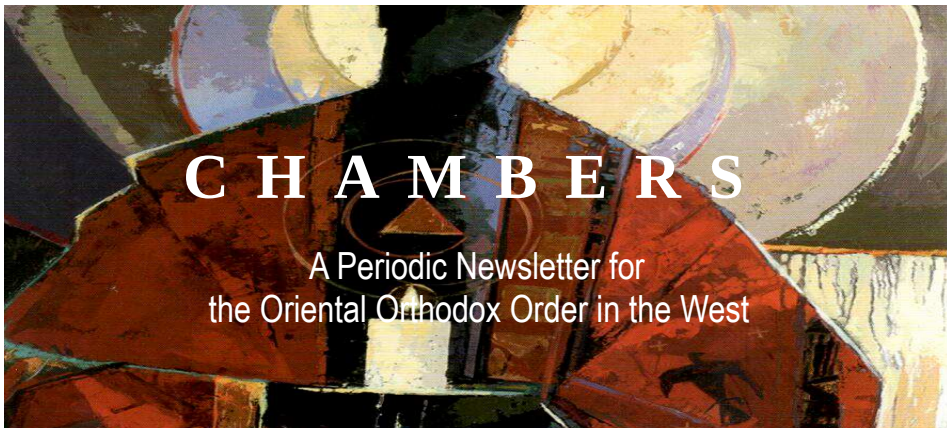

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INVESTIGATIONS INTO EARLY CHRISTIANITY: JEWISH ROOTS AND ORIGINS

A New Translation of the Letter of James

A significant and important feature of early Christianity was that it began as a movement of spiritual awakening among the followers of Yeshua within Judaism. It was a form of Jewish renewal that spread later into the Gentile world and morphed into what we know today as the Christian tradition.

Before we equate the Wisdom of Yeshua with its Gentile expression, we need to understand its Jewish roots and what it meant to be a follower of Yeshua within the heart of Judaism itself. This is difficult, of course, because little of that beginning remains, and what does is read through the lens of later western Orthodoxy. It is not easy, therefore, to reconstruct a Jewish worldview that we might call Christian, but also not impossible. One good beginning would be to reexamine the letter of James found in the Christian scriptures as a manifestation of that early understanding. The letter of James identifies the first leader of the followers of Yeshua within the Jewish community in Jerusalem after his death, as the writer. More importantly, perhaps, is the tradition that this is Yeshua's own brother.

Although there is dispute about the authorship of James, which is characteristic of other writings in the Christian Scriptures as well, there is the possibility that the claim is true. Otherwise how could such a text so different from the opinion of the majority writer, Paul, find its way into the final approved canon? There were, of course, a number of individuals with this same name in the circle around Yeshua, but Yeshua's brother, Ya'akov is sited in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3, and appears as the leader of the Jewish Christian community whom Paul acknowledges as one of its "pillars" (Galatians 2:9). In Acts he appears as the authorized spokesman for the Jewish Christian position (Acts 12:17, 15:13-21). According to Josephus he was stoned to death in 62 C.E.

Imagine in reading this new translation that your religious heritage was Jewish rather than Christian, but with the added understanding that you consider Yeshua to be the new Messianic figure appearing in your day. It will make far more sense. Then feel the underlying currents of a Jewish faith and wisdom that is Christian in some original way, but not yet shaped by its encounter with the Gentile world and its Pauline interpretation. Through this way of reading, a new form of Christian understanding appears as well as a fresh expression of early Christian wisdom that lies close indeed to the Jewish heart and teachings of Yeshua himself.

— L. Bauman

The Wisdom of Ya'akov
Brother of Yeshua

1:1

Greetings to you,
the twelve tribes of Israel scattered from the homeland
to the four winds.
From Ya'akov[1]
Servant of God (*Abdullah*)
and servant of the Master Yeshua, the Anointed One (*Abdul-Massih*)[2]

