



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Background: Deciding for God (1) The Theology of James

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According to John Neuhaus, H. Richard Niebuhr once gave a “withering analysis of the gospel of liberal Christianity. He said it depicts a god that without wrath ‘brought men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross’” (Neuhaus 2011, 115).

Niebuhr’s assessment reminds us of the ease with which we can seek to domesticate God, trying to squeeze him into our molds instead of letting him transform us into his (cf. Rom 12.2 Philippians). This tendency, deriving from and contributing to efforts to assimilate with society, has been a problem for some time, as Scripture shows. For example, in about 600 BC, some of Jeremiah’s countrymen forced him to go with them as they fled to Egypt to escape Babylon’s reach. Jeremiah had been warning the people about their idolatry and the spiritually adulterous lifestyle it had produced; he continued those warnings even as the events of Jeremiah 44 played out (vv. 1-14, 20-30; esp. vv. 2-5, 7, 11, 13-14, 22-23). But the people were having none of it. They interrupted his warnings to defend their ways, telling the prophet in no uncertain terms that they would not be deterred from their chosen course.

¹⁵ Then all the men who knew that their wives had made offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah: ¹⁶ “As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD, we will not listen to you. ¹⁷ But we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out drink offerings to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no disaster. ¹⁸ But since we left off making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine.” ¹⁹ And the women said, “When we made offerings to the queen of heaven and poured out drink offerings to her, was it without our husbands’ approval that we made cakes for her bearing her image and poured out drink offerings to her?” (Jer 44.15-19)

Their sentiment could not be clearer: they wanted God as *they* wanted him and used the good life they had been enjoying as justification for continuing to pursue the course they preferred.

Although it is frequently more subtle, we sometimes see the same attitude today. Think of how some focus on an “attractive Christ,” preferring images of Jesus such as a friend of children or tender shepherd which fit their ideal of what the Son of God (and the Father whose will he came to do; John 4.34; 6.38) should be. Meanwhile, they reject, or at least minimize, other depictions of him, also found in Scripture, such as the sword-wielding judge with flaming eyes and a voice like the roar of many waters who will call everyone, including his churches, to account (see Rev 1.12-17; 2.1-3.22). In truth, efforts to engage with God in ways that extol only the “attractive” aspects of his character while dismissing other traits we find unsettling are more like ancient paganism than biblical Christianity (Oster 2013, 74-75).

Since we claim to reject paganism, why do we persist in trying to limit God like the pagans do? From among several possible answers three stand out. The first is rooted in the limitations inherent in our humanity. Because of those restrictions, we struggle to grasp God’s infinite character; furthermore, our fallen human natures make us especially susceptible to resistance of any notion of obeying someone else, no matter who he is.

Second, our cultural fascination with what works seduces us, especially if what works promises to open the way to an easier path. Too often, we’re so eager to get to the bottom line that we won’t take the time to engage in the depth of thought commensurate with “the depths of God” whose thoughts and ways are not ours (1 Cor 2.10; Isa 55.8-9).

Third, because we are content with pragmatic and surface solutions, we fail to see just how practical a deeper and more complex view of God is.

The letter of James, famous for its down-to-earth practicality, undercuts these reasons. To be sure, the letter’s reality matches its reputation: James is an eminently practical writing. But James repeatedly grounds his practical teaching in a developed understanding of God. In fact, we can best understand what he says in his letter about dealing with life’s problems when we read it

in view of what he says about the benefits of God's nature and then apply what we learn to the corresponding practicality of being God's friend. Accordingly, we can summarize what James does as follows:

- Writing to *believers under duress*,
- James urges *a response of decisive commitment to unwavering faith that*
- recalls *the giving nature of the creative, covenantal, and providential God* who gives the wisdom we need to manage the challenges of life.

We'll explore more about how he does this in part 2.

Works Cited

Richard John Neuhaus (2011). "Can An Atheist Be a Good Citizen?" in Eric Mataxes, ed. *Socrates in the City: Conversations on "Life, God, and Other Small Topics."* New York: Dutton.

Richard E. Oster, Jr. (2013). *Seven Congregations in a Roman Crucible: A Commentary on Revelation 1-3*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.

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