

Saving the Strawy Epistle: The Recovery of James after Martin Luther

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Introduction

Although he never wrote a formal commentary on the letter, Martin Luther's notorious comments about the Epistle of James – chiefly, that it was an “epistle of straw”¹ – became a byword in the exegetical tradition by the mid-sixteenth century.² In fact, nearly every commentator who wrote on the letter after the time of Luther, whether Catholic or Protestant, did so in full awareness of Luther's comments and responded accordingly – and almost always negatively. When the English divine Thomas Manton, for instance, wrote his commentary on James in the 1640s, he reserved his most bitter remarks for Luther. He

¹ Martin Luther, LW 35:362; WABi 6:11, 29-35.

² See, for instance, Philip Mencil, a German lawyer, who wrote a Latin poem about Luther's famous comments on James entitled “Poem on the canonical Epistle of St. James, which Luther called a straw epistle.” It was apparently appended to a commentary on James by a Catholic professor at Ingolstadt, Petrus Stevartius (1549-1624), *In canonicam B. Iacobi Epistolam brevis commentarius* (Ingolstadt, 1591). See Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, rev. Heinrich Greeven (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 56 n. 233.

regarded the reformer's comments, a century past, as "rude," "uncivil," and even "blasphemous."³

Dissatisfaction with and disapproval of Luther's appraisal of James was widespread and immediate, and the subsequent recovery of the letter's significance within the canon occurred over the course of several decades, of which Manton's commentary served as the culmination of this lengthy process. Protestant interpreters during the second half of the sixteenth century and first half of the seventeenth century particularly illustrated this process as they variously commented on James subsequent to Martin Luther. After first discussing Luther's own comments about James, this article will then focus on how individual commentators among the three most dominant Protestant traditions at this time (Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican) responded to Luther's comments. Specifically, this article illustrates how John Calvin, Niels Hemmingsen, and Thomas Manton collectively and completely distanced themselves from Luther's (perceived) negative comments about the Letter of James.

Martin Luther (1484-1546)

Martin Luther first publicly questioned the integrity of the Letter of James within the context of his famous discussion of the sacraments in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in the fall of 1520.⁴ Specifically, in reference to the so-called sacrament of extreme unction, Luther attacked the doctrine's biblical basis by suggesting, as did Erasmus just before him and Cajetan soon afterward, that "this epistle is not by James the apostle, and that it is not worthy of an apostolic spirit."⁵ However, in his argument against extreme unction, Luther left the question of authorship aside and argued instead that extreme unction was not a sacrament on other grounds, namely, because it lacked dominical institution.

It was not until two years later, in 1522, that Luther published his most famous comments on James. These remarks, which emerged in the context of Luther's translation of the New Testament into German,

³ Thomas Manton, *The Works of Thomas Manton* (London: Nisbet, 1870), 4:10-11.

⁴ This was not Luther's earliest public questioning of James, but it was probably the most decisive one given the wide circulation of *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. In fact, as Ronald Sider, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt: The Development of His Thought 1517-1525* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 96, points out, Luther questioned the letter as early as 1519.

⁵ Luther, LW 36:118; WA 6:567, 33-568, 19.

have been notoriously intertwined with the reformer ever since. In the conclusion to his prefaces to the New Testament, where he commented on various books and explained his method of biblical interpretation, Luther offered these final remarks:

In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvific for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book of doctrine. Therefore, St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw [*stramineam epistolam*; German: *ein rechte stroern Epistel*], compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.⁶

Although Luther later removed these comments from the 1534 preface in the complete Bible and, in 1539, from printings of the New Testament (most importantly, his comment about James being "an epistle of straw"), they generated widespread discussion and opprobrium among subsequent interpreters, and they have since then become a byword in the exegetical tradition.

Luther's comments on James, up to this point, largely (but not completely) reflected the views of his Catholic contemporaries Erasmus and Cajetan. Luther, however, differed considerably from these two theologians in at least one important way. Whereas Erasmus and Cajetan questioned the authorship of James based on linguistic and historical grounds (from a tradition stretching all the way back to Eusebius and Jerome), Luther, in addition to these two reasons, questioned the letter's apostolicity and canonicity on the basis of its theology. As Luke Timothy Johnson explains, "Luther pushed the principle of [*S*]achkritik ('content criticism') to the extreme of rejecting James entirely because of its (perceived) contradiction to Luther's fundamental principle of *sola fide*."⁷ Indeed, as Luther himself states in his preface to the Epistles of James and Jude in 1522, "I do not regard [James] as the writing of an apostle."⁸

Luther offered three main reasons why he questioned James. First, the epistle "is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in

⁶ Luther, LW 35:362; WABi 6:11, 29-35.

⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 141.

⁸ Luther, LW 35:396; WABi 7:385, 3-8.

ascribing justification to works.” Second, although “its purpose is to teach Christians...in all [its] long teaching it does not mention the Passion, the resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ.” Finally, “James does nothing more than drive to the law and to its works.” For these reasons, Luther concludes, “I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him.”⁹

Although Luther referred to James on numerous occasions throughout the remainder of his career, these comments from *The Babylonian Captivity to the Church* in 1520 and, especially, the prefaces to the New Testament and the Letter of James in 1522 encapsulate well Luther’s (complex) view of James. As David Lotz explains: Because Luther “uses the principle ‘what preaches Christ’ to determine the boundaries of the biblical canon,”¹⁰ he concludes that James is not apostolic. However, contrary to popular thinking, Luther does not reject James completely or even partially; on the contrary, he considers it a fine letter and includes it in the canon; but it is inferior to the “the right and precious books [*die rechten und edlisten bucher*]”¹¹ of the New Testament, namely, Paul’s letters and the Gospels. Indeed, the very fact that Luther calls James an epistle “of straw,” which language he adopts from Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, indicates that he does not reject it. Just as Paul’s metaphor about a building that is constructed by gold or silver is better than one constructed by hay or straw, so books of the New Testament like Romans and John (gold) are superior to books like James or Jude (straw).

Despite his intentions, however, and his otherwise favorable or, at least, neutral statements about the letter, those who interpreted James after Luther gravitated toward those comments he made that questioned the integrity of James. It is for this reason, perhaps, why so few Lutheran exegetes wrote commentaries on the letter.¹² Aside from Luther’s former German theological ally Andreas von Karlstadt, who

⁹ Luther, LW 35:396-397; WABi 7:385, 3-8.

¹⁰ David Lotz, “Sola Scriptura: Luther on Biblical Authority,” *Interpretation* 35 (1981): 273.

¹¹ LW 35:396; WABi 7:385, 3-8.

¹² Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 142, states it thus: “Luther’s position, indeed, was to be of greater influence on later scholars in the German Lutheran tradition than it was on his fellow reformers.” This is certainly accurate, but it is incomplete. Luther’s influence surpasses that of his fellow German Lutherans. His influence, though largely negative when it comes to the Epistle of James, is clearly discernible among the Reformed tradition.

disagreed with Luther about the status and importance of James and who even attacked his view,¹³ German Lutherans after Luther did not generally write commentaries on the letter.¹⁴

John Calvin (1509-1564)

In the Protestant exegetical tradition, the writing of commentaries on James fell to the Reformed.¹⁵ Chief among the Reformed commentators was John Calvin, who wrote commentaries on all of the New Testament, excluding Revelation and 2 and 3 John. Calvin published his Latin commentary on the Catholic Epistles¹⁶ in 1551 and, although he dedicated it to Edward VI and it appears to have been well received in England, it was not translated into English during the sixteenth century. Although Calvin had less of an aversion than Luther did to books like Hebrews, James, and Jude, Calvin did position 1 Peter and 1 John before James among the Catholic Epistles and he did not even deign to include 2 and 3 John in his commentary. Calvin's decision to give canonical prominence to 1 Peter and 1 John in terms of positioning was not atypical; the Vulgate had done this. However, his decision not to write on 2 and 3 John doubtlessly reflects the elasticity of the canon in the first half of the sixteenth century. As Richard

¹³ As Ronald Sider, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, 96-97, writes, "Karlstadt reported that when he undertook lectures on James in 1520, a certain presbyter (Luther's name was never mentioned) rejected the epistle on the grounds that its authorship was uncertain. This good priest's satirical opposition to the book apparently decreased Karlstadt's audience, and seriously threatened their old friendship... Without engaging in any detailed discussion of the theological problem, Karlstadt declared in regard to the content that the epistle contained nothing which contradicted other books such as Paul's epistles. Karlstadt sharply attacked the subjectivism of Luther's position."

