Hartin, Patrick J.

*A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James*


Edgar, David Hutchinson

*Has God Not Chosen the Poor? The Social Setting of the Epistle of James*


Jackson-McCabe, Matt A.


Supplements to Novum Testamentum 100

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Whereas only a few monographs on the epistle of James appeared in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the situation has radically changed in the last decade. At the same time, the focus has shifted. Instead of the traditional concentration on 2:14–26 and on the comparison with Paul, the perspective has opened up considerably, and the individual theological significance of James and its themes has been more strongly recognized. In opposition to the classical, derogatory assessment of Martin Luther, the letter has therefore undergone a thorough rehabilitation most recently. In the present review, three newly published monographs documenting these new interests will be presented.
Subsequent to publishing his *James and the Q Sayings of Jesus* (JSNTSup 47; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) and a number of articles, Patrick Hartin has contributed another monograph, *A Spirituality of Perfection*, in which he draws a comprehensive picture of his understanding of the epistle and simultaneously attempts to unfold the meaning of the letter for today (ch. 7: “On Reading James Today” [149–69]). Hartin belongs to those scholars who emphasize the close connection of the epistle with the Jesus tradition. In this new monograph, his primary intention is portraying “how James’s concept of perfection operates as a unifying theme by giving meaning to the other themes developed throughout the letter” (10). Additionally, Hartin postulates close resemblances between the letter and the Jesus tradition as it is handed down in the Gospel of Matthew, especially in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount.

Prior to analyzing the Jacobean concept of perfection, Hartin offers “An Overview of the Concept of Perfection in the Ancient World as a Background to the Letter of James” (ch. 2 [17–39]), in which he presents the concept of perfection in the classical Greek world, the Hebrew Scriptures and the Septuagint, Second Temple Judaism, and the New Testament. In his opinion, the Old Testament concept of perfection serves as the main background for James’s perception. Hartin discerns three essential aspects here: (1) “the idea of wholeness, or completeness, whereby a being remains true to its original constitution” (26); (2) wholehearted dedication to the Lord; and (3) obedience to the Torah.

As a second preliminary step to the analysis of the idea of perfection in James, Hartin gives attention to the nature or genre of this writing (ch. 3: “The Nature and Purpose of the Letter of James” [41–56]). Hartin follows others in categorizing the epistle as a piece of wisdom literature but defines the writing more precisely as “protreptic discourse,” which he distinguishes from paraenesis, for example, by its more strongly argumentative character in comparison with the paraenetic collection of loosely connected exhortations. With this last classification, Hartin joins the new magnus consensus of James scholarship, insofar as the Dibelian view of the epistle as a loose collection of sayings without any situational reference has generally been surmounted, although Hartin’s definitions of paraenesis and protreptic discourse are questionable. Moreover, since the wisdom classification of the epistle is a highly disputed matter in recent scholarship on the letter, an essential critical point is missed, because Hartin does not engage in intensive discussion with the opposing position.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the center of the monograph. In ch. 4 (“Faith Perfected through Works: A Context for the Moral Instructions in the Letter of James” [57–92]) Hartin analyzes the concept of perfection in the epistle, which he regards as “exercising an ethical role in that it provides the perspective for, and the motivation behind, the various moral actions” (60). Hartin organizes the thematic material under four headings: (1) call
to perfection through enduring trials (1:2–4; 5:7–11); (2) wisdom as the horizon for attaining perfection (1:5–8; 1:17 [!]; 3:13–18; 4:4); (3) perfection and the law (1:25; 2:8); (4) faith perfected through works (2:22). He rightly emphasizes the sharp dichotomy between God and the “world” in the letter (4:4). “James calls for total allegiance to the Lord, an allegiance that keeps one unstained from the world” (77). The law, which is to be identified with the biblical Torah, is called “perfect” (1:25) as a gift of God. Moreover, “observance of the Torah leads to the establishment of a wholehearted relationship with the Lord” (81). The love command (2:8) “does not replace the Torah, but gives expression to the pulsating heart and direction of the Torah as God’s will for God’s people” (84). Hartin especially highlights the more communal rather than exclusively individualistic dimension of the ethos of James, the main focus of which is concern for the poor. Wisdom, defined as “a practical gift, enabling one to know how to act in specific situations” (66), is necessary for treading the path of perfection.

