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MAKING CHRISTIAN CULTURE IN THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

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Abstract

Twenty years have passed since John AT Robinson threw a bombshell into scholarly circles by arguing for a radical redating of New Testament writings (Robinson 1976). Many New Testament scholars refused to sanction the debate by entering it directly. During these two decades, however, turmoil over the dating of early Christian writings has spread slowly but surely throughout New Testament studies, emerging with equal furor at embarrassing times for the cautious and adventurous alike. Robinson wants to date the Acts of the Apostles as early as 62 CE--before the death of Paul--since there is no account of the death of Paul in the final chapter. For some interpreters, this is a highly welcome prospect. If Acts was written in the early 60s, this might bolster its historical reliability and free believer and scholar alike from a deadly disease of scepticism about the accuracy of story upon story in the account that intermingles historical, geographical, and biographical detail with legend, myth, and fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. For other interpreters, this is wishful thinking. The historiography in Acts is an ideological presentation that puts the kind of discourse that emerged from a half century of assertion, dialogue, and debate on the lips of apostles fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection. Whether or not Acts was written early, some say, the earliest versions of the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter probably were written by 50 CE and influenced the presentation of both the teaching and the death of Jesus in the canonical gospels (Crossan 1985, 1988). Suddenly, then, into this early dating of Christian writings comes the prospect of ascetic, gnostic, and docetic beliefs as early as Paul's visits to Macedonia and Greece.

1. Introduction

The major approach for addressing this issue has been a model of trajectories through early Christianity, introduced by James M Robinson and Helmut Koester during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Robinson and Koester 1971). In the context of the application of this model, the arbitrariness of both historical and literary methods on many issues has become evident. Regularly the historical evidence is so limited or tendentious that a literary approach can make a persuasive case either for one way of influence (e.g., from the canonical gospels to the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Thomas) or for the reverse (from the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Thomas to the canonical gospels). Karl Donfried has presented an excellent summary in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* of known historical events from the New Testament (Donfried 1992). It is informative that the article does not contain information like: 'In March of 54 CE while Paul was in Ephesus, he wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians, sent it with Chloe to the Corinthian church, and Chloe delivered it to them in

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April.' The reason is simple. Even though data for establishing an exact time and place for Paul's writing of 1 Corinthians is better than for most New Testament writings, it is conflicted enough that the date ranges between 53-56 CE. Moreover, there is no certainty concerning who delivered the letter, and there is no certainty when its recipients received it (Betz and Mitchell 1992). If we could have certainty within a three year period for all of Paul's genuine letters and within a ten year period for all the other writings in the New Testament, this could help us immensely. The truth is that, in terms of definite proof, the Gospel of Luke, for example, could have been written anytime between ca. 58-155 CE and the Acts of the Apostles could have been written anytime between ca. 61-175 CE (Robbins 1992b: 91-94). Likewise, the Epistle of James could have been written anywhere between ca. 47-150 CE (Robinson 1976: 135-139; cf. Johnson 1995: 118-121). With possible variation like this, a historical account of early Christian discourse is extremely difficult.

This raises the issue if perhaps there is another way to approach the New Testament that would give a new way of thinking about the multiple traditions of discourse in earliest Christianity. It is unlikely, to be sure, that an alternative approach will cause those to cease and desist who have found their battling over chronological dating to be as exciting as the football, soccer, and rugby tournaments many people watch in their leisure hours. Nevertheless, an alternative approach may come as a relief to some, introducing an angle of analysis and interpretation that provides new insight into the relation of different kinds of early Christian discourse to one another and to the discourse of other religious traditions both in antiquity and in the present.

2. From Trajectories to Making Culture

My recommendation, which will come as little surprise, presupposes an application of socio-rhetorical analysis and interpretation (Robbins 1992a, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1996a, 1996b). Rather than placing such high stakes on the exact dating of New Testament writings, the goal is to understand the relation of individual forms of discourse in the New Testament to the overall discourse that results from their dialogical relation to one another. The model I use for this comes from Bradd Shore's book *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning* (Shore 1996). Rather than a concept of trajectories--which presupposes an evolutionary development from multiple forms of orthodoxy (the kerygma) to orthodoxy vs. heresy--the model is the making of culture. As children, humans engage in 'free play.' As they grow older, they adopt and reconstruct rule-governed games. When humans become adults, they are expected to distinguish between playing and 'being serious' Their serious work creates responsible society and responsible culture. Yet many of the cultural dimensions of being 'at play' inform activities of humans as they work at serious business. People at work agree to 'play by the rules,' and if they do not, regularly they are 'penalized' in one way or another. Sacred ritual has an important relation both to the games humans play and to the serious work they do. Some anthropologists consider ritual to be 'the most formalized kind of play' Ritual is:

