



**The Order of St James (UK).**  
**Theologia Apologetica: December 2025**  
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**A Kingdom of Heaven view of the Parable of the Prodigal Son.**

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***The Parable of the Prodigal Son***

*11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to[a] one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

*17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."' 20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned*

*against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his servants,[c] ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.*

*25 “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ 28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ 31 And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”*

### **Summary of the Parable**

*The Parable of the Prodigal Son is found in Luke 15:11-32. It tells the story of a wealthy man who has two sons. The younger son asks his father for his share of the inheritance, which he receives and squanders in a distant land through reckless living.*

*When a famine strikes, he finds himself in dire need, working as a swineherd and longing to eat the food of the pigs.*

*Realizing his mistakes, the younger son decides to return home, hoping to work as a hired servant. However, when he is still far off, his father sees him and runs to embrace him, filled with compassion. The father orders a celebration, saying, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:24).*

### **Themes and Lessons**

1. **Forgiveness and Redemption:** *The father's unconditional love and willingness to forgive his son symbolize God's grace towards sinners. The story emphasizes that no matter how far one strays, they can always return to God and be welcomed back with open arms.*
2. **The Nature of Sin:** *The younger son represents those who turn away from God and indulge in sinful behaviour, while the father's response illustrates the joy of repentance and restoration.*
3. **Self-Righteousness:** *The older brother, who remains at home and works diligently, becomes angry at the celebration for his wayward brother. This character represents the self-righteous who may feel entitled and resentful towards God's grace extended to others.*

4. Hope and Compassion: *The father's watchful waiting for his son's return reflects God's longing for the lost and His readiness to forgive.*

### **Conclusion**

*The Parable of the Prodigal Son serves as a profound reminder of the themes of forgiveness, grace, and the joy of reconciliation. It encourages believers to embrace repentance and to understand the depth of God's love for all, regardless of their past actions. This parable is often read during Lent and is a central teaching in Christian theology regarding redemption and forgiveness.*

So that is the traditional interpretation and exposition but parables are like onions in that they have many layers. Perhaps there are other layers we need to explore and may teach us something new.

So who is the parable really about?

Is it the wayward son who comes to his senses?

His approach is one of self-survival. I cannot say that there is any sense of love towards his father or family. He is motivated by self-preservation and can see in his hour of need where his next meal might come from.

Common sense tells him he would be better off at home as a servant rather than face starvation. He might not like or even despise his father but at least his father is fair and looks after his staff.

*(I am reminded of Jesus words as recorded in Matthew 5:25–26 (NIV)*

*25 “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.”)*

Is it about the older son, embittered and used and apparently unappreciated?

I know about being used, abused, and taken for granted and being unappreciated. But then why should I complain if I am only doing what is expected and no more? I have ample food, clothing and a roof over my head, an employer who treats me fairly as with all his employees. What have I to complain about and I should be glad he treats all his employees with the same kind of care as I get?

Or do I need to feel just that bit more special and needed. Am I not his first son?

Or is it me that is actually running the farm because my father is irresponsible and needs protecting from himself?

Then there is the father. At least he had the common sense to stop his younger son from presenting his unbelievably well-practised and grovelling diatribe begging for forgiveness before he got started.....

Who in their right mind would give their inheritance to such as the younger son who will obviously waste what he has received?

Who would receive such as this son back with open arms?

And what of the wasted investment in his younger son? Not just the financial investment but the lost time and emotional heartbreak.

In spite of this, he did not turn his back against the younger son all always hope for his safe return to the fold, even though it would come at a cost. Unlike the shepherd who left 99 sheep to search for the absent one or the widow who searched her house for a missing coin, the father did not actively seek his missing son, but it seems he did leave his responsibilities and other family obligations in the hands of his remaining son and watched and waited in hope. Maybe it was all he was capable of doing.

And what of the effect on extended family relationships and others associated with or working on behalf of the family and the damage done to them? It seems that the collateral damage just keeps on growing the more you look at this.

Two sons but it seems one is more favoured. I recall one of the other parables about not serving two masters for one you will love and the other despise. Is this a similar scenario? How do you love two very different children equally without creating jealousy and resentment?

The whole family dynamic is a mine field of unstable relationships.

And finally, there is the matter of the family itself. What kind of a family is this?

Dysfunctional and in need of counselling?

It would certainly make the basis of a 'good' TV series. Almost 'The Simpsons'-esque.