Of some importance for the overall understanding is that Hartin reads the concept of perfection into James’s use of ἀπαρχή in 1:18: Because “nothing that was imperfect could form part of that offering” (i.e., the offering of the firstfruits, M. K.) (69ff.), James’s metaphorical use of the word implies, according to Hartin, that the Christians “too must be unblemished. They are perfect, not through anything of their own doing, but through God’s actions” (70). On this basis, Hartin asserts that the Old Testament “idea of wholeness or completeness, whereby a being remains true to its original constitution, is the fundamental understanding of the meaning of perfection in James” (89).

The fact that Hartin reads wisdom into 1:17–18 so that it is the gift of wisdom that “brings about regeneration and rebirth” (78) is of no less consequence. This kind of wisdom reading of 1:17ff. is not peculiar to Hartin. Nevertheless, it is rather unconvincing. The only link between 1:17 and wisdom is that James speaks of “wisdom from above” in 3:15, which calls ἄνωθεν in 1:17 to mind. However, this only implies that wisdom is one of the many good gifts of God. When one of the gifts is exemplified in 1:18, it cannot simply be assumed that the same gift is meant as later in 3:13–18. Rather, proof can be given to the contrary: 1:18 speaks—as Hartin also presumes—of the rebirth of the Christians, that is, of conversion. According to 1:5, however, there are Christians who fully or at least partially lack wisdom. Wisdom is, therefore, not inscribed upon the birth certificates of Christians.

Chapter 5 supplements the previous analysis of the concept of perfection with observations on “Spirituality of Authentic Perfection” in James. Although unfolding his system of belief is not James’s concern, such a system is reflected in his ethical discourse. A peculiarity of the epistle is its theocentric rather than christocentric orientation. Moreover, Hartin discovers the motif of the imitation of God in the letter,
although he has to admit that this is not directly stated. “God is one and single minded, which is contrasted to the person who is double-minded” (100). Under the heading “faith in action,” Hartin describes different aspects of the spirituality found in the letter, such as a spirituality of integrity, of friendship with God, of prayer, a spirituality permeated by love of neighbor, and a spirituality of the poor, which Hartin strongly emphasizes. Especially here, the difference over against the world with its striving for status and wealth becomes strikingly apparent, and it is evident that “the spirituality of James is countercultural” (127).

In chapter 6 (“Perfection in the Letter of James and the Sermon on the Mount” [129–47]) Hartin tries to depict the close commonalities between the letter of James and the Sermon on the Mount in their understanding of perfection. From a historical perspective, Hartin concludes that the connections between both texts “point to the development of the traditions of early Christianity within a similar environment or milieu” (145). Despite the affinity between the two texts, their fates have been extremely different: whereas the Sermon on the Mount always belonged to the basic texts of Christianity, the epistle of James was marginalized for the most part. Hartin’s intention is to correct this: “James should be valued alongside Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount as giving an insight into traditions of early Christianity that lie very close to the person of Jesus” (147).