> religion in motion, practices directed toward the sacred.... [R]ituals bring forward into consciousness the shared framework of forms and rules within which participants enact their histories. Ritual sometimes serves as a kind of publicly available social memory. It is a community's recollection in action, an enactment of shared experience, reminding us that our private moments and often conflicted actions unfold within shared worlds. This experiencing through ritual of a transcendent form and collective memory is why rites have been universally appropriated for expressing and experiencing the sacred. (Shore 1996: 89-90)

Key insights for the analysis of the epistle of James in this essay come from Shore's chapters on 'Mind Games' and 'Playing with Rules' (Shore 1996: 75-115). The basic concept is that humans create culture by making careful rules for establishing and violating boundaries. One of his most brilliant insights is that baseball exhibits a cultural model of the social relations of Americans to one another (Shore 1996: 75-100). A game is a framing of time, space, and action. His analysis shows that energetic, lawful, exciting, and timely violation of temporal and spatial boundaries is central to the game. My proposal is that Jesus himself and the 'followers of Jesus' in subsequent years, decades, and centuries were and are engaged in making and remaking rules and rituals for private life, communal life, and public life. One of the results of this activity is the creation of Christian culture--in the mind, in intimate relationships, in cordial social environments, and in public life both congenial and hostile.

Every culture has different kinds of games, and often people in these cultures understand some of the games better than others. Until a few decades ago, the major games in American culture were baseball, softball, basketball, football, volleyball, tennis, and golf. During more recent decades, hockey and soccer have become major games, and even lacrosse is occupying the time of many college students. Games from other cultures, then, regularly make inroads into the context of the traditional games in a culture. In addition to the different kinds of games, there often are local versions of games versus more national versions, and informal versions of games that people play on picnics or in schoolyards and more formal versions that take place on playing fields or professional arenas. Often there are activities that look similar from game to game, like throwing, hitting, kicking, or bouncing a ball. These similar activities regularly occur under different sets of rules and are rewarded, or penalized, in significantly different ways in different games. All the games have referees, and professional games regularly have head commissioners who oversee the activities of an entire 'league' of teams who play the game.

My suggestion is that first century Christianity contained many different games, with local versions and more widespread regional versions, as well as formal and informal versions. New Testament literature itself, I propose, shows us multiple versions in which people were participating. When we add literature outside the New Testament, we get even a fuller picture of the multiple games and versions of games in early Christianity. All of the games together comprise early Christian culture. By the end of the first century, some of the versions of the games were being sanctioned by certain leaders, and other versions were being censured. The internecine dialogue among people loyal to one game rather than another creates the environment we know today as early Christian culture.

3. Being an Abraham who Endures Tests in the Epistle of James

The story of Abraham in Genesis 12-25 is the Israelite version of the Greco-Roman story of Heracles/Hercules and his many labors. The Abraham story also has many analogies to a person being 'at bat' in American baseball. The goal of the person at bat is to get on base and successfully endure the trials that he or she encounters going from base to base. Abraham is called by God to leave home, go out into the world, and endure the tests that arise on the journey. The basic activity, then, is a journey of faith. Abraham understands that there will be many tests on the journey. He also understands that he must accept the call to undertake the venture. When Abraham successfully endures the tests, God blesses him in special ways (e.g., Gen. 25.35-36).