1:2-8

My brothers and sisters,[3] count it a great joy when trials and tribulations befall you and you must bear up under the suffering. Know this, that these trials are tests of your faithfulness. They produce in you the capacity for perseverance and patient endurance, and when these have been perfected, you will be a whole and complete being, lacking in nothing. But if any of you are lacking wisdom, then ask God and it will be granted you, for God is generous and self-giving, and imparts to all ungrudgingly and without reserve. But ask trustingly, without hesitation or doubt, for those who are doubtful are like ocean waves driven and tossed about by the winds. Do not imagine that they are capable of receiving anything, for an individual with a divided heart is inherently unstable.[4]

1:9-12

Brothers and sisters, those of you who are of humble means, rejoice in your exalted state. And those of you who are privileged rejoice in deprivation,[5] knowing that like flowers in a field which quickly fade, ultimately you too will be humbled. For when the sun rises, and the hot winds blow across the grass, the flowers dry up, their beauty passes and they quickly fall. Just so, the rich and their privileges[6] will pass into oblivion. But those who have proven steady in their testings are the truly blessed.[7] They will be crowned with Life—the Life promised to those who are in loving relationship with their Master.[8]

Notes

[1]Ya'akov (the anglicized Jacob) is the Hebrew name for the Greek, James. Traditionally James is called "the Just," which is understood to be a translation of the appellation, ***tzadik***, associated with a mystical and social movement within Post-Alexandrian Judaism.

[2]These two Arabic words are in current use in the Middle East and are close in form to the Aramaic and Hebrew languages. It is important to hear something of both ancient and current usage to remind ourselves that this is a Semitic text from the cultural context of the Middle East.

[3]This phrase in one form or another is used multiple times in the text translating the Greek word ***adelphoi*** which is in the masculine gender, but certainly includes both sexes. Brothers and sisters (the whole community) are included here.

[4]In this opening paragraph there are two issues of semantic importance. The first concerns the word endurance or perserverance (***hupmonei***). There are many nuances to this term which include patience and bearing up under pressure and suffering. In an attempt to express this full semantic content I have given different translations of the same word. The second concerns the Greek word ***dipsuchos*** (literally double-souled). In order to communicate this expression I have used instead the idea of "double-hearted" which is a dynamic equivalent in contemporary English, but perhaps another possibility is "fragmented soul."

[5]The phraseology of this passage presents a symmetrical reversal. The poor are exalted and the rich are brought low. The translation also allows for the means of this reversal—

1:13-18

Never say, however, that it is God who is testing us with temptations. God tempts no one and is tempted by nothing. We tempt ourselves when our lusts and desires have lured us into their traps, bringing calamity down upon our own heads. When our own egoic desires conceive, they give birth to failure and collapse, and when that child is born, inevitably we "miss the mark"[9] and are led towards death. So brothers and sisters, do not live in error. God only gifts us with the Good, and each divine gift is a perfection that falls from above, coming down from the changeless Source (the Father of Lights),[10] with whom there is no alteration, nor play of passing shadows. The whole purpose is to bring us into being by Truth spoken,[11] in order that we might become a kind of "first-fruit" birthed from out of the whole creation.[12]

1:19-25

So beloved ones, be swift to listen and slow to speak. Be slower still in becoming angry, for there is no way that anger or rage work to accomplish right-relationships. Cast aside every evil and its corrupting influences. In a spirit of gentleness receive the Word deeply implanted within you.[13] It is able to restore your souls to wholeness.[14] Seek instead to become practitioners of the divine Word, and not simply to hear it, which will only mislead you. Anyone who merely hears and takes no further action is like someone who, looking into a mirror and seeing the reality of their own face, immediately goes away forgetting completely what sort of being they actually are. But whoever gazes closely into the Torah of Perfect Freedom,[15] and continues looking (not like a thoughtless or forgetful hearer, but an accomplished practitioner of the work), will experience the full state of blessedness.

1:26-27

Suppose, then, that there are those who believe they are truly spiritual[16] and yet they cannot even control their own tongue, they are delusional and have subverted their own hearts.[17] All their religious devotion is useless. From the viewpoint of God the Source, true and authentic spirituality is simply this: to look after and care for orphans and widows in their afflictions, and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the conventions of this world.[18]

2:1-4

My brothers and sisters—those of you who have committed yourselves to Yeshua—Anointed and filled with Light,[19] know this: the Master pays no attention whatsoever to external appearances. Suppose a man dressed in

the humble state is a true exaltation, and the privileged in their state of opulence, in truth, is a spiritual deprivation and will literally prove to be so as time takes its inevitable toll either before or at the time of death.