Without a doubt, Hartin’s interpretation represents an important contribution to recent James research. Nevertheless, there are some questionable points in addition to the one concerning wisdom mentioned earlier. It is striking that a detailed analysis of the use of τέλειος in 3:2 is missing from chapter 4. This verse also cannot be easily accounted for in Hartin’s interpretation. According to it, Christians have at least had sins of the tongue attributed to them. A person would only be perfect, however, if he were not to stumble ἐν λόγῳ. This seems to suggest that perfection in James implies sinlessness and above all that James does not actually reckon with the existence of perfect Christians (by inference, being perfect is not the same as being just!). This can be further illustrated by another consideration. According to Hartin, wisdom is a prerequisite for being perfect. However, God does not give wisdom to the διψυχος but only to those who ask him ἐν πίστει, which comprises wholehearted dedication to God. The sequence in 1:4–8 thus implies that perfection is more than the wholehearted allegiance to God alone. The latter is certainly the fundament of James’s conception, but perfection itself means more, namely, fulfilling this attitude in a perfect way in daily life. Simultaneously, this means that perfection is rather an ideal that should spur the readers onwards. Nevertheless, these questions do not alter the fact that Hartin’s book is a profound enrichment for research on James.

David Hutchinson Edgar’s work is a revision of his doctoral thesis at the University of Dublin, completed in 1996, but not published until 2001. Its aim is to “re-examine the
disputed question of the epistle’s setting within the social world of emergent Christianity” (12). Methodologically, Edgar also joins the newer approaches in reading the epistle “as purposeful communication within, and appropriate to, a specific context” (38). Following this line, he first analyzes the self-presentation of the author (ch. 2) and the presentation of the addressees (ch. 3). Chapter 2 contains two different elements. First, Edgar discusses the self-identification of the author as “slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1) and as a teacher (3:1). The second aspect is the more decisive one, namely, the relation of the epistle of James to authoritative traditions. Edgar points to the Jewish conception of the order of the world as the fundament of the author’s worldview, but above all he stresses—similar to Hartin—the influence of Jesus traditions on the epistle. Edgar lists eighty (!) parallels that he classifies in three categories: (1) close verbal and conceptual correspondence; (2) some degree of verbal and conceptual correspondence, where contact between the epistle of James and the gospel traditions is likely; and (3) more distant verbal and/or conceptual resonances (65ff.).

The analysis of the addressees’ situation in chapter 3 is twofold again. First of all, Edgar calls attention to the designations of the addressees in the epistle as the “twelve tribes in the diaspora” (1:1), which he understands figuratively, as “brothers” (fifteen times), and, on the other hand, as “adulteresses” (4:4), “sinners” (4:8), and “double-minded” (1:8; 4:8). There is nothing really new in this part of Edgar’s study, and thus the more important section of chapter 3 is the analysis of the specific emphasis of James’s critique of the addressees, which Edgar develops on the basis of an exegesis of 2:5ff. The decisive moment for his overall hypothesis is that he reads the verses within the framework of Gerd Theissen’s depiction of the Jesus movement. The “poor” are identified with the itinerant radicals who are totally dependent on and who totally trust in God, and the addressees are identified with the group of sympathizers, whereby Edgar stresses again and again that one must not presuppose a clear distinction between Christian and Jewish groups in the social environment of the epistle (e.g., one should not “make a sharp differentiation” as to whether the assembly in 2:2–4 “should be seen as either Jewish or Christian” [115]; the “good name” in 2:7 refers to God, not to Jesus [123–24]). In other words, Edgar not only postulates a strong influence of Jesus traditions; he also combines this with the assumption that the social constellation of the early Jesus movement builds the relevant social context of the epistle. On the basis of this principal presumption, Edgar identifies the poor stranger of 2:2–3 as one of the radical itinerant prophets, whereas the “goldfinger” is seen as a “(prospective) patron, who is attempting to gain the support of clients in the local community” (119). The major problem diagnosed by the author of the epistle is that the sympathizers are not as sympathetic toward the itinerant radicals as they should be in his eyes (128, 133).
In chapters 4–6 Edgar develops a short exegesis of the letter ("Reading the Text"), which is divided according to his outline of the letter into three sections: 1:2–18 as "opening section"; 1:19–3:18; and 4:1–5:20. Edgar stresses two central aspects here: (1) the depiction of the addressees’ shortcomings accompanied by the exhortation to firm reliance on God; (2) "the depiction of God’s supreme status, authority and beneficence" (137). Edgar interprets the text in an original way primarily when he implements his overall thesis referred to above. The needy in 2:15–16 are again brought into connection with the itinerant radicals, and in 3:1 he discovers "tensions between itinerant radicals, who perpetuated the proclamation of Jesus among local communities, and representatives of those communities" (177). As Edgar concisely summarizes in his conclusion (ch. 7), this all results in the following perspective of the situation of the addressees: “Concretely symptomatic of the addressees’ shortcomings is their treatment of the radical itinerant members of the early Christian movement, who have been received with dishonour, refused material support and had their authority as teachers called into question” (218).

