, here, that a sign of the rightly preached Word is a life in which the Holy Spirit is active as manifested by a demonstration of moral righteousness. The focus here is not free will as it was for Hubmaier, but Simons’ insistence that a life of faith must be evident in one’s actions is reflected in his conviction that the believer receives the word of truth from God, as articulated in Jas 1:18.

IV. CONCLUSION

This cursory review of early Anabaptist use of the Letter of James has attempted to understand this interpretation within the context of the theology, hermeneutics, and experiences of members and leaders of the movement. Although they upheld the notion of justification by faith, Luther’s negative assessment of James did not influence Anabaptists.⁶¹ Instead, the letter of James was popular despite the differences between and diversity within these groups of people.

The discussion here has been brief, but attention to the use of James among early Anabaptists indicates that the hermeneutical emphasis upon the teachings of Jesus was particularly important, for, as I have argued, the parallels and associations between the letter of James and the teachings of Jesus that have long been noticed were also perceived by some members of this movement. Such connections, in my view, caused the Letter of James to be all the more appealing. For Anabaptists, the voice of Jesus often overlapped with the voice of James.

James was also useful to Anabaptist leaders as they sought to articulate their positions both in the context of internal disputes about such topics as the ban, as well as the many external arguments, including on the question of the use of the oath, which they engaged in either with members of the Roman Catholic Church or with Protestant opponents. James assisted these writers as they sought to ground their arguments biblically.

⁵⁸ Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 737.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Indeed, Luther’s negative views likely only increased Anabaptist appreciation for the letter!

In examining the references to James within the *Martyrs Mirror*, it is evident that James was important to those who were imprisoned, tortured and executed for their faith. Testimonies from some of these martyrs indicate that James assisted individuals in articulating, in part, their experience of suffering and felt hostility from the world. James' emphasis upon endurance, in particular, was directly relevant to those who had to physically withstand such atrocities as torture on the rack or prolonged periods of being hung upside down from the rafters. These latter accounts demonstrate the centrality, within Anabaptist theology and hermeneutics, of manifesting one's faith through action, even if it requires that one forsake one's life. Although justification was by faith, the believer must co-operate with the Holy Spirit in an ongoing process of sanctification. We cannot assume that those who withstood these horrors would have been familiar with all of the writings and theological ideas of their leaders, but they appear to have embodied them even to the point of death. In sum, Anabaptists found support in the letter of James for their emphasis upon and manifestation of witness. Such perceived resonances between James and the theology and experience of early Anabaptists would, in turn, contribute to the strawy epistle's ongoing significance for many within the Anabaptist tradition.

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