The epistle of James presents a Christian version of this venture of faith, citing Abraham in James 2.21-24 as a person who successfully met the test. The conceptuality of the venture

of faith in the epistle of James is built on wisdom, miracle, and prophetic discourse. In other words, no death-resurrection or cosmic Jesus discourse appears. This epistle combines Torah wisdom, healing ritual, and prophetic judgment as it introduces its own particular first century version of the venture of faith. The reader will not be surprised if there are some different features in this version, since the 'Lord Jesus Messiah' (1.1; 2.1) is involved in addition to God. The epistle is addressed to 'the twelve tribes in the dispersion' (1.1). In other words, the letter speaks to people who have been called to live in a territory that is not their 'home' but is somewhere out 'in the world'

The epistle of James does not show an actual Abraham ritual or game in progress. Rather, James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Messiah (1.1), functions much like a head commissioner who calls together representatives of the twelve tribes in the dispersion (1.1), greets them, and explains to them the conceptuality of the game. As his explanation begins, the dialectical nature of his discourse is present in his reference to 'the testing or genuineness (*dokomion*) of your faith' (1.3). The word *dokimos* (approved) is used in the LXX of Gen. 23.16 for the current monetary standards among the Hittites when Abraham bought the field of Ephron in Machpelah. In the Messianite dialect of the epistle of James, the issue is not the approved standards of wealth but the genuine standards for faith. In a context of faith (which occurs 14 times in James), the challenge of the game is endurance (steadfastness: 1.3, 4; 5.11) and work (which occurs 12 times in James). The goal is for each contestant to be 'perfect and complete, lacking in nothing' (1.4) as he or she does the work of faith. The episodes in the venture of faith have the potential to bring demerits to the individual contestants--negative points which would cause an individual team member to lose. Great benefits can result, however, if the contestant is successful. As it states in 1.12: 'Blessed is one who endures a test, for when one has stood the test, that one will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him' Later in the epistle, James introduces the cardinal sin, so to speak, during a test, namely, becoming 'a friend of the world' As it says in 4.4: 'Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God' If in the process of going out into the world, then, a person becomes a friend of the world, he or she becomes 'stained by the world' (1.27) and does not meet the test. The person must not turn away from God to the world. The person must prove himself or herself to be a friend of God. This is a matter not only of having faith in God but in doing what God wants the person to do--i.e., doing the work of God.

The major activities in the venture of faith, as we have seen, are periods of testing. Those who successfully endure all the tests during the venture will receive a crown of life from God, who created the venture as a way of identifying those throughout his creation who love him (1.12). It appears that the venture continues throughout the life of each individual. Tests of various kinds occur during major periods of time in the venture and constitute the major content of the game. In James 1.13-27, the discourse explains the underlying principles of the game in a short elaboration of the meaning of the blessing in James 1.12.

As mentioned above, the epistle of James does not show an actual venture of faith in progress. Rather, it discusses a Messianite version of the venture in a manner that can equip people to enact it and referee it. In James 2.1-4, the discourse describes an episode in which contestants do not properly meet the test. A man with gold rings and fine clothing comes in among the assembled players, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in (2.2). If one or more of the team members pay attention to the well-dressed man and offer him a seat, then tell the poor man to stand on the side or sit at their feet, the group loses the test. This is like 'three strikes and you are out' in baseball.

As the discourse brings the description of the episode to a close, it seems to insinuate that the referees in the dispersion have been allowing partiality between rich and poor to occur during the tests without counting this partiality against the contestants. As it says: 'have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?' (1.4). In 2.5-26, it explains in detail why this partiality is unacceptable. After reciting rules that have developed in the history of the game (2.8-13), it recounts the exemplary way in which Abraham remained a friend of God as he successfully met his most difficult test (2.21-24). Then the discourse cites Rahab the prostitute as one who met the test faithfully by doing the work of God when messengers came from the Israelites (2.25). In Joshua 2.1-21 Rahab's deeds had already become an exhibition of her faith, and in rabbinic tradition Rahab is honored as a proselyte and a model of hospitality. The epistles of James and Hebrews (11.31) in the New Testament perpetuate this tradition, and 1 Clement 10 and 12 perpetuate it outside the canon. In these contexts, early Christians place special emphasis on the righteous deeds that Rahab performed as a result of her faith (Johnson 1995: 245).

In 3.1-18, the discourse turns to the responsibilities of those who teach the rules of the game. The teachers are judged by even a greater strictness than the referees and the players (3.1). Everyone makes mistakes, but a person who makes no mistakes in what he says is a perfect man who has learned to bridle and guide his entire body like a ship that is directed skillfully and safely through strong winds (3.2-4). James 3.5-12 follows with an exposition on the tongue, which has the potential both for dispensing the wisdom of God and for generating evil. The concern, finally, is whether wisdom 'comes down from above or is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish' (3.15). Wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity (3.17). Those who teach the game have a responsibility to teach it accurately and resist the temptation to enter into talk that creates bad feelings among those who compete with one another on a regular basis.

