Hartin, Patrick J.

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


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With an engaging, pastoral and scholarly voice, Patrick Hartin appeals both to ecclesial and academic worlds. The helpful combination is not by chance. The style of his examination of James reflects the nature of the letter itself. This enigmatic letter is presented as a unified and generative combination of wisdom tradition’s scholarship and a pastoral concern for the community of faith. Then he combines these two elements in his exploration of the overarching principle of “perfection” which weaves together the major themes of the book.

Hartin understands the letter’s audience designation, “the twelve tribes of the Dispersion” (1:1), as literal (believers outside the physical boundaries of Palestine) unlike Martin Dibelius, Timothy Cargal, and Robert Wall, for example, who see the title as metaphorical (“believers outside the boundaries of truth”). Therefore, the purpose of the letter is to encourage a community of believers in their faith as members of the reconstructed covenant community.

James’ community is not seen by Hartin as literally withdrawing, Qumran-like, from society. Yet James is calling the community to metaphorically withdraw from the values and motives of this world. James provides “instructions and values [which] are countercultural” and which set believers apart from the existing social order. Thus Hartin’s quote of Leo G. Perdue is supportive of his broader concern if we understand the withdrawal as metaphorical: “By withdrawal within this Gemeinschaft, a different social reality is constructed and efforts are undertaken to protect it from the threat of outside
worlds.” The efforts undertaken by James to protect the community of faith are thematically drawn together under the rubric of perfection.

Chapter one provides a brief overview to current Jamesian studies, articulates the specific focus of Hartin’s approach, and narrows the concept of perfection. The chapter ends with a helpful discussion of various interpretations of James’ “spirituality of perfection” (moral, eschatological, posthumous, and Gnostic). Acknowledging that the idea of “perfection” has fallen out of favor in our day and age, Hartin (chapter two) explores descriptions of the idea from Classical Greek, Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, Second Temple Judaism, and the New Testament before turning his attention to James.

Chapter three provides a good introduction to the Wisdom Literature genre while placing James’ audience in a community of faith with eschatological concerns. Hartin supports Walter Bauer’s thesis that the Christian movement developed as “numerous independent Christian communities each with its own theologies and understandings” (p. 3). Therefore, the letter provides a glimpse of a different kind of Christianity. It is not a polemic against Paul, but an alternative definition of a community of faithfulness. Hartin argues that James is not just a loose collection of Wisdom sayings but rather brings Wisdom’s rubber-hits-the-road mentality to Christian theology under the unifying theme of perfection.

The fourth chapter thickens the plot by examining the phrase “Faith perfected through works” as a summary of the message of the letter of James. Hartin provides in this chapter his strongest examination of the concept of “wholeness or completeness, whereby a being remains true to its original constitution, [as] the fundamental understanding of the meaning of perfection in James” (89). Through examination of Wisdom and Torah (both as “prefect” gifts from God) Hartin lays the biblical foundation for his argument.

Particularly helpful in this examination was a look at the dichotomy between being “double-minded” (dipsuchos), used only in James (1:7, 4:8), and the exclusivity sought through Deut 6:4, the first commandment, Matt 6:24, and elsewhere. While the concept is not new (Ps 12:2 is listed, though Ps 119:113 might be a stronger example), Hartin acknowledges the possibility that James coined the phrase (countering Dibelius, Ropes, and Clark).

Having carefully examined one of his title concepts (perfection), Hartin moves in chapter five to look at the second: spirituality. Highlighting the work of several modern authors, the definition of spirituality is seen as “the daily, communal, lived expression of ones ultimate beliefs” (94). With such a view of spirituality, the work of James is exemplary. Spirituality connects the two elements of faith: belief and action. Again the importance of “single-mindedness” comes into crisp focus. In a variety of areas (speech,
discrimination, suffering, theology, economics, and prayer) the essential “spirituality of perfection” builds a common path which emphasizes the essential element of integrity.

Chapter six makes a case for connecting the perfection of James with Matthew’s call to perfection in the Sermon on the Mount. While he is not suggesting that the Matthean and Jamesian communities were related or that either text was influenced by the other, Hartin convincingly shows that “the thought world of the letter of James is very similar to that of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount” (144). It is clear that both texts connect faith and action. Both call for an intentional, faith-works life. Both take seriously the influences of Judaism’s understanding of Torah and Wisdom.

The final chapter, “On Reading James Today,” looks at the implications of James’ spirituality of perfection for the Christian church today. Here some readers may find the author’s more deliberate challenge to the church somewhat “preachy.” On the contrary, I could not imagine a more Jamesian conclusion to the work. It is not enough, say Hartin and James, to simply come to “understand” or even to “believe” what one has heard; “authentic perfection demands consistency between what one believes and what one does” (162). Thus Hartin must use James’ own instruction and “preach” what he has found. Having looked into the mirror, the church must act on what it sees in order to have integrity.

One weakness in this chapter was the attempt to show James as encouraging Christians to reach out beyond the boundaries of Christianity. While the intention is admirable and may be supported in a general way, to my reading Hartin has not proved an intentionality of James to focus on anything other than the community of faith itself.

“The call to perfection that James makes is essentially a call to integrity” (p. 15). As such, the call to perfection is a call to every believer, not just the sainted, ordained, or cloistered few. This call to perfection (integrity) thus presents itself in every act of the faith community as well as in individual action. It is a call to join faith with works that reminds one of Soren Kierkegaard’s use of James in For Self Examination as he urges believers to adopt a more engaged presence when reading scripture and living out faith.

Through this book Patrick Hartin provides an excellent examination of the letter of James. Rather than scrutinizing James in comparison with Paul, we are invited to allow the letter to stand on its own merits with its own theological perspective. Such an examination provides new insight into the emerging first-century church as well as insights about the call to faith-action. Helpful observations about single-mindedness and integrity of word and deed lift the letter from being just an object of study to being a faith-view that generates response. Hartin bridges the world of scholarship and faith in such a way as to preserve this generative quality for his readers while maintaining sound scholarship.