¹⁴ The one early (pre-1550) exception to this rule is Andreas Althamer (1500-1539), reformer in Ansbach, who wrote a (forgotten) German commentary, *Die Epistel S. Jacobs mit newer Auslegung* (Wittenberg, 1533).

¹⁵ In contrast to the Lutherans as well as Anabaptists (who generally did not write commentaries in the sixteenth century), several Reformed theologians commented on James: Conrad Pellican (1478-1556), Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), Rudolph Gualther (1519-1586), Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), Augustine Marlorat (1506-1562), John Calvin (1509-1564), and Daniel Tossanus (1541-1602).

¹⁶ John Calvin, "Commentarius in Epistolas Catholicas," in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, vol. 55 (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1896), 199-516.

Muller explains in relation to Luther, so too is the case for Calvin and his contemporaries:

Luther's famous and highly hyperbolic dismissal of the Epistle of James as an epistle of "straw" can easily be set into an early Reformation context in which the patristic distinction between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena* in the New Testament still functioned. This sense of the relative fluidity of canon rapidly gave way in the sixteenth century to a stricter sense of the equally normative value of all the books of the New Testament, indeed, of the Bible as a whole.¹⁷

Harry Gamble confirms this: "[N]o ecumenical authority of the ancient church ever rendered a formal decision for the church at large as to the exact contents of the Christian scripture."¹⁸

Even though Calvin worked during a time in which the canon was more fluid, the "stricter sense" of the "equally normative value of all the books of the New Testament" emerges in the thought of Calvin in a way that it does not in Luther. In his *argumentum* for the Epistle of James, for instance, Calvin writes:

It appears from the writings of Jerome and Eusebius, that this Epistle was not formerly received by many Churches without opposition. There are also at this day some [namely, Luther¹⁹] who do not think it entitled to authority. I am

¹⁷ Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 2:374.

¹⁸ Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 56.

¹⁹ As for why Calvin cites Eusebius and Jerome but not Luther, John Thompson, "Calvin as a Biblical Commentator," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ed., Donald McKim, 65, offers the following comments: "Calvin does follow a general pattern in citing his sources: it is the church fathers above all whom he will name in his writings, as a mark of respect for their authority (second, of course, to Scripture), whereas scholastic and contemporary writers will normally not be mentioned by name because they are not seen as authorities." Later, Thompson adds that Calvin also quotes the Fathers in order to enter into debate or disagreement – as is the case here.

happy, however, to receive it without controversy, because I see no just cause for rejecting it.²⁰

Whereas Luther rejected the apostolicity of the Letter of James as a result of its reticence about the passion of Christ – indeed, hardly any mention of Jesus at all – and its fondness for law rather than gospel, Calvin accepted the letter. Interestingly, the reasons Calvin gives for accepting the letter – namely, that James and Paul are reconcilable, and that James’ reserve in speaking about Christ is consonant with Scripture – appeal not to the church’s authority but to Calvin’s individual hermeneutic.²¹ It also reveals how closely he had read Luther’s arguments and, by rejecting them, honored them as worthy of reply.

For Calvin, the deciding factor for determining the authority of James is not that it must preach Christ. The criterion is “that it contains nothing unworthy of an Apostle of Christ.”²² Moreover, in contrast to Luther (who additionally disfavored James for its stress on law and practical instruction),²³ Calvin favors it.²⁴ In the words of Calvin, “It is indeed full of instruction on various subjects, the benefit of which extends to every part of the Christian life.”²⁵ For Calvin, in other words, the problem with James is not internal; it is a perfectly useful

²⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 276; CO 55:381.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 276; CO 55:381. As was the case with 1 Peter and 1 John, Calvin makes yet another allusion to Luther’s general preface to the New Testament (1522) when he isolates the Gospel of John as tacitly superior to the other Gospels: “...among the evangelists themselves there is so much difference in setting forth the power of Christ, that the other three, compared with John, have hardly sparks of that full brightness which appears so conspicuous in him.” Calvin’s “stricter sense” distinguishes him from Luther as he finishes this statement: “...and yet we commend them all alike.”

²² Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 276; CO 55:381.

²³ As he writes in his preface to James, LW 35:397, “...thus James does nothing more than drive to the law and to its work...He calls the law a ‘law of liberty’ though Paul calls it a law of slavery, of wrath, of death, and of sin.” Two paragraphs below, however, Luther speaks well of the letter for its “otherwise many good sayings.”

