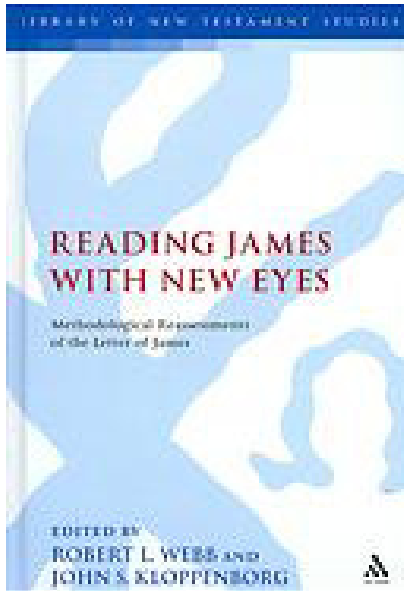


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Reading James with New Eyes: Methodological Reassessments of the Letter of James

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This collection of essays has its origin in two sessions at the 2005 Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting. Each of the essays has been revised for publication in light of the discussion that followed the presentation in these sessions. *Reading James with New Eyes* consists of eight essays: John S. Kloppenborg and Robert L. Webb, “Reading James with New Eyes: An Introduction” (1–5); Alicia Batten, “Ideological Strategies in the Letter of James” (6–26); K. Jason Coker, “Nativism in James 2.14–26: A Post-colonial Reading” (27–48); Darian Lockett, “‘Unstained by the World’: Purity and Pollution as an Indicator of Cultural Interaction in the Letter of James” (49–74); Margaret M. Mitchell, “The Letter of James as a Document of Paulinism?” (75–98); Duane F. Watson, “An Assessment of the Rhetoric and Rhetorical Analysis of the Letter of James” (99–120); John S. Kloppenborg, “The Emulation of the Jesus Tradition in the Letter of James” (121–50); and Wesley H. Wachob, “The Language of ‘Household’ and ‘Kingdom’ in the Letter of James: A Socio-rhetorical Study” (151–68).

Batten looks at James from the perspective of “ideological criticism,” understood as a “heuristic tool” (9) as it pertains to the issue of rich and poor (Jas 1:9–11; 2:1–13; 5:1–6). After defining the economic mode of production, the literary mode of production, and the dominant ideology as an honor-shame ideology, Batten applies ideological criticism

to the letter of James, a document taken to be a “literary letter” (15) embedded in deliberate rhetoric. The result, in short, is that James’s view of rich and poor fits into many ideological strategies, such as the unifying of a social group, pointing toward action and rationalizing those, legitimatizing social relations and working with stereotyping (see 9, 18, 21, 23). Regarding the rich and poor, James “is oppositional to the dominant honour ideology of the day ... and has replaced it by stressing the poor as honourable, and shown how this notion of the honourable poor is the true understanding of the tradition” (24) of the community and some of Jesus’ teachings.

The essay by Coker is in some, even many, respects illuminating, but in others quite problematic. The author examines the classical section Jas 2:14–26 from a postcolonial lens. The thesis put forward is that James and Paul are oppositional not so much in “a faith/works binary than with the issue of identity” as they are enmeshed in “politics of identity” (27). Employing the basic postcolonial categories of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence (29–31), Coker sees “a deep conflict between Paul and James” (40); “Paul represents everything that James stands against, that is, a religious identity that is thoroughly hybridized” (46). My hesitation about this essay has to do with the methodological imposition of postmodern categories on Paul and James, but more on this below. Like Coker, Mitchell’s study examines the relation between Paul and James, but unlike Coker, Mitchell argues that James “writes *from within Paulinism* (rather than in opposition to Paul), creating a compromise document which has as one of its purposes reconciling ‘Paul with Paul’ and ‘Paul with the pillars’” (79, emphasis original). Mitchell is convinced that there is a “literary relationship” (78) between James and Gal 2:16–3:29, Rom 3–4 and the letter of 1 Corinthians (88–93). Mitchell’s case rests on the examination of the wider *corpus Paulinum*, that is to say, how Paul’s letter were received from his own time until about the fourth century (including 1 Clement, Polycarp, Ignatius, John Chrysostom, Pelagius). She concludes that these authors employ what she calls a “combinatory hermeneutics” (91), a model of interpretation that has close conceptual and philological affinities with Paul’s writings while showing independent and creative adaptations. In the same way, James’s treatment of the Pauline literary tradition amounts to a “harmonizing Paulinist hermeneutic” (97).

In his study, Lockett argues—contra the majority of biblical scholars—that the question of purity/pollution was “a central or controlling theme” in James, marks “cartographic lines of ideology” (49), and amounts to “an integral part of the author’s construction and perception of reality” (51). Lockett substantiates his thesis by drawing on a number of texts (Jas 1:26–27; 3:6; 4:8) in which the tension between purity and love for the world is exemplified and the latter also linked with the theme of perfection (70–73). The conclusion is that James calls for pure and undefiled actions before God at the expense of one’s friendship with the world (74).