In 4.1-17, the discourse discusses wars and battles, implicating the twelve tribes explicitly in such conflicts. It asserts that their public fighting is a result of passions at war among their members (4.1). It accuses them of killing as well as coveting (4.2)! Their goal, in other words, is to eliminate people (Johnson 1995: 277) in the context of the venture of faith. Suddenly the discourse attacks its addressees as 'adulteresses' in 4.4 (Johnson 1995: 278). Then it exhorts them to 'submit themselves to God' (4.7-8), to 'humble themselves before the Lord' by becoming wretched, by mourning, and by weeping (4.9-10), and by not speaking evil against one another (4.11-12). It specifically maligns those who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into a certain city and spend a year there and do business and make a gain' (4:13: Johnson 1995: 295). In other words, the specific attack of this discourse is on people whose primary interest is in becoming wealthy. In 5.1 the discourse directly attacks the representatives of the twelve tribes as 'rich people' and in 5.2-6 it moves into a tirade against riches. As the discourse continues, it asserts that rich people among them have fraudulently withheld the wages of the workers who have mowed their fields, and that the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts (5.4). Every game creates a potential environment of fighting on the field, bragging about one's accomplishments, and seeking advantage without concern for others. The epistle of James exhorts its readers to refrain from such activities by humbling oneself and dealing justly especially with those who work at the hard labor that creates comfort and riches for others.

In 5.7, the discourse abruptly changes its address from the wealthy person to the farmer, and it exhorts the listener to be patient. A dialectical feature of Messianite speech appears in the discourse as there is reference to 'the coming of the Lord' (5.7: *tes parousias tou*

kuriou). In 5.4, the discourse had referred to the Lord of hosts. Now the discourse uses the phrase '*parousia tou kyriou*' in a manner that makes it unclear whether it is a reference to the Lord God of hosts or the Lord Jesus Messiah. In no case is the term '*parousia*' (coming) applied to God in the LXX, nor is 'the expression *parousia tou kyriou* ('coming of the Lord')' ever attested in the LXX. The term *parousia* with reference to God does appear, however, in T. Jud. 22.2; T. Levi 8.11; T. Abr. 13.4; 2 Baruch 55.6; Josephus, Ant. 3.80; 9.55, although in some instances the text has been disputed (Johnson 1995: 313). The two occurrences in Josephus are especially interesting. *Antiquities* 3.80 is a reference to God's coming to the people on the morning of the third day after Moses has gone up to God (Exodus 19.16). As Josephus says: 'while all the rest of heaven remained serene, blustering winds, bringing tempestuous rain, came sweeping down, lightning terrified the beholders, and the thunderbolts hurled from aloft signified the advent of God (*parousian tou theou*) propitious to the desires of Moses' (Ant. 3.80). *Antiquities* 9.55, accordingly, is a discussion of the attempt of Adados (Ben-hadad) of Syria to capture Elisha. When Elisha's servant brought Elisha the news that Adados was in pursuit, Elisha besought God to reveal (*emphainisai*) his power and presence (*dynamin kai parousian*) as far as possible to his servant, that he may have hope and take courage (Josephus, Ant. 9.55; 2 Kings 6.16-17).

The discourse of James not only uses the phrase '*parousia* of the Lord' but it contains the assertion that 'parousia tou kyriou enggiken ('the coming of the Lord is at hand'). In the LXX of Exodus 19.20-21, the present tense of *engizo* is used to refer to the people's 'drawing near' to God, but it does not use the verb for God's drawing near to the people. Reference to 'the drawing near of the coming of the Lord' appears to be another dialectical feature of the Messianite discourse in James, complemented by the subsequent assertion that 'the Judge is standing at the doors' (James 5.9). A major issue is whether this discourse is referring to the Lord God or to the Lord Jesus Messiah as the one whose coming is near at hand. It is characteristic of this Messianite rhetorolect (Robbins 1996c) that the term 'Lord' with reference to the Lord Jesus Messiah is being absorbed into references to 'the Lord God of hosts.' The result will be significant discomfort on behalf of Jews who consider the activities of God to be clearly distinct from the activities of Jesus of Nazareth. Messianite Jews who focus their attention on Jesus change the game. For them, the activities of Jesus are so fully embedded in the activities of God that Jesus as Lord Messiah performs many of the functions usually attributed to the Lord God. As this discourse refers to the coming of the Lord, then, it willingly blurs the boundaries between the coming of the Lord Jesus Messiah and the coming of the Lord God of hosts. As a result, it is hard to know if the Lord God of hosts might come in God's own epiphany separate from God's Messiah, if the Lord God of hosts comes near in the manifest presence of the Lord Jesus Messiah, or if the coming of the Lord Jesus Messiah replaces the coming of the Lord God of hosts in such a manner that the Messiah's activity allows God to stay in heaven.