And don't forget the role of the fatted calf, poor thing. An innocent creature caught up in a circumstance not of its creation. Even it becomes an object of resentment. Where is the justice there?

And why is this a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven rather than just being about forgiveness? If it was a parable just about forgiveness it certainly has the sense of being unfinished and inconclusive. The faithful elder son certainly has nothing to rejoice about at the return of his younger sibling.

The problem for him is one of loving justice. He has been badly treated even though he physically has lacked for nothing but the attentions of love and affection, support and encouragement. I find loving justice, empathy and compassion somewhat lacking in the elder son's treatment, but not so in the younger son's reception. I certainly see where he is coming from.

If we were to treat God in such a manner and not appreciate, praise, take an interest in, etc., I'm sure He would soon make His feelings known.

And then there is the question of the inheritance that has been squandered. There is no mention of whether the younger son is given a second chance and receives a second inheritance or even what his position is in the family business.

It is the patient waiting of the father in the end with his quiet hope and the great joy when all the waiting and pain is over. No recrimination or accusation, just relief. It seems love can survive in spite of all the dysfunction. A new beginning for all the cast of the story if they have the desire for it. That I think is probably where the Kingdom of God is exposed and modelled in this otherwise all too easily recognised human and flawed story.

You may remember from other newsletters that I suggested this parable has a prophetic edge. The elder son representing the Jewish faith, faithfully doing its duty and working its heart out, the younger being the Christian faith which has squandered its inheritance in wild and irresponsible living rather than taking up its responsibilities.

We are certainly in a time when the Christian church as represented by the main stream churches have squandered their inheritance and departed from scriptural ways. It certainly fits the bill when it comes to selling its birth right for a mess of pottage. (Thank you for that reference +Patrick as it has been so useful).



One of the things missing regarding forgiveness is that it still leaves the consequences of sin to be lived with. They don't go away just because someone is forgiven. Something the errant church needs to take into account.

And forgiveness should be more about true repentance and reconciliation rather than trying to avoid the unhappy consequences of self-inflicted misdemeanour and weaselling your way out of the mire you find yourself in.

Like the younger son, I fear the church will see the errors of its ways and seeks to be reconciled, not out of love but by necessity, to the Father and to the older brother. That does not mean to say there will be willing reconciliation or even love. It will in the end perhaps be a matter of practicality and pragmatism.

I feel that after the joy of the return of the prodigal there will be some serious consideration of what to do next for the good of all concerned and healing won't be quick for either son or the father.

Or maybe we should say 'it's just a parable and you shouldn't read too much into it', but then this affects how we look at other parables and the credence they each have.

But what does this parable say of the Kingdom of Heaven and how literally do you take it?

Interesting:-

Is it possible that the Kingdom of Heaven is not as 'perfect' as we think it is? It still has to work around 'free will' and personality which are God's gifts to us and incorporates a level of unpredictability about it.

Will we still have to work at building and maintaining the Kingdom of Heaven or is it already finished/completed?

What about sin? In our 're-born state' (whatever that is) will it still be a problem for us?

Can we remain sinless if we have 'free will'?

Whilst sin may not exist in Heaven, is it still a problem?

Adam and Eve lived in Paradise with God, but still were trapped by sin. Is that so in Heaven?

If the angels can fall from Heaven in their sin then can you still argue Heaven is truly free from the reach and effects of sin?

Or if we are free from the effect and reach of sin, will we still need God?

We don't have much to go on when it comes to understanding what Heaven is like or how it works other than the few hints given in Jesus parables and teaching and some ideas from the Old Testament.

I think that much of our understanding about what Heaven will be like is more fictional and fantasy than reality, and there is a big industry in promoting and pedalling half-truths or even the things we want to hear rather than the actuality.

The many ways it is portrayed by the entertainment industry will certainly have an unintentional effect on our perceptions and ever increasingly epic CGI effects will be a big part of that. It means that our expectations may be increasingly 'unrealistic' as we are drenched in this stuff but who knows what God has in mind for us?

I know what I would like Heaven to be, but it may be hell for others sharing that ideal with me, and the other thing of course is it is for eternity. Would my ideal still be Heaven over that time? Would it be sufficient to keep me being fulfilled spiritually and absorbed? Somehow I doubt it and Eternity is a long time to live with mistakes.

Something best left then to our Father.

All we can say is that the love of God continues. That is the only reality we can be sure about.