In a fine essay, Watson's objective is to "assess the rhetorical criticism of the Epistle of James" (100). After discussing the themes of ancient and modern rhetoric, paraenesis and diatribe, epistolary and rhetorical theory, rhetorical training, intertextuality, and sociorhetorical analysis, Watson comes to his own constructive proposal of the rhetorical structure of James. Even though Watson maintains that "the author of James had received rhetorical education" (113) and "clearly there is rhetorical structure in the epistle" (119), it is still the case that overall James does not fit neatly into ancient rhetorical schemata such as *exordium*, *narratio*, *probatio*, and *peroratio*, even though the epistle introduces topoi such as *exordium* and *peroratio* (117). In a nutshell, the structure and rhetoric of James presents itself as "a Jewish-Christian wisdom work influenced by Hellenistic rhetoric, but it is arranged overall in the topic-to-topic fashion of Jewish wisdom texts" (119).

Kloppenborg's essay is "an experiment in deriving a selection of James' statements from Q" based on an examination and comparison of "the principles of rhetorical emulation" (141). In a first step, Kloppenborg establishes his analytic framework, namely, a "model of verbal transmission and transformation ... self-consciously undertaken and explicitly described by ancient authors" (128). Examples from antiquity (such as Sirach, Pseudo-Phocylides, Diogenes Laertius, P. Bouriant I) establish the process of textual transmission to the extent "that verbatim repetition of predecessor texts" (133) was not desirable and "footnoting" not necessary, since the creative paraphrasing of texts was simply the rhetorical technique known as *aemulatio*. In a second step, Kloppenborg examines in detail the use of paraphrase and emulation in the Epistle of James and concludes that Jas 4:3-4 is anchored in Q 16:13 and Jas 5:1, 2-3 in Q 6:24; 12:33-34. The essay includes a helpful table that compares James with the Q sayings of the Jesus tradition (143-50).

In the final essay, Wachob develops the sociorhetorical approach vis-à-vis the notions of "household" and "kingdom." This approach is not merely one method of the hermeneutical repertoire but should be understood, following Vernon Robbins, as an "antimethod" guided by multidimensional and multi-interpretive lenses such as rhetoric, anthropology, and sociology (151). Wachob presupposes that James is "a written instance of deliberative rhetoric" and that the "rhetorolects" "household" and "kingdom" (among others) are crucial to the "social and cultural intertexture"; his goal is "to demonstrate something of the persuasive artistry" of James (153). With reference to the prescript (1:1), *exordium* (1:2-13), *narratio* (1:13-27), and *confirmatio* (2:1-12), his detailed exegesis arrives at the conclusion that "socio-rhetorical interpretation specifically asks what the rhetoric of the Epistle of James attempt to do: it helps us identify the function of the social possession and use of langue in the text ... to persuade some Jewish Christians to hold Jesus' faith: to think and act like 'the glorious Lord Jesus Christ' (Jas. 2.1)" (168).

What should the reader make of the “methodological reassessments” proposed in these essays? On the one hand, each of the essays constitutes a solid piece of work on a specific method and its application to James. Indeed, every study has insightful analyses, nuances, and lenses from which much light falls on James. In other words, as individual studies all the contributions are interesting, certainly learned, innovative, and thought-provoking. On the other hand, and more important, the issue that crept up consistently for this reviewer was the question of the correlation of these various (post)modern methods (1) within the spectrum of the proposed methods and (2) as legitimate—that is to say, nonimposed—interpretive techniques appropriate to the exegesis of James and other biblical texts. It struck me repeatedly that the various methods are not congruent, at least that they do not proliferate into a more cohesive understanding of James as a whole. To be fair, each method claims nothing more than to illuminate a very particular aspect of James from a very particular angle. Even so, the essays by Coker and Mitchell, for example, notwithstanding certain minor agreements, argue in effect for contradictory positions of James vis-à-vis Paul. Similarly, the various claims made in these studies concerning the most central theme or focus of James diverge widely. For example, is it purity/pollution (Lockett) or social injustice of poverty (Jas 2:5; see Wachob, 114, 166)? Of course, it is possible to claim that James has many foci. But on a deeper level, this merely intensifies the issue of whether the central theme is the (necessary) result established by the method rather than determined by other factors, conceivably a more historically and theologically oriented exegesis.

Another question that lingers for me is how reading James with new methods ultimately yields a more coherent, comprehensive, and clearer portrait of the man called James and the intentions of his letter. In spite of Batten’s claim that the methodologies discussed in these studies function as “heuristic tools” in view of “uncovering aspects of texts that without the tool may not be obvious” (9), I found myself often looking for these hitherto unknown aspects. For example, the fine essays of Kloppenborg and Wachob draw conclusions that clearly do not uncover new aspects that may be credited as the direct result of the application of a new method. Regarding the first, why the elaborate construction of a redactionary model of textual paraphrase and emulation of the Jesus tradition to determine the oral-literary sources for James’s sayings and instructions. What is new about the Jesus tradition, not just its path of transmission, that enhances our picture of James in this regard? To be sure, now we know more details as to the precise origin of the Jesus tradition in James, but arguably there is nothing that is so fundamentally new that required this kind of sophisticated rhetorical analysis. Similarly, Wachob’s conclusion that James wants to “persuade some Jewish Christians to hold Jesus’ faith: to think and act like ‘the glorious Lord Jesus Christ’ (Jas. 2.1)” (168), does strictly

speaking not require a sociorhetorical interpretation. There are many scholars who have reached similar conclusions without recourse to this particular method.

Notwithstanding these reservations, the work is most definitely a step forward in the study of James. It is a timely contribution precisely because it raises the important question of methodological approaches and thus essentially the perennial question of hermeneutics.