
A note on Jacob's homily

by Allen Cabaniss

"Jacob's homily" is an unfamiliar designation for a very familiar document. Dr. Cabaniss, who contributes this short study on what is commonly called the Epistle of James, is Research Professor in the Department of History in the University of Mississippi.

IN *New Testament Abstracts*, XIV, No. 2 (Winter 1970), 200-204, there are listed no less than fifteen articles about the epistle of James published during the year 1969. I am therefore encouraged to add a few comments on the subject which I think will clarify the unity of the book.¹

Jacob's homily (commonly called the "Epistle of James") was written by a teacher, as he himself explicitly tells us (3: 1). Probably also a bishop, the writer was one who taught with authority. The language he used is very good, but simple, Greek. The date is more than likely A.D. 100, perhaps slightly earlier or later, judging from identification of Jesus as "God and Lord" (1: 1) in reminiscence of Emperor Domitian's title. The group that received the communication was one close enough to the world to be in danger of its distractions. Beyond these statements, however, it is difficult to go.

There seems to be general agreement that the letter originated in a Jewish-Christian milieu. For that reason, in translating one should deliberately employ the terminology "Jacob" instead of "James," "Messiah" instead of "Christ," "Torah" instead of "Law," "synagogue" instead of "assembly," "rabbis" instead of "teachers," and capitalization of the word "Wisdom," in order to emphasize the Jewish quality of the product. The form of the essay, on the other hand, appears to be Hellenistic, in particular that of a Stoic-Cynic diatribe, and there are some indications that suggest the practice of rhetoricians. Consequently one should not avoid in English the occasional use of rhetorical devices. Citations from the Old Testament are of the Septuagint and the book was indeed directed to the Diaspora where that version was normally in use.

¹ This book has long been one of my particular interests. See, e.g., Allen Cabaniss, "The Epistle of Saint James," *Journal of Bible and Religion*, XXII, No. 1 (Jan. 1954), 27-29; also *Liturgy and Literature* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1970), 15.

There is wide consensus about divisions of the book,² but there is also a feeling that as a whole the document is not closely knit. As a result theories of displacement, editorial work, and additions have been rife. But it appears that the book can be taken as it stands and that there is a logical order to it, if one looks upon it as a homily delivered to a particular assembly of Jewish-Christians, and this without doing major violence to accepted divisions of it. In an early church gathering people were usually grouped according to status in the Christian community, as clergy, laity, men, women, catechumens, penitents, the faithful, and so forth. With such a meeting in view, it is easy to distinguish various parts of the homily directed to each segment of the assembly in the following manner.

(a) *To rulers of the church*, 1: 2-27. Although the letter itself refers once to "presbyters" (5: 14), I am inclined to designate this first group as *bishops*, chiefly because of the verb *episkeptesthai* ("to look after") in 1: 27. This word suggests its cognate *episkopeō* ("to superintend" or "supervise"), which in turn evokes the noun *episkopos* ("bishop"). Be that as it may, 1: 2-27 is addressed to those who rule in the church and whom the author calls "my brothers" (1: 2) and "my brothers beloved" (twice, 1: 16, 19). They are exhorted to be steadfast under persecution (1: 2-4), wise in their leadership (1: 5-11), uncomplaining in tribulations (1: 12-19a), sober of speech (1: 19b-21), exemplary and unwavering in performance of duty (1: 22-27). The section recalls duties of bishops as outlined in I Tim. 3: 2-7; Tit. 1: 7-9, and it urges bishops to live up to those "Pauline" requirements. If, however, these exhortations should be deemed as addressed to presbyters, an appropriate reference is Polycarp, *To the Philippians*, vi, 1.

(b) *To deacons*, 2: 1-26. This section is made up of two divisions: (1) 2: 1-13, addressed to deacons as porters or doorkeepers of the assembly, and (2) 2: 14-26, as administrators of the church's charity (servers of tables). Both capacities were very early functions of deacons, the second being noted perhaps in the New Testament itself (Acts 6: 2-6). (1) As doorkeepers deacons should be concerned only with evidence that each person admitted to the ecclesiastical assembly is a professed believer. They should not show any partiality out of respect for secular rank or circumstance (2: 1-9); being servants, they are not the ones called to make judgments upon their neighbours (2: 10-13). (2) As dispensers of charity deacons should attend carefully to the original task for which their office probably arose; above