[6] The phrase "rich and their privileges" is an alternative way of translating the term which references to someone who is rich.

[7] This is the first expression of the term **blessed** (***makarios***) which Yeshua also uses to describe a state in which the soul lives and thrives despite what the outer circumstances may be. This condition is both an inner reality, but it also describes a relationship to Ultimate Reality and to the Divine Realm.

[8] Several issues are present in this sentence. In the original Greek the reference is to the "Lord." If we understand this to be Yeshua himself, then perhaps the best translation is the word Master (***rab*** or ***mari***) to whom they are devoted and whom they love. And in Aramaic he is said also to be the Life-Giver (***Mahiyana***) which appears to be the reference made here.

[9] The standard meaning of the word ***hamartia*** is to move toward but fall short of the goal, which is also the origin of the previous translation "failure."

[10] A Semitic way of describing the source of something is to call it the "father," who is the Source of Light.

[11] "Truth spoken" is a direct translation of the original text. This phrase could also be understood as the Word (or ***logos***) of Truth.

[12] This reference to first-fruits has to do with the Hebrew understanding of first and second harvest, as well as the first and latter-born. The image is of those

splendid clothing, bejeweled with gold rings comes into your synagogue[20] followed by a person in rags, and you pay greater respect to the one dressed in high fashion saying, "O, please sit down here," and to the other, "You, stand over there," or even, "Here, sit down at my feet." Have you not become a dishonorable judge corrupted by every evil thought?

2:5-8

Ask this, then, my beloved brothers and sisters, has God not singled out the poor ones in this world (but those rich in faith) to become heirs of the Realm of Heaven—a promise made to all those who are in loving relationship with God? But then, look, you dishonored the poor man! Is it not the rich who have oppressed and dragged you into court before the magistrates? Are they not the very ones who blaspheme the Name that is most precious to you, and by which you yourselves are now called? Is not this the crown of the Torah:[21] *You shall love your neighbor as your very own being?* If you fulfill this royal law, then, you are doing everything well indeed.

2:9-13

But if you practice discrimination, you commit a grave error[22] and are condemned as a transgressor by the very Torah you say you follow. Whoever keeps the whole Torah but fails in this one thing has becomes guilty before all of it. For example, the Torah says, do not commit adultery. It also says do not commit murder, but suppose you kill another person, have you not become a transgressor in the eyes of the whole Torah? So speak and act, then, as if you are about to stand before the Torah of Ultimate Liberation.[23] Remember, merciless judgment is given to anyone who shows no mercy, but mercy itself triumphs over every judgment.

2:14-20

So tell me this, then, what profit is there to a faith that never results in practice?[24] Will that kind of faith heal and restore you?[25] Suppose a brother or sister is naked or starving and you say, "Go in peace, be warm and full," but you never lift a hand to alleviate their physical need, what sort of faith is that? It has no benefit at all. Practice becomes an orphan[26] and faith is dead! Someone can say, "Well yes, you take action, but I have faith." Listen, show me a true faith without practical action! I by my practice am demonstrating my faith. You say you believe in the One God. That's all well and good, but so do the demons, and even they tremble in fear. Are you not willing to see, then, O foolish one, that faith without practice is a dead thing?

2:21-26

Did not our father Abraham, as a token of his trust in God, offer up Isaac, his son, proving his faith? Was he not found worthy[27] by that very act? Do you not

who bear fruit or come forth before the rest and are representative of what shall follow and have, in some way, special responsibility for what is to come—especially in the case of first-born beings referenced throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures: Exodus 22:29, Leviticus 2:12, Number 18:12, Deut. 18:4, Prov. 3:9, Rom. 11:16, 16:5, I Cor. 15:20. The phrase "birthed out of the whole creation" is literally translated as "birthed from among all the creatures."

[13] The traditional translation of Word is from the original ***logos*** which has specific reference to the active manifestation of the Divine into space and time as the living principle of the Logos. It is used twice in this passage—and is clearly referenced in the previous passage, though the emphasis there was on Truth itself as the generative principle. The term ***logos*** is certainly related to the original Hebrew word ***dabar***, which like the Logos speaks of an active transmission from the Source expressed in human terms.