Perhaps it, whether in this life or the next, is firmly based on the two great commandments that celebrate our imperfections to create what is a chaotic and untidy perfection when perfectly applied.

I can't help feeling that perfection would be just 'too perfect' and we do need something to do in Heaven, some kind of purpose and engagement.

God forbid it would be, well, 'boring' and mind numbingly 'predictable'. All these skilled, experienced and spiritually gifted people with nothing to do is asking for trouble.

It seems contradictory and counterintuitive but aren't we dealing with a God who at the moment of creation re-ordered chaos to create order, not in the way of human understanding but of a higher and more appropriate way?

Perfection perhaps does not mean 'without problem' but with 'solutions built on love'. Yes, I have no problem with the idea of Heaven and genuine Christian/biblically founded love which continually needs to express itself in action and deed.

But I still have a disquieting problem with Heaven and the existence of evil.

According to the bible it has a dark side where evil can exist and require casting out. If Heaven is perfect and free of all evil then why could evil come into existence in the form of Lucifer who sought to usurp God and what of the fall of angels?

Perhaps Heaven is the last and final battle that our lives here on earth prepare us for.

It might not be a physical battle, rather instead a prayerful and spiritual time where evil simply cannot thrive or operate, but it is not going to be easily or quickly won. But we are promised it shall be won. I wonder what then?

We will just have to wait and see and do what we can in the meantime.

In relation to the parables and other teachings of Jesus, I suggest that all the parables have something to say about the Kingdom of Heaven we need to discern and take note of. These are principles and ideas we can put into practise should we be willing to take them on board.

The parables however are a vehicle for teaching within the context of a story, and they have their limits as to how far you can take them literally. You should not for example take the behaviour of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son as a model to be emulated for your own behaviour or that of others, or encourage as part of your Christian duty younger sons to 'go on the razz', or older sons to stay at home, or say to people they need to have two sons to have a family.

Similarly, we have not been given a definitive and complete scriptural answer to what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like in the next part of our journey, but we are given clues. Like the individual pieces of a jigsaw, a clearer picture will evolve as they begin to be assembled, but it will take a lot of patience to put the pieces together.

There are two distinct strands we should recognise. The first is living out the Kingdom of Heaven, and the second is developing a sense of the Kingdom of Heaven when this life is done. Perhaps the second is less clear so we keep our minds firmly centred on the first.

Let the idea sit for a while and think on it even though my thoughts count for little in the end. Your thoughts are much more important.

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### **What is the Kingdom of God (Heaven)?**

+David

How does the Bible define it? Who will be allowed to enter it and who will be rejected?

The Kingdom of God is the rule and governance of the Godhead over all things. The Bible speaks of it existing in the past (Daniel 4:17, 25, 34, 5:21), present (Matthew 12:28, Luke 17:20 - 21, Colossians 1:13), and future (Daniel 2:44 - 45, 7:13 - 14, Revelation 11:15 - 18, 20:4 - 15, 21:1 - 22:5).

The phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" is found 33 times in 32 King James verses. Interestingly, all these occurrences are recorded only in the book of Matthew. The only verse in the Bible that uses the phrase twice quotes Jesus' words during his famous Sermon on the Mount. The Lord, while teaching the multitudes, makes it clear how important it is to obey God.

+David

## **What will we look like in Heaven: clues from the parable of Dives and Lazarus.**

Luke 16:19-31 New International Version

### **The Rich Man and Lazarus**

<sup>19</sup> “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. <sup>20</sup> At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores <sup>21</sup> and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

<sup>22</sup> “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup> So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

<sup>25</sup> “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup> And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

<sup>27</sup> “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

<sup>29</sup> “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

<sup>30</sup> “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

<sup>31</sup> “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

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I add this article out of interest and speculatively, and will not touch on the moral or spiritual aspects of this text. I will though draw some speculative observations and will remind you that this is a story, a vehicle to carry teaching, and the story details may be illustrative rather than ‘reliable and indisputable fact’.