2 Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., "The Epistle of James and the Gospel of Matthew," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXV, Part 1 (March 1956), 40-51, esp. 42; Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1964), 8. The latter (p. 7) suggests that James is "equivalent to a sermon,"

all others they are the ones who must exemplify the faith by active deeds (2: 14-26). A remarkably interesting and unusually apt reference occurs in I Clement 42: 5, where the author cites an erratic version of Isa. 60: 17, "I will establish . . . their deacons in faith". Compare also Ignatius, *Trallians* 2: 3, "It is requisite for those who are deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Messiah to be in every way pleasing to all. They are not deacons of food and drink, but servants of God's church. It is fit therefore that they guard against blame as though it were fire". Our author Jacob also calls the deacons "my brothers" (twice, 2: 1, 14) and "my brothers beloved" (2: 5).

(c) *To teachers*, 3: 1-18. Persons belonging to this class (clearly identified, 3: 1, as the first two classes are not) are exhorted to be responsible (3: 1-5a), not jealous (3: 5b-12), but courteous (3: 13-18). They must avoid those peculiar temptations that beset professional "talkers," namely, to go beyond the evidence, to be bitter toward other teachers, to provoke rivalry and discord. These people, too, the author thrice addresses as "my brothers" (3: 1, 11f.) and indeed specifically identifies himself with them (3: 1). He was, therefore, whatever else he was, a teacher (rabbi).

At this point it is appropriate to inquire if these three foregoing orders appear in other early church literature. And, of course, they do. In the Shepherd of Hermas, *Vision* 3: 5-1, there is a statement: "These are the apostles and bishops and teachers and deacons who walked in accordance with God's holiness and who in purity and reverence served God's elect ones as bishops and teachers and deacons". The sequence is not as in Jacob's homily, but the reality is apparently the same.

(d) *To widows (virgins?)*, 4: 1-10. There are two traces of evidence that these verses are addressed to women: first, use of the word "wantons" ("adulteresses") in 4: 4—a feminine word in Greek; and secondly, the fact that throughout this rather lengthy section the author does not address his hearers or readers as "brothers", although he had previously so denominated the three earlier ranks three times each and would later employ the word six times. He does not call these people "brothers", for they are indeed women.

The existence of a corporate body of women known as "widows" is attested both in the New Testament (Acts 6: 1; I Tim. 5: 3-16; Tit. 2: 3) and the Apostolic Fathers (Ignatius, *To Polycarp*, 4: 1; Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 4: 3). The same group is indicated by the term "virgins" as suggested by I Cor. 7: 8; Ignatius, *To Polycarp*, 13: 1; Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 5: 3. Our author is particularly harsh with this class, excoriating its members for peculiar vices anciently attributed to women: quarrelsomeness, bickering, envy, gossip, love of pleasure. His sharpness is vindicated by I Tim. 3: 6, 11-13, 15; Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 4: 3; 5: 3.

(e) *To penitents*, 4: 11—5: 12. This section is composed of five divisions addressed respectively to (1) slanderers (4: 11f.), (2) braggarts (4: 13-17), (3) carousers (5: 1-6), (4) the impatient (5: 7-11), and (5) oath-takers (5: 12). With the first group the writer is relatively sympathetic (“brothers,” 4: 11), since their sin is one which may entrap a teacher. To braggarts and carousers he speaks more harshly. With the impatient and oath-takers he is again sympathetic (“brothers,” 5: 7, 9f.; “my brothers,” 5: 12), since their sins are also ones into which a teacher may easily fall.

(f) *To the faithful*, 5: 13-20. Believers are urged to look closely to their religious duties: to prayer, praise, reception of holy unction, and confession of sins (5: 13-16ab), the exhortation bolstered by an apt illustration (5: 16c-18). And finally the author concludes by commending those who have turned sinners back to the truth, calling them “my brothers” (5: 19f.).

The book may therefore be outlined thus:

- I. Salutation, 1: 1
- II. To bishops, 1: 2-27
- III. To deacons, 2: 1-26
 - (1) As doorkeepers, 2: 1-13
 - (2) As servers of tables, 2: 14-26
- IV. To teachers, 3: 1-18
- V. To widows, 4: 1-10
- VI. To penitents, 4: 11—5: 12
 - (1) Slanderers, 4: 11f.
 - (2) Braggarts, 4: 13-17
 - (3) Carousers, 5: 1-6
 - (4) The impatient, 5: 7-11
 - (5) Oath-takers, 5: 12
- VII. To the faithful, 5: 13-20³

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³ The author reserves all rights to this essay, including the notes.