Rotting riches
Economics in the letter of James

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The New Testament Epistle of James has had a rocky ride in Christian history. Among the reasons for its inconsistent and sometimes negative treatment, or its simple neglect, have been the judgment that it lacks structure and theological sophistication (it includes no reflection on the death and resurrection of Jesus, for example), and the difficulty of placing it historically and geographically.[1] But it was Martin Luther's assessment of James as counter to the reformer's emphasis on justification by faith alone that was most damaging to the letter's reputation.[2] Despite Zwingli's and Calvin's great admiration for James, and the fact that it was a favourite among Anabaptists who especially appreciated its rejection of oaths and emphasis on a discipleship that consists of both faith and works,[3] Luther's criticism of James as an "epistle of straw" has had an enduring effect on its subsequent reception. And, because of the profound impact of German and Swiss Lutheran scholarship on biblical exegesis and interpretation, Luther's opinion has influenced traditions and practices much further afield than the confines of the academic guild.

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There are other aspects of this epistle that have made it unpalatable to Christians in a variety of locations. James, as anyone who reads it even quickly and in a cursory manner can see, is direct in its criticism of the rich and the pursuit of wealth. Such teachings have not been well received by numerous interpreters in the past, or by some contemporary readers, perhaps especially because churches often rely on gifts from wealthy donors. Yet this dimension of the Epistle of James is an important irritant that, although it may rub some the wrong way, needs to remain in focus today.

Three notable passages in James address rich and poor. The first is James 1:9–11, which considers the fate of a lowly brother who will rise in exaltation, and contrasts it to that of a rich person who will fade away in the midst of his activities. Next is the castigation of the letter's recipients for showing favouritism to the wealthy man who arrives in the assembly sporting fine clothes and gold rings: he is offered a good seat, while the shabbily dressed person is ordered to stand or to sit at their feet (James 2:1–4). James criticizes those who presume that they will be doing business and making money in the days to come (James 4:13–17), and follows it directly with an invective against the affluent (James 5:1–6). These rich receive no mercy, as the author scornfully assures them that their riches have rotted, their clothes have been eaten by bugs, and their gold and silver have rusted. That rust will in turn be evidence against them and will eat their flesh like fire.

Historically, various interpreters have managed to tame these passages somewhat. For example, J. B. Mayor in his erudite commentary on James published in 1892 observed that although British churches displayed much elitism that should be corrected, he had no objection to the practice of allowing the wealthy to pay for the right to sit in certain pews. Mayor simply thought churches should also provide some free and open seating that was just as good as the pews of the wealthy.[4] Apparently elitism is acceptable in moderation.

One factor bearing on the topic of economics in James is the question whether the wealthy are members of James's audience. Interpreters have not come to a consensus on this issue, but those who think that the rich are within the community tend to take the "heroic" view; these interpreters argue that James is calling on the affluent to humble themselves and demonstrate a certain heroism in their loss of wealth. Others take the "ironic" view, contending that the rich are outsiders and that all they can do at the end of the day is boast, ironically, in their own humiliation.[5] The affluent have no hope, for according to James 1:9–11 and James 5:1–6 they are facing doom.

It is important to remember, though, that harsh language of this sort can have rhetorical uses. James may be addressing a diverse array of people at varying social levels. Some of them may

identify with these rich and thus will feel compelled to change their ways, while others may identify with the poor. Most in the audience, however, are in between, for James is clearly calling on them to care for the poor—evidence that at least some of them must have the means to do so.

Commentators agree that in James, one's relationship to money has significant bearing on one's relationship to God, yet "many avow that our text does not implicate modern capitalism or Christians who run businesses for profit."[6] I would disagree. James is writing from a context in which "the economy" was not perceived as a separate sphere that functioned according to market principles; economics was embedded in other aspects of life and society, including religious and family life. There was a notion of limited good, in that the more land, power, or honour one person gained, the less others had. Thus the "economy" would not be perceived as "growing" in the way that we hear it described today. Rather, it would be "evening out," in that the gain of some is seen to be at the expense of others.

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In addition, various writers objected to acquiring wealth through exchange and charging interest, because the goal of gaining more wealth was seen as "unnatural" (money does not grow on trees!). On the other hand, acquiring more through agriculture in order to support a household is natural, because food is then consumed so people can continue to live.[7] Gold and silver serve little purpose; they cannot be eaten, only hoarded. Riches thus simply rot in James.

The pursuit of inordinate wealth, which in the contemporary world might be lauded by many as admirable and a mark of success, would not have been universally admired in antiquity. Extremely wealthy people who stored up their treasures were often labelled as greedy and soft. They were even judged immoral. An author long before James's time describes "wealth's people" as "fat rogues with big bellies and dropsical legs, whose toes by the gout are tormented."[8] Although it was not considered good to be poor, for that would mean that one had lost status and material security, being rich often led to sharp criticism from moralists,

because it indicated that one had much more than one needed in order to be self-sufficient.[9]

James, then, like other ancient authors and figures, warns against the quest for wealth, for such pursuits lead to the suffering of others such as the poor man in James 2:2, or the exploited labourers in James 5:4. In the ancient world, possessing great wealth often meant that one could bribe officials within the court system, and thus it is not surprising to see James say that the rich oppress people and drag them into court (James 2:6). It would have been tempting for some in James's audience to fawn over rich patrons, for such people provided significant funding or other benefits, such as protection. Yet ultimately such patrons would want to extract something in exchange for extending favours to those in less fortunate circumstances, and this "exchange" usually led to overt exploitation. James is therefore opposed to relying on so-called donations from the rich.