1. we can communicate by word so we have a mouth and tongue
2. we have a personality that enables us to process thoughts, emotions and feelings, we have self-awareness and physical needs
3. we have physical and environmental awareness and can feel pain
4. we can reason and offer argument and ideas
5. we are aware of others and may still care for them
6. we have fingers so by implication have hands, etc
7. we have recognisable appearance



8. by implication we have physical bodies similar to our own
9. the bodies have substance and are capable of movement
10. these bodies are capable of carrying out tasks
11. we have consciousness and moral understanding
12. we have an awareness of the present and the past
13. the elements of fire and water and air (we need air to speak) exist
14. we have eyes to see and we can safely add light to enable vision
15. we can hear so have ears
16. time appears still to be linear and there is past, present and future

Based on the textual evidence in the parable there may be 'sufficient grounds to support a form of recognisable, familiar and fully functioning bodily resurrection'. What form that takes in reality remains open but I think there enough hints in the text to draw a safe conclusion. Bear in mind also the physical descriptions of appearance of Jesus after the Resurrection recorded in the Gospels.

As to the nature of Heaven, the parable states there is a big chasm between Heaven and Hades where none may pass no matter how much they desire, but communication and observation between each is possible. An open door?

It also appear that Heaven is place where comfort may be received by the deserving and absence from Heaven is quite simply 'agonising' and as if or literally 'burning up' for those not. I still think that this latter result is self-inflicted and a route chose under free will but I am no expert. I just know that God will respect any free will decisions and will not intervene after decisions have been made. Whether there is a redemptive or reconciliatory route once in this state I simply do not know, but by tradition Jesus preached to the lost in Hades after His burial...

And as for Dives, what did he do wrong to end up in Hades in torment?

He may not be at fault for loving God, with all his heart, his soul and all of his very being, but he was certainly at fault for not loving his neighbour, both concepts parts enshrined in the two great commandments. Both elements are required.

As St James states, (James ch 2, v14-24):

### ***Faith and deeds***

*<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

*<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.'*

*Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. <sup>19</sup> You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.*

*<sup>20</sup> You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? <sup>21</sup> Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.*

Something to ponder on given the needs of the world we live in.

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**Untitled:**

Fr. Ed Elsey, OSJ

In the former Benedictine monastery of Pomposa at Ravenna - I came across Guido dd' Abrezzo. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomposa\\_Abbey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomposa_Abbey)

As Guido was the one who invented the presently used system of writing and arranging musical notes, he may not be unknown to you who spent a large part of your life reading and working with them as organist and choirmaster.

What further attracted my attention was the link between my own name – Johannes – and the naming of notes: the initials SI (7th note of the octave) is said to be an abbreviation of Sanctus Ioannis.

And the verses written by Guido to define the notes is apparently called Hymnus Johannes. Nothing less! To all my friends named John.

The whole hymn reads:

Ut queant laxis (UT is in many languages used instead of DOH)  
REsonare fibris  
Mira gestorum  
Famuli tuorum  
SOYe populi  
LAbii reatum  
Sancte Ioannes.

Paraphrased in English:

DO let our voices  
REsonate most purely,  
Miracles telling,  
FAr greater than many;  
SO Let our tongues be  
Lavish in your praises,  
Saint John the Baptist.

Beautifully accompanied by a Gregorian tune:

<https://fr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Johannes.Hymnus.ogg>

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## James the Just vs the Apostle Paul: excerpts from full text

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There are several data points that give evidence to a struggle between the Apostle Paul and the brother of Jesus, known in the early church as "James the Just." ....I will quickly list the data....

### **- the record in Acts 15**

Although Paul and James do not have open dispute in what we call the Jerusalem Council, Paul's autobiographical comments in Galatians make it a bit more clear that he did not view James as THE leader of Christ's Church (see Gal 1:17; 2:6-9; 2:11-13).

### **- the four commands from Acts 15**

James the Just gives the pronouncement that Gentiles were "You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.." v29

In his writing Paul objects to all dietary restrictions:

One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. - Romans 14:2

I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is

unclean....For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit...All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. - Romans 14:14-20

But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. - 1 Cor 8:8

1 Cor 8 - the entire chapter is given to eating meat offered to idols. Paul is nuanced, but does not support the Acts 15 prohibition.

All the Pauline writings taken together make it clear that food laws are not required.

Paul seems to say that IF a person wants to follow food laws he/she can, but nothing is unclean in itself.

#### **- Galatians and the Epistle of James**

The apparent polemical nature of letter of James the Just against Paul's letter to the Galatians. I realize that most Christians will say that these two documents are not in disagreement, but we have another set of ancient texts that seem to address this apparent conflict: these texts are known as the Pseudo-Clementine Literature which includes Homilies, Recognitions of Clement, and The Preaching of Peter.

## **James the Just vs Paul**

Pseudo-Clementine Literature (more to be added....)