[14] To restore to wholeness is the intention of the original Greek term for ***sodzo***, which is used in many instances as the term for restoring health and wholeness to a sick or dying person.

[15] The fact that both Yeshua and Yakov were Torah-observant Jews is reflected in this phraseology. It is not simply obedience to Law which is being referenced here, but observance of the whole Torah which is understood to lead to perfect and complete liberation.

[16] The original term (***thrēskos***, ***thrēskeia***) translated here as "spiritual" refers to a religious, devout or pious person. An alternative translation, therefore, would be: *Suppose, then, that someone believes they are truly*

see, then, how faith expressed through practice is thereby completed or perfected. This is the way, then that the sacred texts were fulfilled which say that Abraham believed God, and was proven true. Ever after, therefore, he was remembered to be "the friend of God."[28] Know this, then, that it is through faith resulting in practice that a person is put right with God, and not simply by belief alone. Remember Rahab the prostitute? She too found a way to a right-relationship with God when she acted to hide the messengers, sending them out secretly by another way. So just as the body without the soul is dead, faith without practice is truly lifeless.

3:1-6

My brothers and sisters, do not eagerly seek the position of a teacher[29] knowing that they are the ones who receive the greater scrutiny—for in so many respects we all stumble. If, however, anyone is capable of bringing no offence by what they say, then they have perfected the ability to control their whole body as well. For example, when we put a bit and bridle into a horse's mouth we are able to control the whole animal, making it obey us. Also, on a large ship in heavy seas, it is the rudder (a very small thing) which is able to steer against the currents turning the ship wherever the captain wishes to go. So it is with the tongue, which is also a small part of the whole body. But by making great boasts, it is able to set off a firestorm with a single spark. In this world filled with many evils, the tongue acts like a cinder hidden among our many members. It can set our whole body ablaze, inflaming the web[30] of nature herself with Gehenna-like fire.

3:7-12

Creatures of every sort: birds, beasts, reptiles, and even those from the sea can be tamed, but the tongue is unmanageable and apparently untamable by humankind. It is so often out of control and full of venomous poison. Through it we can bless the Lord God as ***Abba***, Father—the Source[31]—or by it we can curse other human beings who are fashioned in the very image of God. Out of the same mouth flows both blessing and cursing—but this should not be, my brothers and sisters. Does the same fountain overflow with both sweet and brackish water? Can a fig tree produce olives, or a grape vine bear figs? In just the same way, a spring does not produce both fresh and salty water.

3:13-18

Who, then, are the wise and aware among you? Let them show their wisdom through the practice of gracious and humble living. If, however, there is bitterness and jealousy among you, or if there is conflict inside your hearts,

devout and yet cannot even control their own tongue. ... true and authentic devotion..." This would be a devout believer or follower of the Torah who follows the practices of Jewish religion in general.

[17] This term requires that we understand the heart to be a cognitive organ of perception which is superior in so many ways to the rational mind.

[18] This text as well as all of the early Christian writings calls the conventional human social order the ***kosmos***. This designation is typically put in either a negative or ambiguous light, since the human order is highly distorted or contaminated, and therefore problematic for the serious practitioner of the Torah.

[19] This title for Yeshua as the Anointed One (the Messiah) who is the Master (or the Lord) adds the word ***doxa***, which connotes beauty, glory, radiance, and luminosity, so this could also be translated as "the Luminous Messiah."

[20] This is the original word in the text and is a clear reference to the fact that this letter is written to a Jewish community living within the universe of Judaism and its spiritual practices.

[21] The Greek word for the Torah is Law, but a Jewish author writing to a Jewish audience can only have one meaning in mind, not Law in general, but the Torah in particular. The whole Torah is the Law or ordering principle of Judaism. We must understand that the early Jewish followers of Yeshua as Torah-observant Jews saw their spiritual practice as being in conformity with the writings of the Torah—that foundational text at the roots of the tradition.

