

Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage*, London and New York: Routledge 1999 ISBN 0415103703 pp. x + 246

Richard Bauckham's *James*, from the Routledge series of *New Testament Readings*, is perhaps the best commentary on a single New Testament epistle available today for scholars as well as for ministers and for anyone interested in the wisdom of James. As one of the premier English scholars, Bauckham has written a genuinely invigorating book about the epistle of James. He argues against the acceptable and what many will think to be indubitable: that James the brother of Jesus is the author of the epistle. Apparently, Bauckham is not constrained by canonical boundaries, nor is he afraid to make assertions that go against the grain of contemporary perspectives while suggesting conservative approaches to the wisdom of James.¹

In Chapter 1, Bauckham describes the epistle as “a encyclical from James to the diaspora.” Since Bauckham is an expert on Jesus’ family, he makes much of who the author of James really is. Bauckham writes: “Only one James was so uniquely prominent in the early Christian movement that he could be identified purely by the phrase: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 12:17; 15:13; 1 Cor 15:7; Gal 2:9, 12)” (p. 16). In fact, the epithet ‘servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ’ in James 1:1 is not meant to distinguish him from other Jameses, but to indicate his authority for addressing his readers. Bauckham adds to his argument concerning the authorship of James the relationship between James, the Jerusalem church and Jewish Christians in the Diaspora plus one important factor: the tradition of letters from Jerusalem to the Diaspora (p. 19).²

Bauckham spends valuable time explaining that James is indeed an epistle inasmuch as it carries the only necessary feature to make it so: the letter-opening. He deals in detail with two very important questions: (1) Does James have the form and content of a real letter? (2) Did it

¹ Mark Goodacre, *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 7 (2000), p. 52.

² *Ibid*, 53.

function as a real letter, i.e. was it really sent, by the hand of a messenger or messengers, from an author resident in one place to recipients living elsewhere? (p.12). His conclusion is that the letter opening is quite sufficient to make James a formal letter.

Chapter 2 makes up the largest part of the book (pp. 29-111), and is where the subtitle derives its name “The wisdom of James, disciple of Jesus the sage.” Chapter 2 gives further details about the captivating thesis that “James, as a disciple of Jesus the sage, is a wisdom teacher who has made the wisdom of Jesus his own, and who seeks to appropriate and to develop the resources of the Jewish wisdom tradition in a way that is guided and controlled by the teaching of Jesus” (p. 30). The author lays out his argument by meticulously pointing out the various literary forms (pp. 35-60) in James (aphorisms, similitudes and parables along with examples or models) and then weighs them against the usage of similar forms both in Jesus’ teaching and, more exactly, in Wisdom Literature.³

In classifying the aphorisms in James, Bauckham borrows the scheme used by David Aune to classify the aphorisms attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Since Bauckham does not believe that there are any aphorisms in James which Aune’s classification cannot accommodate (p. 36), Bauckham shows that the range of literary forms employed by James closely resembles those employed in the Synoptic sayings of Jesus. Thus a rather lengthy explanation of these aphorisms follows which show, for example, that some forms of aphorisms used in wisdom paraenesis also occur in apocalypses.

It is necessary to note here, however, that there are several new wrinkles in Bauckham’s approach to reading James. He not only is successful in avoiding to convoluted attempts to connect material in James to imaginary gospel sources, but he also avoids the trap of arguing about whether or not James refers to sayings of Jesus by just sidestepping the difference of

³ *Ibid*, 53.

opinion and replacing the language of “allusion” with the language of “creative re-expression” (p. 93). For Bauckham, providing evidence concerning dependence between specific sayings in the Gospels and specific sayings in James is not the matter of interest at all; rather, this book is about James’ confirmation and ratification of his teacher’s spirit and distinctive character (p. 100). For instance, he mentions with respect to combining prophetic and wisdom styles of speech, that James notably resembles the tradition of the sayings of Jesus (p. 57) without forcing the idea that James merely alludes to Jesus’ very words. Furthermore, when one compares James with Jewish wisdom paraenesis and with the sayings of Jesus, it is worth noting that nearly all the forms of comparison in James can also be found in the sayings of Jesus. The significance of such an arrangement lies in recognizing that James’s wisdom seems to have developed in the kind of oral wisdom instruction that both the teaching of Jesus and the rabbinic parables reflect.