The documents known under the name Pseudo-Clementine Literature probably dates into the second century (possibly late second century). It is important to know that there is plenty of disagreement among scholars regarding these documents, thus I have no inclination to make too many dogmatic statements. I will give the things we know from this body of literature.

The earliest tradition attributes authorship of some of these documents to "Pope Clement I of Rome," the man we believe led the church of Rome at the end of the first century - the same author typically seen for 1 Clement. This is disputed by many good scholars, thus the possibility of a much later date. Here are characteristics we can agree on that allows one to say that the Clementine Literature points to a tradition that Paul and James (and Peter) were not in agreement:

- the Apostle Paul is not mentioned
- Pauline theology is noticeably absent
- the tone is Ebionitic in nature, a witness to a more Jewish-style community

In addition, there is one particular instance where an "enemy" of Peter is mentioned. This reference is in the Letter of Peter to James where "Peter" refers to the "enemy:"

For some from among the Gentiles have rejected my legal preaching, attaching themselves to certain lawless and trifling preaching of the man who is my enemy....to transform my words by certain various interpretations, in order to the dissolution of the law; as though I also myself were of such a mind, but did not freely proclaim it, which God forbid! For such a thing were to act in opposition to the law of God which was spoken by Moses...

Some scholars see this "enemy" as a reference to Paul; others see it as a reference to Simon Magus, the man Peter is indeed actively engaging in debate in the story.

Those who see Paul as an "enemy" of Peter are drawing this conclusion from the characteristics listed above which does seem to point to the theological differences of Paul and James.

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## **St James: 'More Than an Epistle of Straw'**

This essay first appeared in [\*Issue 27 of The Mockingbird\*](#) magazine.

Written by Todd Brewer

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Martin Luther had many opponents in his lifetime. Whether they were princes, kings, clergy, professors, the pope, or former friends, he debated anyone he believed to have abandoned the gospel.



These were powerful men who wielded more than mere words, but none of these adversaries loomed as large as James — not the man, but the Epistle. If Luther quoted Paul, his rivals would quote James.

When an elderly Luther looked back on his years of quarrelling over scripture, he remarked,

*‘That epistle of James gives us much trouble, for the papists embrace it alone and leave out all the rest ...*

*Accordingly, if they will not admit my interpretations [of James], then I shall make rubble also of it. I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove.’ (Luther’s Works, 34:317)*

The nature of the dispute was this: Paul and Luther believed one was justified by faith; James believed one was justified by faith *and* works. James was the thorn in Luther’s side, or as he deemed in his introduction to the New Testament, “an epistle of straw” (35:362) — so much so that his German translation of the New Testament omitted James out of the canon.

In Luther’s hometown of Wittenburg, Bibles relegated the epistle to an apocryphal status. Rather than following Hebrews (as it usually does), James was appended *after* the New Testament, alongside Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation, credited not to a “St.,” like the 23 canonical books, but simply to “James.”

Still, its influence upon Luther was inescapable. James's canonical status created a context within which Christians read Paul's letters differently than they were by their original recipients. After James, Paul's arguments about the Law and faith are understood by terms set by James — for Luther, too.

To get a sense of how James influenced Luther, we need to look at both Paul and James in their original contexts, before the canonization of the New Testament. As will become clear, they both have specific definitions of “Law” which, once put in conversation with one another, will inform Luther's distinction.

### **Paul, Before the New Testament**

In the strictest sense of the word, Paul was an anti-nomian. Not in the sense that Paul's message enabled and condoned ethical licentiousness — he had a great deal to say about ethical conduct of believers. Paul very much did believe, for example, that fornication with Roman temple prostitutes severs one from Christ (1 Cor 6:12–16). But the principal foundation of Paul's ethics was not the Law.

According to his “salvation-historical framework,” the Law had been given to Moses to serve as a provisional guide for the people of Israel until the coming of the foretold Messiah (Gal 3:23–26). Those in Christ are no longer under the Law (4:1–7). Why return to servitude when one has been freed (5:1)? Either one follows the Law or one follows Christ (6:2), and an intermixing of the two spoils the whole (5:9). As Paul would later write to the Church in Rome, “You are not under Law, you are under grace” (Rom 6:14).

What Paul means by Law in these and many other contexts is the legal code at Sinai. The rationale for abandoning these commandments arises from Paul's reading of the Old Testament in light of the revelation of Jesus.

