

Introduction: *An Epistle of Straw?*

*“He throws things together so chaotically
that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man,
who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles
and thus tossed them off on paper.”*

- Martin Luther (1483-1546)¹

It would be an understatement to say that Luther’s disparagement of the Epistle of James has profoundly impacted Protestant reading and study of the short book. Calling it “an epistle of straw,” Luther consigned it to the unnumbered list at the bottom of the Table of Contents in his German Bible (along with Hebrews, Jude, and the Revelation of John). Luther’s negative judgment was only slightly tempered by the relative nature of his assessment – he considered the Book of James to be “strawy” compared to the other epistles of the New Testament. On the whole, he thought James had some good things to say, but did so in such a hotch-potch fashion that he failed both to accomplish his literary goal and to counter the charge (made by Luther) that his Gospel was deficient relative to Paul’s. Luther concludes his preface to the Epistle of James with a highly guarded recommendation:

In a word, he wanted to guard against those who relied on faith without works, but was unequal to the task. He tries to accomplish by harping on the law what the apostles accomplish by stimulating people to love. Therefore I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him.²

¹ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude,” in *Word and Sacrament I (Luther’s Works, Volume 35)*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 397.

² Luther, “Preface to the Epistles,” 397.

Die Bucher des nerven testaments.	
1	Euangelion Sanct Matthes.
2	Euangelion Sanct Marcus.
3	Euangelion Sanct Lucas.
4	Euangelion Sanct Johannis.
5	Der Apostel geschicht beschriben von Sanct Lucas
6	Epistel Sanct Paulus zu den Romern.
7	Die erste Epistel Sanct Paulus zu den Coynthern.
8	Die ander Epistel Sanct Paulus zu den Coynthern
9	Epistel Sanct Paulus zu den Galatern.
10	Epistel Sanct Paulus zu den Ephesern.
11	Epistel Sanct Paulus zu den Philippem.
12	Epistel Sanct Paulus zu den Coloffern.
13	Die erste Epistel Sanct Paulus zu den Theffalonicern.
14	Die ander Epistel Sanct Paulus zu den Theffalonicern.
15	Die erst Epistel Sanct Paulus an Timotheon.
16	Die ander Epistel Sanct Paulus an Timotheon.
17	Epistel Sanct Paulus an Titon.
18	Epistel Sanct Paulus an Philemon.
19	Die erst Epistel Sanct Peters.
20	Die ander Epistel Sanct Peters.
21	Die erste Epistel Sanct Johannis.
22	Die ander Epistel Sanct Johannis.
23	Die drit Epistel Sanct Johannis.
	Die Epistel zu den Ebreern.
	Die Epistel Jacobus.
	Die Epistel Judas.
	Die offenbarung Johannis.

Figure 1: "The Books of the New Testament" – Luther's table of contents in the first edition of his German translation of the New Testament; *Das Neue Testament Deutzsch* (Wittenberg, September 1522).

The apparent conflict between James and Paul on the issue of justification was Luther's primary stumbling block; the German Reformer simply could not stomach James' emphasis on works, and concluded unequivocally that James was wrong: "In the first

place it is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works."³ So famous and influential is Luther's judgment that no commentary on James since the mid-sixteenth century can overlook it but must spend an inordinate amount of ink harmonizing James with Paul and showing Luther to be the one in error. Thus Alec Motyer writes: "To Paul the question was, 'How is salvation experienced?' and the answer, 'By faith alone.' To James the question was, 'How is true and living faith recognized?' and the answer, 'By its fruits.' The supposition that Paul and James are at variance is a false trail."⁴ What is perhaps most amazing regarding Luther's view of James versus Paul, is the fact that he was still able to say some good things about the epistle, given his near obsession with the doctrine of justification by faith.

But Luther had another complaint concerning the Book of James that is potentially more problematic: the book's seemingly chaotic shifting from topic to topic and back again. Luther says of James: "he throws things together so chaotically that it seems to me he must have been a good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper."⁵ It is actually easier to harmonize James with Paul on the matter of justification than it is to outline the Epistle of James. Those who attempt verse-by-verse exegesis of the book find themselves plowing again over earlier furrows. The apparent logical disorder of James indeed poses a difficulty for readers and exegetes alike, though it is unnecessary to join with Luther in thinking that the author merely tossed off a few borrowed thoughts on paper. A more reasonable approach is to consider the *genre* of the book as perhaps being something other than an epistle. For instance, Motyer considers the Book of James to be a sermon, and speaks rather glowingly of the sermon's organization and flow: "like every good sermon, James' letter was constructed with a clear plan, with an introduction, a well-subdivided central section and a conclusion designed both to bring the sermon back to the point where it started and also to

³ Luther, "Preface to the Epistles," 396.

⁴ Alec Motyer, *The Message of James* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 20.

⁵ Luther, "Preface to the Epistles," 397.

take account of the teaching which has emerged en route.”⁶ Ironically, Motyer proceeds immediately to surmise an essentially linear outline of the book in the same manner as most modern commentators.