Furthermore, in Chapter 2 Bauckham provides the structure of James’s letter that he divides into three unequal parts: Prescript (1:1); Introduction (1:2-27); Exposition (2 – 5). He provides little discussion here since he alluded to the prescript and introduction previously in Chapter 1 and does so again in pages 69-73.

Here Bauckham proceeds to delve into the exposition of chapters 2 – 5. It is the author’s contention that the twelve sections of the exposition are carefully crafted as self-contained entities with strong indications to readers that they are to be read as such. Within each section, Bauckham maintains, there is an easily discernible movement of thought, which is brought to a rhetorically satisfying conclusion at the end of each section. Not only by unity of topic by also by rhetorical effect each section is united within itself and clearly marked out from others.

Therefore much the most prominent and important structural feature of chapters 2 – 5 is the arrangement of material into twelve discrete sections.

Bauckham first recounts Dibelius's rendition of paraenesis and then lays the foundation for seeing that one does not have to necessarily accept the fact that James has to possess a unified pattern of sequential development across the chapters. Against Dibelius, Bauckham maintains that paraenesis need not be a loose connection of disconnected statements, but can have a specific overall purpose of influencing and persuading people, a purpose which cannot be served by a mere collection of diverse material. James does not intend, according to the author, to persuade his readers through an argument pursued sequentially but rather with providing his readers with a compendium of wisdom instruction on a varied range of topics relevant to fulfilling the law, implementing the wisdom from above, and attaining perfection.

Consequently, James rhetorical structural is skillfully designed and implemented, but he has a different kind of rhetorical aim and strategy different from that envisaged by Thurén and others. Since much of James's rhetorical strategy is to cause the reader to pause and ponder, only within each section is he concerned to lead the reader on to a continuous train of thought. It is in this respect that James resembles other examples of Jewish wisdom instruction. In other words, for paraenesis of this kind, whether Ben Sira's or James', it is the structure of the topical sections that is important, while the arrangement of these sections in relation to each other is not necessarily of any importance for the achievement of the work's communicative goal. However, we should note that Bauckham's point is not to argue that the twelve sections in chapters 2 – 5 are arranged in an entirely random order, only that, even if this were the case, it would not necessarily impede James's overall goal in his work (p. 68).

Then, Bauckham maintains that the epistle is not “a haphazard collection of heterogeneous paraenetic traditions,” as Dibelius influentially supposed, but instead “it is a compendium of James’ wisdom, arranged, after an introductory epitome, in a series of discrete sections on various topics.” a form and structure that is “well suited to its purpose, which is to provide a resource for acquiring the wisdom that is expressed in obedience to God in every day life” (p. 108).⁴

One of the more valuable contributions that Bauckham makes to the study of James is his comparison of the wisdom of Jesus with the wisdom of James. “James has so made the wisdom of Jesus his own that what he brings out of his treasury of wisdom are not only things old and things new, but also things which are at once old and new” (p. 93). The author questions previous scholarship with respect to both Jesus’ and James’ wisdom (for instance, Witherington) and proceeds to offer another more satisfactory grounds for understanding this type of wisdom. First, Bauckham offers a brief sketch, in five sections, of the distinctive characteristics and emphases in the Synoptic sayings of Jesus. The five sections are: (1) Jesus’ ethical demands are more radical than those of the Torah, as conventionally interpreted, or of Jewish wisdom paraenesis; (2) Jesus envisages a society under the rule of God which contrasts radically with the hierarchical structures of existing society; (3) God’s eschatological action, in judgment or vindication, is the criterion for judging right or wrong acts, rather than the socially accepted view or the consequences for oneself in the natural course of events; (4) The understanding of God as compassionate, gracious and generous takes precedence over God as the dispenser of distributive justice, giving the deserving what they deserve; (5) Jesus is concerned with the renewal and reconstitution of Israel as the people of God (pp. 97-99).

⁴ *Ibid*, 53.