Citing Genesis 15:6, Paul argued that Abraham was declared righteous by his faith, 430 years before the Law even existed. Though the Law promised that those who keep its commands will obtain life (Lev 18:5), life, Paul finds, is given to those who are righteous by faith (Hab 2:4).

At face value, one could imagine it possible to follow the Law as a believing Christian. Other Christians in Paul's day certainly thought so. But Paul saw there was more at stake than the moral ordering of one's life.

(1) Law and faith represented two alternate social "patterns of religion"

(2) with distinct and irreconcilable internal consistencies.

For Paul, the announcement of the good news of Jesus' life-giving death and resurrection generates within the believer a new life that is patterned after that very good news. In this way, there is a symmetry between the indicative (what God has done) and the imperative (what we do).

Not only is there no further need for the Law, but the reintroduction of the Law severs the believer from the very source of their life (Gal 5:4).

The blueprint for life is not the law, but Jesus. Paul believed that the grace of Jesus (through the resurrection and gift of the Spirit) generated ethical action entirely independent of the Law's instruction.

The contents of the Christian ethics arise simultaneously with the desire to do them, without the need for further instruction from the Law.

### **James, Before the New Testament**

Since the Reformation, Paul and James' divergent views on justification have been coordinated or harmonized to fit the various theological traditions of that era. The privileging of James over Paul on justification echoes Luther's Catholic opponents just as the reverse tactic repeats Luther.

Both strategies are legitimate attempts at canonical readings of scripture, or understanding the component parts of scripture in light of one another. I would argue, however, the differences between James and Paul on justification are symptomatic of a more fundamental divide over the role of the Law.

If Paul seems to have no need of the Law, James's epistle responds to Paul's letters and attempts to rebalance the scales.

To James, the Law is neither slavery nor an instrument of death, but "the perfect law, the law of liberty" (1:25), the "word of truth" that produces the first fruits of God's creation (1:18).

If Paul emphasized the righteousness of those who hear the gospel and confess in faith (Rom 10:14–15), James warns against those “hearers who forget” and extolls “doers who act” because “they will be blessed in their doing” (1:25).

Where Paul believed that love fulfilled the entirety of the Law, James turns this formulation on its head: one who transgresses a single point of the Law is guilty of the whole Law (2:10).

For James, faith coincides with doing the Law, and it would be unimaginable to him that one could speak of faith apart from law-abiding conduct.(5)

In James’s use of the Abraham narrative, it is clear that he is responding to Paul using terms set out for him by Paul. James cites verbatim Paul’s quotation of Genesis 15:6 alongside Genesis 22 to posit that Abraham was *actually* justified by works.

And finally, where Paul believed the judgment on the last day to be “according to my gospel through Jesus Christ” (Rom 2:16) — rather than the Law — James maintained that “there is one Law-giver and judge who is able to save and destroy” (Jam 4:12).

For James, the Law maintains its status as normative for the Christian. The doing of the Law is the path of liberty that leads to salvation.

## **The New Testament's Law-Gospel Tension**

What now?

The preservation of disparate voices within the New Testament canon exerts interpretive pressure on both sides of the divide to both generate new readings and forestall others.

For James, the canon guarantees the Law's validity for Christian ethics and practice, but his endorsement of "the whole Law" is reinterpreted to refer only to the Law's ethical content, having nothing to do with ritual purity, circumcision, or animal sacrifice.

The epistle's brief references to divine mercy, perplexingly vague Christology, and passing mentions of eschatological judgment are then filled in by the canonical context to conform to a more Pauline viewpoint.

Placed alongside Paul, the letter becomes a guide for Christian living that contends for a continuity between the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

For Paul, placed alongside James, the consequences of canonization are perhaps more pronounced. The canon ensures that Pauline interpretation safely proceeds within accepted bounds of Christian orthodoxy.

Many readers of Paul in the second century were inclined to extend Paul's Law and faith antithesis into a sharp divide between Christianity and Judaism.

As Tertullian famously proclaimed toward the beginning of the third century, Paul was “apostle of the heretics,” some of which viewed the God of the New Testament to be different from the God of the Old Testament (*Adversus Marcionem*, 3.5).

To counter these heretics’ use of Paul, Tertullian repeatedly insisted that Paul actually agreed with the other apostles. In this way, James served as a counter-voice in early Christianity to interpretations of Paul that threatened the unity of the emerging Christian writings and Jewish scriptures.