Edgar prefers the option of pseudepigraphical authorship of the epistle but views the letter, along with other interpreters in most recent James research, as independent of Paul. His decisive argument for locating the writing in the region of Syria-Palestine is, again, the alleged reference to the itinerant radicals of the Jesus movement (225). Or conversely, the hypothesis of itinerant radicals is not substantiated by independent arguments for the letter’s localization; rather, it is employed as the initial argument for the localization. Finally, Edgar also makes a case for the writing of the epistle prior to 66 C.E. with this hypothesis.

The difficulties with Edgar’s overall thesis are apparent. Nowhere does the epistle explicitly restrict the πτωχοί to itinerant radicals, nor does it offer any sort of clear indications pointing in this direction. In 2:15–16 as well as in 3:1, this hypothesis is simply forced upon the text, and nothing else can be maintained for 2:2ff. either. On the basis of his postulation of a strong influence of Jesus tradition in James, Edgar reads the social constellation of the Jesus movement into the letter. This, however, is jumping to a rash conclusion, for the Jesus tradition was also transmitted and preserved in other social constellations in early Christianity. Indeed, one must even go a step further and put Edgar’s traditio-historical hypothesis in question. I give only a few examples: Edgar puts the “parallels” between Jas 1:2 and Matt 5:11ff./Luke 6:22ff. and those between Jas 4:10 and Matt 23:12/Luke 14:11 into the highest category. But the closest parallels to Jas 1:2ff. are 1 Pet 1:6ff. and Rom 5:3–5. James 4:6–10 corresponds most closely to 1 Pet 5:5c–9. It is feasible that the Jesus logion serves as a basis in this last case. Nevertheless, James is dependent on the reception of this logion in an early Christian piece of tradition that is also common to 1 Peter, and not directly upon the Jesus logion in Matthew and/or Luke.
In summary, the impression remains that Edgar has formulated an interesting train of thought that is built, however, on shallow ground. Further, another critical remark must be made: unfortunately, Edgar has not adequately taken into consideration literature that appeared in the five years between his dissertation and its subsequent publication; even important monographs are missing from the bibliography.

Matt Jackson-McCabe’s *Logos and Law in the Letter of James* primarily focuses on the interpretation of the ἔμφυτος λόγος in 1:21. In current James research, the determination of the relationship between λόγος in 1:18, 21, 22 and νόμος in 1:25 still remains a point of contention. Are both entities identical, or is the law a part or aspect of the word? Jackson-McCabe’s approach belongs to the first option, but he modifies it with the assumption—and this is the essential assertion of his book—that the Stoic conception of “natural law” serves as the background for the phrase “implanted word” in James.

After a short introduction, Jackson-McCabe first gives an overview of the interpretation of the phrase “implanted logos” in the exegesis of James (7–27), in which he briefly touches on the traditional objections to the understanding of the logos as human reason in 1:21: Contrary to the gospel, human reason cannot be heard and done, and it does not save souls. Moreover, the phrase δέχεσθαι τὸν λόγον occurs several times in other early Christian writings, and in 1:18 the author refers to rebirth through the “word of truth,” which designates the gospel in other early Christian literature (e.g., Col 1:5). A significant Stoic influence was only admitted when the epistle was viewed as a Jewish writing (A. Meyer), or at least 1:17–21 as a pre-Christian tradition (Boismard). One of Jackson-McCabe’s basic credos is that a fusion of different traditio-historical strains cannot be excluded as an option if the work is a Christian composition: that is, viewing the epistle as a Christian letter does not automatically mean that logos must necessarily be used in the sense of “gospel.”