It is also significant that the epistle's teachings on wealth parallel certain sayings attributed to Jesus. These parallels have been noticed since the early Christian era.[10] For example, James 5:1–6 may be drawing on the woes uttered against the rich as preserved in Luke 6:24, which may, in turn, find their origins in one of Luke's possible sources, the Sayings Source Q.[11] Additionally, the teaching about your heart being where your treasure is (found in Luke/Q 12:33–34) reveals similarities to James 5:1–6.[12] Another example of parallel texts on economic issues is James 2:5 and Jesus's blessing of the poor found in Luke/Q 6:20. Here, James has reconfigured the beatitude to suit his overall argument against showing partiality to the rich and causing dishonour to the poor.[13] James never cites Jesus, and there is considerable discussion among biblical scholars about why he does not, but he is inspired by Jesus's teachings and adapts them, perhaps with a sense that at least some people in his audience are aware of their ultimate source. The people for whom James writes are not those with whom Jesus interacted, but he conveys some of Jesus's wisdom, modified to serve the needs or address the failings of those in James's own context.

James reminds people forcefully that they must care for the poor, *materially*. In his day, there was no social safety net that people could rely on if they were in dire straits, and most people

struggled simply to meet their daily needs. Slavery, which was widespread, was largely the result of indebtedness. Archaeological and literary evidence suggests that there were likely some "middling households," but apart from such households (which might have kept a couple of slaves) and the tiny but extremely rich elite class, most people lived at a subsistence level,[14] and many required assistance in order to survive.

James's epistle is a brief but pointed text, and its insights are useful in prodding us to question and challenge the political and economic shifts that increase the gap between the wealthy and the poor.

Despite many progressive economic and social developments in our world now, the plight of people in poverty remains an immense injustice, given that many others have much more than they need. Moreover, some social psychologists have made the troubling observation that the more money people possess, the more they feel entitled to their wealth and the less likely they are to share.[15] Perhaps, we might conjecture, the author of James understood this latter tendency only too well, and that is why the letter is so relentless in its criticism of the rich. But as Steven J. Friesen has observed, with "the rise of capitalism . . . what [James] called arrogant and evil became codified as standard economic practice."[16] The writer of the "letter of straw" would probably find outrageous the constant encouragement we hear from political and business leaders to "grow the economy" and increase our consumption. James's epistle is a brief but pointed text, and its insights are useful in prodding us to question and challenge the political and economic shifts that widen the gap between the wealthy and the poor, and to think creatively about how we all might live more equitably together.

Notes

[1] Here we must remember, however, that many New Testament texts are difficult to date and to locate precisely.

[2] The most famous example of harsh criticism of the Epistle of James is Martin Luther's declaration that it was a "right strawy epistle," in the preface to his 1522 German translation of the New Testament. Luther's attitude toward James must be viewed in light of Luther's own theological development, however, as well as the debates he engaged in with those who defended James and used it to challenge Luther's ideas. For a survey of the treatment of James during the Reformation, see Timothy George, " 'A Right Strawy Epistle': Reformation Perspectives on James," *Review and Expositor* 83 (1986): 369–82.

[3] Some Anabaptists argued directly against Luther on the issue of grace, using James as their support. See George, "'A Right Strawy Epistle,'" 379.
[4] J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (London: Macmillan, 1892), 197.
[5] For a summary of these two views, see Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (1987; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 41–44.
[6] Dale C. Allison Jr., *James: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (London: T & T Clark, 2013), 641.
[7] See Aristotle, *Politics* 1.3.17–35.
[8] Aristophanes, *Plutus* 559.
[9] See Alicia J. Batten, "The Degraded Poor and the Greedy Rich: Exploring the Language of Poverty and Wealth in the Letter of James," in *The Social Sciences and Biblical Translation*, ed. Dietmar Neufeld (Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 65–77.
[10] For a review of parallels discussed since 1833, see Dean B. Deppe, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Epistle of James* (ThD diss., Free University of Amsterdam, 1989).
[11] "Q" stands for *Quelle*, a German word that means "source." Since the late 1800s many New Testament scholars have come to the conclusion that Q, now lost, served as a source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Chapters and verses in Q normally reflect Luke's numbering.
[12] For discussion, see John S. Kloppenborg, "The Emulation of the Jesus Tradition in the Letter of James," in *Reading James with New Eyes: Methodological Reassessments of the Letter of James*, ed. Robert L. Webb and John S. Kloppenborg (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 137–41.
[13] See Wesley Hiram Wachob, *The Voice of Jesus in the Social Rhetoric of James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), for a full study of James's use of this beatitude.
[14] See, for example, Walter Scheidel and Steven J. Friesen, "The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009): 61–91.
[15] For example, see Paul K. Piff, "Wealth and the Inflated Self: Class, Entitlement, and Narcissism," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40 (January 2014): 34–43.
[16] Steven J. Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will: Explanations of Poverty in Four Proto-Christian Texts," in *Christian Origins*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 246.

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