Indeed, the very first reference to James comes from the early third-century Alexandrian theologian Origen, who repeatedly utilized the letter against this precise heresy.

A hundred years later Cyril echoed this context by citing James in support of a moral perfection according to the Law of Moses. At the same time, Augustine believed James was “deliberately aimed” to combat a “treacherous” misreading of Paul (*Fathers of the Church*, 27:246–48).

From its very beginning, James safeguarded against readings of Paul that push his Law and faith dichotomy into a total abandonment of the Jewish scriptures.

Under the pressure of James, Paul’s salvation-historical arguments for the Law’s end become transposed into a different register.

The strictly ethical scope of James' Law, which arises from its placement next to Paul, becomes transferred to Paul's own discussion of the Law.

Because the Christian is always subject to the eternal Law (by way of James), Paul's Law and faith antithesis assumes a universal, timeless validity *for the Christian*. To not be "under the Law" now means more narrowly to not be under its condemnation of sin. Yet the voice of the Law is never entirely put away on this side of eternity and it continues to reveal sin and guilt.

Paul's alternate social patterns of religion, that of Law and faith, are now understood as alternating words to the individual — not just at one's conversion to Christianity, but throughout one's entire life as a penitential journey from the judgment of the Law to the grace of Jesus.

The presence of James and Paul together in the same canon both creates and preserves an on-going tension, or dialectic, between Law and gospel. Constructive readings of James and Paul are thereby prevented from resolving this dialectic in either direction, whether through devotion to the Law as a means of salvation or the abandonment of the Law entirely.

Out of this fundamental dialectic grows innumerable debates on the proper definition of the Law, its various distinctions, its two or threefold uses, and the limits of the Law claims relative to the gospel.



Though the tension between Law and gospel arises from the canon, it nevertheless coheres with human experience.

The Christian life is not a simple story of before and after faith.

For many it is marked by on-going vacillations between uncertainty and assurance, unbelief and faith, guilt and relief.

More significantly, it mirrors Paul's own tension between the resurrection life of the believer and the on-going persistence of sin.

In this way, the contours of Paul's significance within the church have been shaped by an on-going dialogue with James, and for the better.

While Luther relegated James to an apocryphal status, his understanding of Law and gospel was defined at least in part by James — it emerged within a framework determined by the canon.

When Luther was confronted by a real-life antinomian, Johann Agricola, he insisted on the eternality of the law: "For never will the law be removed in eternity, but it will remain, either as to be fulfilled in those damned, or as fulfilled in those blessed" ("The Second Disputation Against the Antinomians").

Though he wouldn't have dared to cite James's epistle in support of his argument, James would have whole-heartedly agreed. Perhaps there was more to this "epistle of straw" than Luther let on.

## **James, the first bishop of Jerusalem and the church, not Paul or Peter.**

‘How did James become the leader of the Church in Jerusalem? The answer comes from an early church tradition recorded in Eusebius' Church History. Eusebius quotes from some earlier writings that now only exist through his quotations:

But Clement in the sixth book of his Hypotyposes writes thus: "For they say that Peter and James and John after the ascension of our Saviour, as if also preferred by our Lord, strove not after honour, but chose James the Just bishop of Jerusalem."

But the same writer, in the seventh book of the same work, relates also the following things concerning him: "The Lord after his resurrection imparted knowledge to James the Just and to John and Peter, and they imparted it to the rest of the apostles, and the rest of the apostles to the seventy, of whom Barnabas was one. - Church History II.1.3-5

But Hegesippus, who lived immediately after the apostles, gives the most accurate account in the fifth book of his Memoirs.

He writes as follows: "James, the brother of the Lord, succeeded to the government of the Church in conjunction with the apostles. He has been called the Just by all from the time of our Saviour to the present day....He was holy from his mother's womb; and he drank no wine nor strong drink, nor did he eat flesh.

No razor came upon his head; he did not anoint himself with oil, and he did not use the bath. He alone was permitted to enter into the holy place; for he wore not woollen but linen garments. And he was in the habit of entering alone into the temple, and was frequently found upon his knees begging forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like those of a camel... - Church History II.23.5-6

We cannot trust these traditions completely, but it is clear that such an early tradition did exist. This indicates the need of the second century fathers to understand and explain how James could have had such a leadership position since he certainly did not have a prominent role in the Acts account until chapter 15. Yet it is clear that James held a place of authority. ‘

Extract from [James the Just vs the Apostle Paul](#)