At this point the discourse recalls a major player in the past who met the test of suffering and patience when God actually 'threw the ball directly at him to hurt him'--namely Job, one of 'the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord' (5.10). As the discourse turns to Job, it returns firmly to the Lord God of hosts, asserting: you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful (Johnson 1995: 321). Thus, after a portion of discourse that exhibited highly Messianite ways of referring to the Lord, it modulates back into a traditional reference to speaking 'in the name of the Lord' God and understanding the purpose of the Lord God, his compassion and his mercy.

In 5.13, the discourse addresses the issue of people who are sick, another test in the venture of faith. How should people in the twelve tribes in the dispersion deal with illness?

The discourse has clear guidelines. The sick person should not attempt to receive healing by direct appeal either to the Lord God or the Lord Jesus Messiah. Rather, people who are sick should call the elders of the congregation and let them pray over them and anoint them with oil 'in the name of the Lord' (5.14). The 'prayer of faith' will heal the sick person, and the Lord will raise the sick person, and if the person has committed sins, those sins will be forgiven (5.15-16). The person the discourse recalls as an example of this is Elijah who 'prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on earth; then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit' (5.17-18). While the rehearsal of Elijah's activity is fully traditional, the reference to the prayer of faith and to anointing in the name of the Lord is Messianite in form. The particular way in which the person is anointed and the prayer of faith is made changes the way the game is regularly played. Usually the name of the Lord would, without question, mean the name of the Lord God of hosts. In this context, it is just as likely that the healing would be in Jesus' name as that it would to be in the name of the Lord God of hosts. Also, to refer to the prayer as 'the prayer of faith' appears to be a Messianite peculiarity of speech.

The address to the representatives of the twelve tribes in the dispersion ends with a special, overriding rule: 'If anyone wanders from the truth and another brings that one back, the one who brings a sinner back from this error will save his soul from death and the act will cover a multitude of sins' (James 5.19-20). In other words, if a person has lost a number of tests but brings a fellow team member back to the venture of faith after that person has wandered off, the person who brings the team member back will receive the crown of life announced as the ultimate prize at the beginning (1.12). In the final sentence, the discourse refers to this crown of life in terms of saving the person's soul from death (5.20). In other words, here is a special, new rule of the game. Even if a person has lost a significant number of tests, if that person has remained on the team trying his or her best, so to speak, and that person brings a team member back who has strayed away from the team, this act nullifies the previous losses and the person automatically receives the prize of life for his or her soul. This is a fascinating rule, obviously related to the maintenance and nurturing of a Messianite community of faith. It is fascinating that there is no focus on mission in any of this. In other words, there is no reward for going out and getting people to join this venture who have not previously been a part of it. For whatever reason, this Messianite version does not reward proselytism but 'bringing people back into the group.'

This version of the venture of faith is interesting for many reasons. First, the concern about wealth is remarkable, since one of the major results of Abraham's successful meeting of the tests was an accumulation of wealth. When Abram went up from Egypt after he had gotten Sarah back from the house of the Pharaoh, 'Abram was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold' (Gen. 13.2). Near the end of Abraham's life when he sends a servant to get a wife for Isaac, the servant gives Rebekah 'a gold nose-ring weighing a half shekel and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels' after she has drawn water for his camels (Gen. 24.22). Later when the servant tells Laban about Abraham, alongside the flocks and herds, male and female slaves, camels, and donkeys with which God has blessed him, he includes 'silver and gold' (Gen. 24.35). When Laban and Bethuel agree to allow Rebekah to return with the servant to be Isaac's wife, the servant brings out additional 'jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments, and gives them to Rebekah' (Gen. 24.53). It is remarkable, then, when the initial test in the epistle of James concerns 'a man with gold rings and in fine clothes' who comes into the assembly (James 2.2). According to the traditional rules of the venture of faith, the major way in which the Lord God blesses people who pass the test is to

give them wealth in the form of a bountiful household, much livestock, and silver and gold. It appears that the epistle of James is changing the rules!

