

Is James' Letter an Old Testament Book?

By FR. WALTER M. ABBOTT, SJ.

The letter from James, some one has said, is "the book of Wisdom of the New Testament." We call it a letter, and it has been considered from early Christian times as a letter for general or universal circulation. However, it is really not a letter at all. It is, like the Old Testament Book of Wisdom, a little treatise on ethics.

I like an expression I read somewhere, that the epistle of James is "the first Christian examination of conscience," but it is only fair to note how Jewish the little book is. Note the many references to "the Law," and quotations from the Old Testament, including the Golden Rule, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (2:8). I have often found that Christians are surprised to learn that the Golden Rule comes from the Old Testament and was not an original contribution of Jesus.

From time to time some scholars have argued that the letter from James is really a Jewish text which some Christian lightly touched up to make it a document of the Church. It has been pointed out that there are only three explicitly Christian references in the book: 1:1, with mention of "the Lord Jesus Christ," 2:1, referring to "our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory," and 5:14, referring to "the church elders." The reference to Job near the end of the book (5:11) has inclined some to think that the author perhaps had the development of that Old Testament book in mind, as well as the Book of Wisdom, and therefore this little book of the New Testament may be an example of very early Christian preaching on Old Testament texts.

Some of those who hold that the letter from James is not the oldest of the New Testa-

ment epistles but among the last to be written have tried to show that it is full of allusions to Christ's teaching as set forth in the Synoptic Gospels. They claim that words and phrases which most scholars see as echoes of Old Testament passages are really taken from various parts of the books that make up what we call the New Testament.

Of course, if the letter from James was not written about the middle of the first century but towards the end, one would expect a more highly developed Christology. In a very real sense, the whole argument about the Christology of James centers around the interpretation of verses 16-18 in the very first chapter, which speak about "every good gift" coming down from "God, the Creator of the heavenly lights," who "brought us into being through the word of truth, so that we should occupy first place among all his creatures."

When I read those verses, I take them to be a reference to what is described in the first part of the Book of Genesis at the beginning of the Old Testament. Those who think the letter from James is a late first-century book (and still more those who think it was written in the second or third century) see in those verses much more than a reference to man's creation. They see the New Testament doctrine of redemption and its consequences for our spiritual life.

If you see those verses containing an allusion to the resurrection of Christ, you will very likely then suddenly see the whole first chapter, with its urging that we consider trials and testing as sources of joy, an expression of the eschatological certainty which is based upon the resurrection of Jesus. You will very likely

end up concluding that the Christology of James is a "wisdom" Christology in which Christ is the one who has gone through suffering to glory and made it possible for us to do likewise. You will then have seen in the letter of James practically the full flowering of the Christology that can be seen in the letters of Paul.

Take a look at almost any part of Paul's letters, however, and I think you will agree with me that the letter from James simply does not have that full, ardent concentration on Christ which is so characteristic of the other New Testament letters.

Those who think that it does have worked too hard to find it so; where they think they have found it they have really created it. I think it makes much more sense to see the letter from James as the work of a very early Christian Bishop, a Jew writing for his Jewish Christian brethren and keeping the style of the only Scriptures that existed then, the books of the Old Testament.

What stands out for me is his preoccupation with prayer, the experience of a life of prayer, the efficacy of prayer. He was obviously a pastor in tune with the daily spiritual life and needs of his people. He was

very much aware that his primary readers were in some kind of trouble. He mentions trials and temptations, fights and quarrels (chapter 4), and he urges "patient endurance under suffering" (5:10). The references are not just generic. It can be argued, from the letter's several references to rich and poor, that James was intervening to defend the rights of the poor who were being oppressed, not by shopkeepers but by men with really big business investments — importers, landowners, industrialists of the day, and what might be called international men. This, I think, is what the letter from James is really all about.

Each Generation Sees Christ Differently

By FR. CARL J. PETER

The disciples of Jesus acknowledge one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism. This has never implied, however, that they have one Christology. Indeed from the very earliest days, there has been a variety of ways of understanding the words, deeds, and role of Jesus Christ.

The first three Gospels, for example, do not unequivocally assert He existed prior to His human conception in the Virgin Mary. But for the Gospel of John (17:5), the opposite is true. There Jesus prays to His Father, with whom He says He existed before the world came to be. What the first three Gospels do not speak of explicitly, the fourth does. There is no contradiction between the silence regarding the preexistence of Jesus on the one hand and its clear assertion on the other. But one can hardly fail to note a difference in the way Jesus is presented for our understanding and belief.

Another illustration of pluralism in Christology within the unity of the one Christian Faith is found in Saint Paul's portrayal of Jesus as the second Adam (Romans 5:14). This locates the redemptive activity of the Lord in a particular context, one the rest of the New Testament would not supply by itself. Conversely, Jesus is fre-

quently described in the Gospels as using the title Son of Man to refer to Himself. This designates His unpretentious style of life (Mark 10:45), the power of forgiveness He exercises while yet on earth (Mark 2:10), and His future role of Judge (Mt. 25:31-46).