[22] The word used here is ***hamartia*** (a term in archery that means to miss the mark

then you should not be pleased, nor should you try to deny the truth of things. None of this is true wisdom from a transcendent source; rather it is debased and self-serving—even demonic. For wherever jealousy and divisions are present, you are sure to find every other kind of disorder and disruptive practice. However, transcendent wisdom is above all, pure, impeccable, and peaceful in nature. It expresses itself in straight-forward, considerate open-mindedness. It is sincere, rich in compassion and in acts of goodness, which are its fruits. Peace, then, becomes the seed-bed of integrity,[32] and peacemakers reap the harvest.

4:1-4

So what, then, are the causes of warfare and human unrest? What is the source of our internal conflicts and discord? Do they not stem from our passions—the competing desires at war within us? We lust for things and cannot obtain them, so we jealously "go to war" to get what we want. We are constantly striving for things that are always just out of reach, and fail to possess what we ultimately desire because we have never truly asked. And when we do ask, we never receive anything because our asking arises out of our pursuit of pure pleasure misspent on our own egoic desires. Remember this, to prostitute yourself to the cultural mind-set is to alienate yourself from God.[33]

4:5-10

Is it a useless observation, then, when the sacred writings say: *The spirit within us is insatiably greedy*? So God, then, must give a greater grace, and thus it is said: *God resists the arrogant, but responds graciously toward those who are humble*. Surrender yourselves, therefore, to the Holy One and resist the Diabolical One—the Destroyer[34]—resist and it will flee from you. Draw closer to God and the Beloved One will come ever closer to you. Wash your hands of every offense. Do away with your divided heart.[35] Be willing, then, to endure suffering and to weep in sorrow. Even allow laughter to be turned to grief and joy to despair in order that you may stand in true humility before the Master who will raise you up.

4:11-12

Never speak evil of anyone. Someone who judges a brother or a sister is actually speaking against the Torah itself, or they are setting themselves as judges over it instead of becoming its practitioner. There is only one Giver of Torah and one Judge over All who is capable of both restoration and destruction—so who are you to stand in judgment of your neighbor?

or target), often translated, of course, as sin. Missing the mark is, however, an error, and this translation, therefore, is possible allowing this text to be understood in a more nuanced way.

[23] This phrase might also be translated as "the Law of Perfect Freedom," which is parallel to 1:25 which adds the world "perfect" or "complete."

[24] The issue in this and the following paragraphs has to do with taking action as the practical outcome of one's faith. The original term is ***ergon***, which defines the energy to do or accomplish something with a practical outcome (or through practical action) in the human order. This is what is meant by practice (or ***praxis***) in Christianity, and by "right-action" in Buddhism.

[25] Restorative faith is also traditionally translated as "saving faith" (or faith that saves one). It is from the verb ***sodzō*** which is used to describe both healing and restoration to fullness of being.

[26] This is the literal idiomatic phrase used in the Greek text, perhaps reflective of its Aramaic origins.

[27] The terms "found worthy" or "proven true" are translations of the original Greek (***dikē***, or ***dikaiao***) in its various forms. Ultimately these speak about being in right-relationship with God or with the divine Realm. The term "justified" has traditionally been used to translate this term, which has many meanings, most of which seem inapplicable here. It has nothing to do with justifying his actions, or explaining them in such a way that they are acceptable to God, appease God's wrath, or earn him entry into heaven. Rather, he is proving to be a worthy person (or a person of

4:13-17

Come then, you who proclaim: "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city and stay there a year, buying and selling to make a profit." Look, you don't even know what tomorrow holds. Your life is as substantial as a wisp of smoke. It appears briefly and then just as quickly it vanishes. Rather you should say, "God willing,[36] we will live and accomplish this or that," but instead you boast of your achievements, which, in the end, is mere empty, evil rhetoric. So, to know what good is and not do it is at the core of all our failings![37]

✡

5:1-6

O you who are rich in this world's goods, weep for the hardships that are about to befall you—your wealth is contaminated, your garments are moth-eaten and thread-bare, and your gold and silver is tarnished. Their toxic effects rise up in testimony against you and you yourselves will be consumed in their destructive flames.[38] This is the only "treasure" you have ever stored away, and it awaits you at the end of time in the *Eschaton*.[39] Just look at the living wages you have kept back from those who have worked your fields. The cries of every common laborer go straight into the ears of God. In the meantime you have lived high off their sufferings—your pleasure at their expense. You condemned good and decent folk to death while you partied your life away on earth, and they could not resist you.