In chapter 2, “Law as Implanted Logos: Cicero and the Stoics on Natural Law” (29–86), Jackson-McCabe depicts the interrelationship of the following ideas: the inchoate logos with which humans are born; the notion of “implanted preconceptions” (ἔμφυτοι προλήψεις), that is, “the human animal’s innate disposition to form concepts like ‘good’ and ‘bad’” (26); and the theory of natural law, which Jackson-McCabe postulates as the traditional background of the phrase in Jas 1:21. Chapter 3, “The Law of Moses, the Teaching of Jesus and Natural Law” (87–133), complements this by pursuing the creative reception of Stoic theory in Jewish (Philo, 4 Maccabees) and Christian literature (*Apostolic Constitutions*, *Second Apology* of Justin Martyr, Methodius), where the Stoic ideas are fused with conceptions alien to them, especially with the notion that the natural law finds its written expression in biblical law. Jackson-McCabe, however, cannot add new references for the phrase ἔμφυτος λόγος in ancient sources. Therefore, results still
show that ἔμφυτος is used in the context of Stoic theory (e.g., ἔμφυτον ἐννοιαν in Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.11.3) and in its reception in the (later) Christian sources named above (but not in Philo and 4 Maccabees!), but the only possible exact evidence for the phrase in question remains Cicero’s definition of law as ratio summa insita in natura (*Leg.* 1.6.18), which probably corresponds to the Greek ἔμφυτος λόγος.

With chapter 4, “The Implanted Logos and the Law of Freedom” (135–92), Jackson-McCabe turns to the analysis of the relation of the ἔμφυτος λόγος and the perfect law of freedom in the epistle of James. According to Jackson-McCabe, the terms “implanted logos” and “law” are functional equivalents, and James’s use of these terms “derives from the Stoic identification of human reason as a divinely given natural law” (154). James thereby depicts the same differences with the Stoic conception as the texts analyzed in chapter 3: though internal to the human individual, the *logos* has an external form as well, and against this background it can be understood that the *logos* can be “heard” and “done” or “received.” As far as the content of the law is concerned, Jackson-McCabe finds a subtle critique of the use of the love command as the summary of the law in 2:8–11, which heralds his hypothesis of an anti-Pauline thrust in the epistle (for this see M. Ludwig, *Wort als Gesetz* [Frankfurt am M., 1994], 171–75, 185–87). The statements in 2:8 and 2:9 are read as “posing simultaneous rather than formally opposite conditions” (172), and this means that 2:8 should be understood as an ironical statement alongside 2:19 (reflection of the Synoptic double love command). The love command is, thus, only “one command alongside others within a larger body of law” (176), which basically is to be identified with the Torah (not a new Christian law), although the question must finally remain open whether the legislation concerning the cult, purity, diet, the calendar, and circumcision is of any relevance for the author (177–85). Soteriologically, this means that keeping the (double) love command is not sufficient (175, 187).