Then, Bauckham provides an invaluable service to readers of James as he details the evidence that James's wisdom has been decisively shaped by the distinctive character and emphases of Jesus (p. 100). He lists five sections corresponding to the five above: (1) Like the teaching of Jesus, the teaching of James lacks the moderation, practical compromise, and alignment with social convention that are often characteristic of the Jewish wisdom tradition, focusing rather on the Torah's demand for perfection, understood as extensively and intensively as possible. (a) James distinctive concern with speech ethics culminates with his most explicit 'allusion' to a saying of Jesus (5:12; Matt 5:34-37), probably the only real allusion in the sense of an echo readers are expected to hear. (b) James shares Jesus special concern with the heart as the source of words and actions; (2) The teaching of James, like that of Jesus, is paraenesis for a counter-cultural community, in which solidarity, especially with the poor, should replace hierarchy and status, along with the competitive ambition and arrogance that characterize the dominant society; (3) James writes with imminent coming of Jesus in view (5:7-8); (4) The God of James, as of Jesus, is pre-eminently the giving, generous, merciful and compassionate one; (5) When James writes to 'the twelve tribes in the diaspora' (1:1) he addresses the Jewish Christian communities as the nucleus of the ongoing Messianic renewal of the people of Israel and, by evoking the hope of restoration, incorporates them in the Messianic programme of redemption Jesus initiated when he appointed twelve apostles (pp. 100-105).

Bauckham, demonstrating his understanding of the spirit of James, imitates the author he wants to portray (thus showing himself a true disciple) forthrightly rejecting modern-day wisdom with respect to other things as well. First, in Chapter 3, for instance, when discussing "The Pauline perspective on James," Bauckham points out that "James relationship with Paul has in fact dominated the history of the reception and interpretation of James" (p. 113). Here he so

succinctly calls his reader's attention to the fact James has not possessed a voice of its own because historically it has been read from a Pauline perspective.

Second, even in a more broad context, in Chapter 3, Bauckham when discussing "James in canonical context," lays down a compelling argument against the common point of view on James, which compares Paul's view of "justification by faith" with James's understanding of works, choosing the former and subjecting the latter to a lesser canonical position. Bauckham then posits the idea that scholars have misjudged James by judging it as anti-Pauline because they have neglected to envision the complimentary voices within the canon. Moreover, Bauckham views the whole question as overemphasized and urges the reader to pay attention to the more obvious relationships between James and other sections of the canon, Torah, the Synoptics, 1 Peter as well as Wisdom.⁵

In Chapter 4, "James in modern and contemporary contexts," (pp. 158-208), Bauckham returns to the thesis he established in the Prologue, "Kierkegaard's critique of biblical scholarship and his demand for an engaged hermeneutic, one which enables subjective engagement with the text by readers who approach it with 'impassioned interestedness' as moral and religious people whose deepest concerns are at stake in the text" (p. 159). One notes here that Bauckham in each chapter alludes to the contemporary relevance of James which he accomplishes vis à vis a dialogue with Kierkegaard. Hence, the author's own respect for both Kierkegaard and James shows up in the last chapter as Bauckham theologically reflects upon how to read James contemporarily.

Bauckham, by using his dialogue with Kierkegaard, reflects upon the state of historical exegesis practiced by modern commentators. He states, "It makes no sense to ask were his (Kierkegaard) reading of James ends and his own creative thinking begins...A example like

⁵ *Ibid*, 54.

Kierkegaard's should make biblical scholars a little more modest than they often are about the importance and the limits of what they do, especially when they are tempted to speak as though they have the meaning of the text in their professional control" (p 161). Consequently, Bauckham divides Chapter four into two sections: (1) Reading James in the nineteenth century and (2) James at the turn of the millennium. Here he provides four major themes that are prominent in Kierkegaard's interpretation of James in order to facilitate the hermeneutical task of appropriating the message of James today.

Although I enjoyed Bauckham's treatment of James tremendously, I found his continual reference to Kierkegaard somewhat laborious. His examination of Kierkegaard's reading of James both in Chapter one as well as in Chapter four, which obviously represents much work on Bauckham's part, didn't hold my interest as much as Bauckham's treatment of the epistle itself. The constant comparison with Kierkegaard, although valuable especially to a philosopher or even literary critic, did not seem to carry me where I would have liked to have gone. As far as Bauckham's ability to capture the attention of the reader, he is an excellent writer who knows his subject so very well. And as far as commentaries on James are concerned, despite my reservations as noted above with reference to Kierkegaard, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage*, is without doubt the best one I have ever read.

His ability to address the questions of canon, Christian origins, the historical Jesus and Gospel studies is invaluable to both academician as well as the preacher. I highly recommend this commentary to anyone who is interested in coming to a better understanding of James, the Gospels, the wisdom literature, and even the writings of Kierkegaard.

That which stands out most about *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage*, is Richard Bauckham's humility and freshness as a writer and scholar.

Dane Boyles

June 2003