The Book of James does not read like a sermon, at least not like the sermons constructed for seminary homiletics. Motyer’s description of James being “constructed with a clear plan” seems to simply deny the seemingly erratic jumping from topic to topic and back again that Luther criticized. It may be that the letter is indeed not a letter in the Pauline, or even first-century structure of that genre, but it also seems that it is not a sermon. Indeed, if one reads through the book in a single sitting (highly recommended), the rapid-fire presentation of moral and ethical statements – none of which is drawn out in detail at any single place – may very well remind one of the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs, too, moves from topic to topic and back again, combining short statements with more fully developed allegories and metaphors, not unlike James’ use of such similes as the tongue compared to a horse or to fire.

This study’s approach to the Book of James is to consider it as a form of Wisdom literature rather than strictly as an epistle. This is not to say that the book was not directed to an intended audience, though the address in the opening verses is somewhat vague: “To the twelve tribes of the Diaspora” (James 1:1). The content of the “letter,” however, does not directly address any specific issues in the manner that Paul’s letters often do. There are, as well, none of the final greetings or benediction common to other New Testament letters. Yet classifying James as Wisdom literature arises more from the manner in which the book is structured, for there is indeed structure. The themes are repetitive throughout the letter, but intensify as one progresses. The various themes will be set forth as couplets, as James tends to compare two sides of an attitude or practice – the positive and the negative. For instance, Temptation-vs.-Endurance forms one such couplet that recurs periodically throughout the book; Worldliness-vs.-True Religion forms another (see chapter 2 for the fuller development of this interpretive approach and the arrangement of couplets proposed in this study).

⁶ Motyer, *Message of James*, 12.

To consider the Book of James as a form of Wisdom literature is not really a stretch, as Wisdom certainly forms a major theme throughout. Ralph Martin considers Wisdom to be one of two major motifs in the book (the other being the Righteous Sufferer).⁷ It is important, however, to define “wisdom” in the proper sense, the *Jewish* sense from which James both lived and wrote. We cannot classify James in the same category with *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, or *The Confessions of Augustine*. In fact, and perhaps a bit disturbingly, the wisdom presented by James is more like *The Analects of Confucius*, than either of these two Western examples. This is because James’ perspective on wisdom, again in keeping with his Jewish heritage, is not from the realm of esoteric contemplation but rather from the realm of practical life. Martin provides an excellent definition of the Jewish concept of wisdom, a definition that fits very well with the content of the Book of James.

The term “wisdom” stands for two aspects of Jewish culture and religious ethos. On the one hand, it may refer to a body of texts that extol the virtue of wisdom as part of the pious person’s way of belief or practice in society. The other side is covered by an understanding of wisdom as a religious stance undertaken by godly persons in Israel. In this context wisdom represents their world-view and response to situations usually of a problematic kind, e.g., those occasioned by the presence of evil, the prosperity of godless people, and the trials that come to all. Wisdom is that outlook which when embodied in practical endeavor enables the pious believer in Yahweh to face life, to make sense of its enigmas, and to surmount its problems.⁸

Considering, then, the Book of James as just this sort of Wisdom literature, we find a specific sub-genre that was becoming popular among Jewish rabbinic sources in the later Second Temple era and beyond: *halakhah*. This term is often translated “Jewish Law,” but the word derives from the Hebrew root הלך (*halak*) which means “to walk” or “to journey.” If James is anything, it is the journey of faith, the faith that works. James

⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *James (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 48)* (Waco: Word Books, 1988), lxxxvii.

⁸ Martin, *James*, lxxxvii.

covers just about every eventuality of a believer's life in this world, the trials and tribulations, the prosperity and poverty, and, perhaps most of all, the stern admonition to "keep oneself unstained by the world" as part of the content of "pure and undefiled religion" (James 1:27). Thus James' presentation of wisdom is very much in the form of a journey, and very much in the Jewish form of halakhah. One contemporary online encyclopedia of traditional Judaism acknowledges that halakhah is often condemned as being "legalistic," a works-religion. Ironically, this is essentially Luther's complaint against James, especially with regard to the relationship of faith and works. Consider, however, this modern observant Jewish response in light of the content of James' halakhah:

Some non-Jews and non-observant Jews criticize this legalistic aspect of traditional Judaism, saying that it reduces the religion to a set of rituals devoid of spirituality. While there are certainly some Jews who observe halakhah in this way, that is not the intention of halakhah, and it is not even the correct way to observe halakhah. On the contrary, when properly observed, halakhah increases the spirituality in a person's life, because it turns the most trivial, mundane acts, such as eating and getting dressed, into acts of religious significance.⁹

One can easily imagine James agreeing with this perspective, so long as it was properly oriented toward Jesus Christ.

A final aspect of the Wisdom-literature, halakhic approach to this study is that of the "Two Ways," a form of ancient wisdom writing that is especially pronounced in the Book of Proverbs. James, too, uses the "fork in the road" method of contrasting the right, or righteous, way versus the path of folly and unrighteousness. By weaving about half a dozen of these "Two Ways" couplets through his text, James creates a beautiful tapestry of Christian Wisdom literature for the Church's edification and instruction. Far from being "strawy," this is a work of "gold, silver, and precious stones."¹⁰

⁹ Tracey Rich, "Deeds > Halakah: Jewish Law," *Judaism 101*, accessed 5 March 2026, https://www.jewfaq.org/jewish_law.

¹⁰ Cp. I Corinthians 3:12-14.

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