In chapter 5, “Logos and Desire” (193–239), Jackson-McCabe analyzes the antithetical relationship between *logos* and desire. For Jackson-McCabe’s overall interpretation it is crucial that on the basis of his postulation of a Stoic background in 1:21 the implantation of the *logos* is linked to creation. In this context, he simultaneously rejects the widespread interpretation of 1:18 as referring to conversion: birth by the “word of truth” refers to the creation of humankind, in his opinion; 1:18b defines the exalted position of humanity in creation. This is supported by an unconventional interpretation of Jas 1:17. Jackson-McCabe reads the notion of heavenly bodies wandering off their prescribed paths into the phrase that speaks of God as “father of lights.” He thereby discovers an analogy between heavenly lights and humankind: “Just as one cannot infer from God’s creation of the ‘lights’ that he is responsible when they deviate from their prescribed courses, so too, one cannot infer from God’s creation of humanity that he is responsible when they ‘wander’
from the *logos* he gave to them as their law” (238, cf. 216). Moreover, Jackson-McCabe also explains the stumbling ἐν λόγῳ in 3:2 on the basis “of the intimate relationship between speech and the human *logos* posited by the Stoics” (228). In the conclusion (241–53) he summarizes his findings and, finally, argues for an anti-Pauline thrust of the epistle: “The author of James writes with an eye to undermining Paul’s position on the significance of the Torah” (250).

Jackson-McCabe has enriched the discussion of the understanding of the “word,” which is important for the general understanding of James, with a new and interesting variant. Especially important in this context is the case he makes for not rashly isolating different strands of traditions. His interpretation of James, however, does not bear critical scrutiny. Contrary to Jackson-McCabe’s assertion (see, e.g., 133), the phrase ἐμφυτὸς λόγος can hardly be proven to be a *terminus technicus* on the basis of seldom, widely strewn, and—in addition—inexact references. Furthermore, Jackson-McCabe does not discuss other usages of ἐμφυτὸς at all (Philo, for example, uses this word only in the context of vices). And a passage such as Barn. 9.9 (ὁ τὴν ἐμπυτὸν δωρεάν τῆς διδαχῆς αὐτοῦ θέμενος) plays no part in Jackson-McCabe’s analysis.

However, the fact that Jackson-McCabe does not succeed in invalidating the traditional objections to the Stoic interpretation of 1:21 is more important. That the *logos* as innate human reason has an external form in the “law of freedom” is hardly a sufficient explanation for the phrase “to receive the *logos*,” or, respectively, “to hear and do the *logos*.” To use the terminology of *Apos. Con.* 8.9.8, the νόμος γραπτός is precisely not what is to be received in James, but rather the ἐμφυτὸς λόγος itself. Most of all, Jackson-McCabe passes over the traditio-historical roots in the early Christian tradition of 1:18 and 21, which are central to his interpretation. The two-part scheme in 1:21, in which the negative part is formulated with ἀποτίθεσται, has a number of early Christian parallels that belong to the context of postconversional instruction (Rom 13:12–14; Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:8–10; 1 Pet 2:1–2), and these are the only occurrences of this scheme. Moreover, Jas 1:18 corresponds closely to 1 Pet 1:23–25 (Jackson-McCabe dismisses it too quickly; see p. 191). This strongly suggests that James has taken over the entire sequence in 1:18, 21 from an early Christian tradition, which interpreted conversion as a (re-)birth through the word of the gospel leading the convert to the truth, and combined this with the admonition to follow this word from now on. In this context, ἐμφυτὸς is to be read as a reference back to the birth metaphor in 1:18. And the *law* in Jas 1:25 is not identical with the word or its external form, but rather is one side or aspect of it.

Furthermore, Jackson-McCabe’s interpretation of the “lights” in Jas 1:17 is hazardous at best. There is no hint at all in the text that James intended to create an analogy between the “lights” and the human race. Finally, 1:18b does not comment on the exalted position
of humans in creation, but the ἀπαρχή is the part of God’s creatures set apart for him. Philo (Spec. 4.180) uses the word with reference to the chosen nation (cf. Rev 14:4; 1 Clem. 29.3), and in following this traditional line Jas 1:18 refers to those who became God’s possession by converting to the Christian faith in a similar manner.

With their—to some extent significantly—different perspectives on James, the three monographs presented above display a facet of the plurality of approaches in most recent research on James. Despite the points of criticism mentioned here, they represent meaningful and innovative contributions to the ongoing discussion of the historical context and theological orientation of an early Christian letter much neglected in earlier decades.