But with Saint Paul things are somewhat different. He too believes that Jesus will come again as the Lord, before whom all must appear to render an account of their works. But it is not of the Son of Man that he speaks in this sense and on the other hand he is by his own admission very little concerned with the life of Jesus prior to the crucifixion and resurrection (2 Cor. 5:16).

There are in short many titles used to describe Jesus in the New Testament. Each gives rise to its own kind of mental image or picture of the One so designated. It is the same Jesus in all, but His presentation differs notably from one to the other. Because the Faith of the New Testament in and about Jesus is one, some assessments of His Person are clearly excluded by it (e.g. that He is simply another teacher of the Law or a prophet not differing in a basic and fundamental way from any other).

For His followers now as

well, believing involves a confession of Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever. But as with other ages (the Schools of Antioch and Alexandria in the fifth century are good examples), this one too must bring its own distinctive contribution to efforts to understand Who it is that calls for faith commitment.

In this regard, one of the most remarkable things, humanly speaking, about Jesus Christ is man's inability to domesticate Him.

He has a way of breaking out of any finite category constructed to pin Him down once and for all.

Who do men say the Son of Man is? Whether men realize it or not, in this life one question underlies all others: "What or Who is God?" The believing Christian sees this question transposed ever again into another: "Who is Jesus Christ?" Faith establishes an identity between the answers to these questions (leaving room, however, for a true humanity in Jesus as well as the divinity with His Father and Spirit).

Christology in every generation is an attempt to make that identity speak eloquently to Christian and non-Christian alike for the good of all men.

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. McBRIEN

Q. Regarding the Sacrament of Penance, why is it that we mention specific sins, their number, and various pertinent data? I would think that, if we are truly contrite, we could present ourselves to the confessor, acknowledge in general terms our sinfulness and attendant sorrow (perhaps through an "Act of Contrition"), and receive sacramental absolution without mentioning at all the specific nature of any of our sins.

I am wondering if there are sound theological reasons why the method I cite for administration of the Sacrament of Penance is not acceptable. If no such reasons exist, I am wondering if the official Church has considered a change along the lines I suggest. If there are no theological obstacles, I feel such a change would be most desirable.

A. Your question has been on the minds of many Catholics for a long time. We always assumed in the past, however, that the answer was fixed and indisputable. The Council of Trent had spoken: all mortal sins must be confessed according to the number and kind. And this, the council suggested, is a matter of divine law and not simply of ecclesiastical discipline.

There are Catholic theologians today who challenge this earlier assumption. They argue, for example, that it is difficult to find any concrete evidence for individual confession of sins to a priest before the sixth century. It is possible, in other words, that Christians had their sins forgiven in sacramental ways other than what we have come to call simply "Confession."

These theologians also point to historical precedents in the Church where confession of sins in number and in kind was not, in fact, required for the reception of the Eucharist. There are several instances in the history and practice of the Oriental churches. Even the present law of the Church allows for exceptions to the rule of integral confession of mortal sins. Canonists and moral theologians have always provided lists of moral and physical reasons for not confessing these sins by kind and number.

Catholic theologians, however, have usually argued that such penitents would be required to confess their serious sins, by number and kind, as soon as these physical and moral reasons disappeared.

But there are Catholic theologians today who would support the views expressed in your question. They would argue that,

despite the value of auricular confession as we have traditionally known and experienced it, there should be a variety of forms for the sacrament of Penance, including forms which do not require the confession of mortal sins by number and kind.

Finally, the Second Vatican Council has already pledged the leadership of the Church to some kind of meaningful reform of the sacrament of Penance so that the rites and formulae may "give more luminous expression to both the nature and effect of the sacrament" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n. 72).

Q. Why do people tend to be narrowminded about other people's consciences? I am referring to a sincere, honest, and very religious conscientious objector, who doesn't believe in killing, and would be willing to volunteer for an alternate service. Why are people prejudiced toward a C.O.? They aren't unchristian or unpatriotic, but rather have the courage of their convictions. It seems that some people conclude that no one can be a good Catholic and still be a conscientious objector.

A. Those who argue that Catholic faith and conscientious objection are incompatible must somehow reconcile their views with those expressed by the leadership of the Catholic Church.

For example, the Second Vatican Council stated: "Moreover, it seems right that laws make humane provisions for the case of those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms, provided however that they accept some other form of service to the human community" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 79).

The American bishops have gone even beyond the council in their collective pastoral letter of November, 1968, wherein they endorsed not only the idea of conscientious objection, but even the far more controversial idea of selective conscientious objection. The American Catholic bishops urged that the Selective Service Act be amended to allow selective conscientious objectors "to refuse—without fear of imprisonment or loss of citizenship—to serve in wars they consider unjust or in branches of the service, e.g., the strategic nuclear forces, that would subject them to the performance of actions contrary to deeply held moral convictions about indiscriminate killing."

I shall not presume to tell you "why" some Catholics feel the way they do about conscientious objectors. I can only suggest that their feelings are considerably removed from the moral guidelines proposed by the Church's leadership, both at the Second Vatican Council and in our national episcopal conference.