There is, to be sure, a scene in the Genesis account of Abraham that suggests that Abraham deals with wealth very carefully. When Abram returned from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, King Melchizedek of Salem brought bread and wine out to Abram and blessed him. Abram's response was to give him 'one tenth of everything' that had been taken from the captives (Gen. 14.20). When the king of Sodom told Abram: 'Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself,' Abram refused to take the goods, because the king would say he had 'made Abram rich' (Gen. 14.23). Abram takes nothing but what the young men have eaten and a share for each man who went with him (14.24). Abram, then, takes only what God brings into his possession, and when this is taken through battle, Abram gives a tithe of it to the local priest. It is interesting, then, that the epistle of James does not mention the tithe or work out some formula for wealthy people in the assembly. As was stated above, the version in James is either making some new rules or revising some traditionally accepted ones. The issue is partiality that is shown to the rich in a context of humiliating the poor. This kind of partiality, in this Messianite version of the venture of faith, is unacceptable (Wachob 1994).

A second point of interest is the procedure for healing a sick person (James 5.14-18). In the Genesis Apocryphon discovered at Qumran, Abram exorcises the plague from the Pharaoh in Egypt in the form of an exorcism. As Abram himself tells it:

> I prayed [for him] ... and I laid my hands on his [head]; and the scourge departed from him and the evil [spirit] was expelled [from him], and he lived. (1QapGen 20.28-29; Vermes 1962: 220)

In some Jewish circles, healing discourse had become part of Abraham's venture of faith. It may have been quite natural, then, for healing discourse to have been part of the wisdom discourse of the venture of faith in the epistle of James. The Messianite phraseology of 'the prayer of faith' and 'anointing the person with oil in the name of the Lord,' however, does not appear in the Genesis Apocryphon. These appear to be part of the 'new dialect' and the 'new rules' in the Messianite version of the venture of faith.

The Christian version of the venture of faith in the epistle of James is a very interesting, and significantly limited, version. Either it is a smalltown version, or a sandlot version in a large city. Its episodes occur only in an overall context of Torah wisdom supplemented with brief insights from prophetic wisdom about the coming of the Lord and from healing wisdom from the tradition of Elijah. A number of the topics in the epistle of James are present in the Q material, and the absence of death-resurrection discourse in Q as well as in the epistle of James is an interesting phenomenon. Q mentions Abraham but not Rahab, Job, or Elijah. The Pauline version of the venture of faith in the epistles of Galatians and Romans is much more elaborate. One of the major changes in Paul's letters is discourse about the death and resurrection of Jesus. The absence of this discourse from the epistle of James creates an environment that assigns very specific, limited roles to Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah. As they exhibited faith that worked the righteousness of God, they were hospitable, they patiently endured suffering, and they engaged in prayer to heal people who were sick. These are highly laudable activities, but they are significantly limited activities when we see the full range of early Christian discourse that develops during the first century.

When a person sees the limited version of the venture of faith in the epistle of James, it makes little difference whether this was the way some early Christians played the game

during the 30s and 40s or during the 80s and 90s of the first century. The epistle may show us a local version from a very early period of time (the first two decades after Jesus' death) or a version for a group of people much later in the century who either were not in contact with some other versions or had no interest in participating in other versions they knew about. While this Messianite version is highly limited, it has openings in it that would allow early Christians at any time to move from this version to other more elaborate versions within early Christianity. The suffering of Job leaves the door open for discourse about the death and resurrection of Jesus, the prophetic coming of the Lord invites apocalyptic discourse under circumstances that welcome it, the language against the rich could be a bridge into opposition discourse, and the wisdom discourse could create a context for cosmic Jesus discourse. In other words, participants in this version could be convinced to join a much more elaborate version. It does not seem remarkable, then, that this Messianite version of the venture of faith was included in the canon of the New Testament alongside much more elaborate versions.