5:7-11

So my brothers and sisters, you must continue to wait in patient expectation for the appearing of the Master. Watch how the farmer anticipates the precious fruits of the earth to appear, patiently waiting until both the early and late rains have come and gone. Like him, you too must steadily carry on, cultivating your own hearts because the time of the appearing of the Master is growing ever closer. Do not be whining and complaining about your brothers and sisters, lest you too stand in judgment, for the Judge stands even at the door. O friends, look at the prophets who spoke out in the name of the Holy One.[40] See them as your example of both suffering and patience. Blessed are all those who patiently endure. Have you heard about the patience of Job? Well, in the end, you saw the result—how tender and compassionate God was.

5:12-15

Beyond all this, brothers and sisters, do not swear by either heaven or earth—or take any other oath, so that you are not forced to stand trial. Let your "yes,"

worth) capable of being in right-relationship with God, and therefore, God's friend. Deeper still is the image used at the beginning of this letter of being "tested" here on earth and found to be true or wanting. Abraham, in this instance, stood the test. He was proved to be true or authentic. He was a real human being, and not simply "justified" before God as is expressed in the Pauline theology of the atonement.

[28] An expanded version of this same sentence giving a full range of meaning can be expressed in this manner: *The sacred texts have been fulfilled which say that it was in this way that Abraham believed God, and was proven to be authentic. This same title, "Friend of God" is expressed in the Islamic tradition as well.*

[29] The word teacher also connotes a spiritual master.

[30] This phrase literally is the "wheel of nature."

[31] There is much in this single phrase with its title for God that references the world of Jewish faith. The Tetragramaton (Yahweh) is typically replaced by the term Lord as reference to God, and Father is the Semitic term for the ultimate Source of something.

[32] This word is traditionally translated as "righteousness."

[33] The term "cultural mind-set" translates ***kosmos*** in Greek which speaks of the social human order and its distortions, which, according to the original Greek text, alienate us from (or make us adversaries of) God.

[34] The Greek term is ***diabolos*** which means, literally to throw things apart, to smash to smithereens and to destroy.

[35] This phrase is literally, "purify your hearts you double-souled."

[36] This phrase is in current

be yes, and your "no," be no. If anyone is suffering, let them pray. If anyone is joyful, let them sing. If someone in your midst is weak, then summon the elders and the congregation and let them pray over them and anoint them with oil in the Master's Name. A faith-filled prayer will restore the sick, for the Master will raise them up again, and if sins have been committed, they will be forgiven.

5:16-20

Confess your faults and short-comings to one another. Pray for each other to be healed, for the prayers of those in harmony with each other[41] are powerful. Remember Elisha? He felt just as we do. While in prayer he asked that it might not rain, and it did not for three and a half years. And then later when he prayed again, the heavens opened and the earth produced bountifully. So, my brothers and sisters, if any of you strays from the truth and someone is able to turn that one back around, know this—restoring anyone on the path who has fallen short will not only save that soul from death, but will also cast a veil hiding multitudes of failures.[42]

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usage in the Middle East with the Arabic term ***Inshallah***.

[37] Another, more typical, translation of this same senstence is: *So, to know to do good and not do it is the essence of sin*.

[38] In the original Greek text it states that it is the "flesh" (***sarkas*** plural) that will be consumed. If Yakov is using this term in the way that Paul does, then this refers not simply to the body (***soma***) but to the configuration of the body's relationship to the soul, and the soul to the body.

[39] This eschatological term refers simply to the "last days"—or the Eschaton at the end of time.

[40] Again, this is a reference to the unsayable (or speakable) Name—the Holy One—the Tetragrammaton.

[41] The phrase "in harmony with each other" translates the term for right-relatedness—being in right-relationship with each other (or traditionally, "righteous").

[42] This final phrase literally concerns a veiling or hiding away of multiple sins, errors or failings that might otherwise be exposed to public view. As expressed before in these notes, the word in the original is ***hamartia*** which means in archery to fail to hit the target and therefore to fall short of the goal.