THE TEST OF WEALTH

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INTRODUCTION

Within the realm of social ethics one of the major topics is the use of material resources, i.e., the issue of wealth. Along with this topic goes one’s attitude towards those who do and do not have these resources, i.e. the rich/wealthy and the poor. Is it possible to compare James and Paul on this significant issue?

The Epistle of James clearly has plenty to say about wealth and its use.1 James 1:9-11 contrasts the “lowly” believer with the “rich.” James 1:27 underlines the importance of caring for orphans and widows, two of the four cardinal categories of poor in the Hebrew scriptures. James 2:1-13 condemns discrimination against someone who is poor and in favor of someone who is rich. James 2:14-26 commends sharing with the poor as a “work” without which faith is “dead.” James 4:2 points out that coveting does not lead to having. James 4:13-17 condemns those merchants who make plans without reference to God. James 5:1-6 condemns the rich who oppress the poor laborers who work for them. James 5:7-11 calls for a patient response to oppression by the rich, but notes that the Judge is at the door and gives the example of Job. Given that Job had his material possessions restored and the previous context is one of not receiving one’s rightful pay, there is at least an implied economic reward in this passage. If we add these together, we discover that 47 verses out of 105 in the letter, or close to 45%, have an economic theme. Clearly we are talking about a topic that is important to James.

When we turn to Paul, we find much less of an emphasis on wealth and poverty.2 It is true that Paul does devote two chapters in 2

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1 See, for example, the monographs by Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, Poverty and Wealth in James (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), and David H. Edgar, Has God Not Chosen the Poor? The Social Setting of the Epistle of James (JSNTSup 206; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

2 E.g., Victor Paul Furnish could write The Moral Teaching of Paul (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) without mentioning the topic. More recently it does not figure in James D. G. Dunn’s The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Richard B. Hays does not mention the topic in relation to Paul in The Moral Vision of the
Corinthians to the topic of his collection for Jerusalem. There are other references to this in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 16. Elsewhere he occasionally talks about caring for the poor. But often his references to wealth are to spiritual wealth. While he was himself often poor, he does not make that an issue of injustice. In fact, he is at best reserved in thanking the Philippians for financial support and positively refuses it from the Corinthians. Taking the whole Pauline corpus, the only place we find a direct address to the rich is in 1 Timothy 6, and there it is similar to the charity that any Jewish leader would have urged upon them. Thus it is clear that we have a significant contrast with James in terms of both emphasis and position taken with respect to wealth. It is to exploring this contrast that this chapter is devoted.

BACKGROUND

When we ask why James devotes such a large portion of his work to the issue of wealth, we quickly discover that he reflects an emphasis of the Jesus tradition. We might say that this interest “ran in the family” or that James “shows a family resemblance,” however one may wish to interpret either of those expressions.

The relationship of James to the Jesus tradition is well documented. That is, James reflects the type of teaching found in the Q tradition, including the teaching on wealth. Interestingly enough, while one

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New Testament (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996). There is, of course, significant discussion of individual passages and particularly of his collection for Jerusalem, but even that is frequently discussed in terms of Paul’s view of the relationship of Jewish and gentile Christians rather than in terms of his view of wealth.

3 For our purposes we will treat the Pauline corpus as a unit, rather than treating the Pastoral Epistles or perhaps some of Prison Epistles separately from the Hauptbriefe. On this topic there is no significant difference in position among the various letters and thus separate discussion is not warranted.

4 Hostility to wealth is documented by Thomas E. Schmidt, Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels (JSNTSup 15; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987). Because the multiple attestation of this theme in all four gospels, as well as in extra-gospel references to Jesus such as 1 Cor 8:9, and because it is discontinuous with the majority practice of the later church (although 1 Cor 13:3a witnesses a practice that Paul knows but does not otherwise mention), Schmidt concludes that this attitude towards wealth goes back to Jesus himself.

5 That is, at the very least James shows a deep acquaintance with the Jesus tradition, even if one does not view it as a Palestinian work.

6 Among other works, see the doctoral dissertations of Dean B. Deppe, The Sayings of Jesus in the Epistle of James (Chelsea, MI: Bookcrafters, 1989), Patrick J. Hartin, James and the Q Sayings of Jesus (JSNTSup 47; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), and of Edgar,