²⁴ As Guenther Haas writes in “Calvin’s Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, 97, “Calvin gives the concept of law a major role in his ethics...Because the law reveals the eternal will of God, it is, for Calvin, the ultimate moral norm.”

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 276; CO 55:381.

and “Christian” book. The problem is more external: Who is the author of this epistle?

This last component to Calvin’s *argumentum* raises the important historical question of authorship. Calvin writes, “...as to the author, there is...more reason for doubting [the authority of the letter].”²⁶ Historically, the exegetical tradition had concluded that there were three potential Jameses: James of Zebedee and James of Alphaeus, who were among the twelve apostles, and James the Just, the brother of the Lord.²⁷ As Calvin confirms, “The ancients are nearly unanimous in thinking that [the author of James] was one of the disciples named [Just] and a relative [note: not brother] of Christ, who was set over the Church at Jerusalem.”²⁸ This was the James, Calvin further explains, whom the ancients believed Paul referred to in Galatians.

However, Calvin disagreed with the tradition. As he explains: “...[the notion] that one of the disciples was mentioned as one of the three pillars, and thus exalted above the other Apostles, does not seem to me probable.”²⁹ Calvin suggests that Paul refers to “the son of Alphaeus” rather than James the Just, the Bishop of Jerusalem. This is because Calvin does not understand how a non-apostle (that is, one of the twelve) such as James the Just could be cited in Scripture as somehow superior to the other two Jameses, who were apostles. For this reason, Calvin concludes his *argumentum* indecisively: “...[which] of the two [James of Alphaeus or James the Just] was the writer of this Epistle, it is not for me to say [*assesere meum non est*].”³⁰ In the end, however, the identity of the author matters little to Calvin. What is

²⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 277; CO 55:382.

²⁷ There are important variations in this numbering, however. The exegetical tradition collectively rejects that James of Zebedee wrote this letter, leaving only James of Alphaeus and James the Just (as Bishop of Jerusalem). Some commentators distinguish between the two, some view them synonymously, and others leave this question unanswered (whether intentionally or not).

²⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 277; CO 55:382.

²⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 277; CO 55:382.

³⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 277; CO 55:382. In his comments on Jude 1, Calvin’s indecisiveness regarding the authorship of James is less prominent: “...the authority of James is not here brought forward as that of a private individual, but because he was counted by all the Church as one of the chief apostles of Christ. He was the son of Alphaeus, as I have said elsewhere. No, this very passage is a sufficient proof to me against Eusebius and others, who say, that he was a disciple, named [Just]...But there is no doubt but that Jude mentions here his own brother, because he was eminent among the apostles,” 428-429.

important is the content of the letter, which he interprets as full of “remarkable passages” on various significant issues in “the Christian life.”³¹

Niels Hemmingsen (1513-1600)

Although he was not the first Reformed theologian to write a formal commentary on James, John Calvin’s work was incorporated into the Protestant exegetical tradition by the sixteenth century in a way that other Reformed commentaries were not. This is not exactly the case with Niels Hemmingsen. Hemmingsen, a bishop, scholar, and influential Lutheran preacher in his native Denmark, is certainly not as recognized today as his Protestant contemporary John Calvin, but he was an important figure. Indeed, as Kenneth Hagen explains:

Hemmingsen (1513-1600) was not unknown in sixteenth-century Europe. He was at the center of university and church life in Denmark. The *praeceptor universalis Daniae* was also the leader in the Philipist period of power. The “brilliant young Dane” was with Melanchthon in Wittenberg, 1537-1542; then in Copenhagen (1542) as professor of Greek (1543), dialectic (1545), and theology (1553), until his dismissal in 1579 on grounds of Crypto-Calvinism regarding the Lord’s Supper. Tyrgve Skarsten says that “his fame and reputation throughout the learned circles of Europe brought renown and glory to the University of Copenhagen. His Latin and Danish works were to be found in the leading libraries in multiple editions and often in Dutch, English, and German translation.”³²

It is surely noteworthy that Hemmingsen’s commentary on James was translated into English and Calvin’s was not. It appeared in

³¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 277; CO 55:382. Calvin’s appraisal of James parallels his view of 2 Peter, since he doubts Petrine authorship but nevertheless argues for the canonicity of the letter, 362-363. As for the equally dubious letter of Jude, Calvin accepts it as canonical but does not enter into discussion as regards authorship. In each of these letters (James, 2 Peter, Jude), Calvin’s conclusion regarding canon and authority is the same: they are authoritative since they contain “nothing inconsistent with the purity of apostolic doctrine,” not because they are written by apostles, CO 55:503.