4. Conclusion

The primary goal of this essay has been to replace the model of trajectories, so dominant in the study of early Christianity, with a model of making Christian culture. The trajectories model (Robinson and Koester 1971), it turns out, presupposes the existence of orthodoxy at the beginning of Christian culture, then imposes a developmental process on the data whereby orthodoxy in multiple forms programmatically and persistently wards off heresy until orthodoxy becomes a dominant culture toward the end of the second century. The data both in the New Testament and outside it during the first two centuries shows us that this perception of the process of the making of early Christianity is not accurate. More recently developed insights into the ways in which humans create ~culture (Shore 1996) equip us to see that followers of Jesus in various places at various times throughout the first two centuries renamed Jewish practices as Christian practices, subtly or not so subtly changed the rules, and introduced new phrases and nuances to communicate their new understandings of who they were and what they were doing.

The goal of this essay has been to exhibit the process of making Christian culture in the epistle of James. Most of the language in the epistle is characteristic of traditional Jewish discourse during the Hellenistic period. Death and resurrection discourse never appears in it. Thus, it does not contain the kerygma many interpreters inaccurately consider to be the center of the beliefs of every Christian group throughout the first century. The epistle exhibits one of the many ways in which Christians during the first century renamed certain Jewish practices, modified both Jewish practices and beliefs by using different language, and introduced new rules designed to nurture their own particular groups in various places throughout the Mediterranean world.

Our analysis reveals that Abraham's venture of faith provides the underlying guidelines for the approach to Christian life presented by the epistle of James. Abraham's call by God to go forth on a journey away from his home is signalled in the opening address to 'the twelve tribes in the disperson' (1.1). The major topic of the discourse is the trials that test the faith of individuals as they live in the midst of the world. The epistle explicitly cites Abraham as the exemplar of the person of faith who fulfilled the attributes of a 'friend of God' in the midst of the most severe kind of testing (2.21-24). As the epistle proceeds, it modifies phrases and terminology in traditional Jewish discourse of the period, creating one of the many Messianite dialects of speech that emerged during the first and second century (Robbins 1996c). As the epistle comes to an end, it introduces a completely new rule for the

venture of faith, namely, a provision that anyone who brings back a brother who 'wanders from the truth' will 'save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins' (James 5.19-20). This new rule, in the midst of other moderate changes of traditional Jewish phrasing, serves well a goal of creating a culture of Messianite belief and practice with an identity distinct from Jews who do not focus on Jesus as Lord Messiah. One notices the absence of any incentive to go out and 'recruit' new members to the group. This may simply be a reality of the contexts in which these groups exist. There are limited populations for recruitment in most small villages and towns. Most people already are members of a particular religious group as a result of their kinship relations. The 'mission' in the epistle of James works inside Jewish groups that are located somewhere 'away from home.' The discourse in the epistle sets up a 'venture of faith culture' in these settings built on the principles of Abraham's venture of faith. The addition of the Lord Jesus Messiah to the discussion, however, creates new rules and new practices that create a new 'culture within a culture.' Little by little, phrase by phrase, a new culture begins to emerge with an identity that finally becomes visible as different from the culture within which it lived and moved and had its being.

One of the remarkable features of the letter, we have discovered, is its concern about wealth, since perhaps the most noticeable reward for Abraham in the traditional version is the blessings of household, livestock, silver, and gold that come into his possession. The discourse in this epistle has its eye on the poor as well as the rich. This evokes an image of synagogues in the diaspora creating special seats of honor for wealthy patrons and using practices that humiliate poor people who come into the assembly. Through an emphasis on impartiality between rich and poor, this epistle introduces a discourse that can create a new culture in two ways. First, by focusing on the poor, it addresses the needs of people who may have been experiencing significant practices of humiliation in certain synagogues. Second, certain wealthy people who know of Abraham's tithe to Melchizedek and restraint with the king of Sodom may experience a more fulfilling activity of patronage in a setting where poor people are treated with honor and respect. Especially if any circumstances are arising during the first century that are causing an influx of poor people into villages, towns, and cities in the Mediterranean world (see Rohrbaugh 1991), this approach might prove to be quite successful within synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world.

It is important for us to observe at the end of this essay that the manner in which the epistle of James creates Christian culture is only one of many ways exhibited to us by literature both inside and outside the New Testament. A task lies before us of describing all the ways the culture-building proceeded. If we remain attentive in each instance to the kind of discourse a text is modifying (see Robbins 1996c), both in subtle and not so subtle ways, we can, over a period of time, begin to see the full range of moves early Christians made to create the wide-reaching and complex phenomenon we recognize today as second and third century Christian discourse.

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