³² Kenneth Hagen, “‘*De Exegetica Methodo*’: Niels Hemmingsen’s *De Methodis* (1555),” in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. David Steinmetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 182.

English in 1577,³³ with the Latin original preceding it by five years.³⁴ Hemmingsen's commentary begins with an *argumentum*, which had been standard practice since the patristic period. In it the Dane alludes to the controversy surrounding the issue of authorship and apostolicity within the exegetical tradition. Throughout his commentary he assumes, as did the majority of the tradition, that James the Just, Jesus' brother, was the author: "The author of this Epistle was James the Apostle, who is called the brother of the Lord."³⁵ As Calvin summarized in his *argumentum* on James, the collective tradition agreed that James the Just was the author, who may also have been James of Alpheus, but who was clearly not James of Zebedee (whom Herod killed in the early 40s). In contrast to Calvin, however, Hemmingsen agreed with the tradition; and just as the tradition used the standard view of authorship to affirm the authority of the letter against those who questioned it, so Hemmingsen argued forcefully for its apostility and authority.

Hemmingsen proceeds to defend the apostleship of James the author by explaining that on the day of Pentecost he was "again by a visible sign authorized and confirmed in his apostleship."³⁶ More pointedly, he argues: "Here it appears what is to be judged of this Epistle, namely, that we must give no less credit to it than to the voice of God."³⁷ The two decades that separated Calvin's commentary from Hemmingsen's were significant ones, as the previous "fluidity of the canon" had solidified even more in Protestant doctrine. Whereas Calvin remained somewhat intransigent to the view that James was not apostolic, Hemmingsen was noticeably opposed to this. This explains his defensive posture toward the view that this letter does not come from "the voice of God."³⁸ Hemmingsen made this statement to affirm

³³ Niels Hemmingsen, *A learned and fruitefull commentarie upon the Epistle of James the Apostle wherein are diligently and profitably entreated all such matters and chiefe commonplaces of religion as are touched in the same epistle* (London, 1577). The language has been standardized.

³⁴ Niels Hemmingsen, *Commentaria in omnes epistolas apostolorum* (Leipzig, 1572).

³⁵ Hemmingsen, *A learned and fruitefull commentarie upon the Epistle of James the Apostle*, 1.

³⁶ Hemmingsen, *A learned and fruitefull commentarie upon the Epistle of James the Apostle*, 1.

³⁷ Hemmingsen, *A learned and fruitefull commentarie upon the Epistle of James the Apostle*, 1.

³⁸ By the second half of the sixteenth century, however, this form of language was common.

the letter's authority against those who were giving "less credit to it."³⁹ It is not possible to identify unmistakably to whom Hemmingsen was reacting, but Luther is the most likely candidate. Having studied in Wittenberg the same time Luther taught there, and being so connected with Luther's faithful colleague and supporter, Philip Melancthon, Hemmingsen was surely familiar with Luther's view of James.

Hemmingsen concludes his *argumentum* with a traditional discussion on the meaning of the term "Catholic Epistles." Of significance in this closing section is his discussion of canon. In the context of distinguishing the letters of Paul from the other New Testament writings, Hemmingsen writes that "whatsoever we read in the Epistles of the Apostles, we ought to embrace it as a canon or rule of the truth."⁴⁰ In other words, he concludes, the Epistle of James (as well as the rest of the Catholic Epistles) remains canonical and authoritative – regardless of doubts in regard to authorship and historical circumstance.

Thomas Manton (1620-1677)

In contrast to several commentaries that Continental Reformed theologians wrote on James, and less occasional ones that Lutherans composed, very few English divines published commentaries on James during the sixteenth century. However, by the time of the mid-seventeenth century, several interpreters had written commentaries on the letter, the most detailed of which was written by the famous London preacher Thomas Manton, rector at St. Paul's, Covent Garden, until his dismissal in 1662 due to the Act of Uniformity. Manton, recipient of the Doctor of Divinity from Wadham College, Oxford, in 1660, wrote a homiletical commentary on James during the English Civil Wars in the 1640s and published it exactly 100 years after Calvin's in 1651.⁴¹

As Manton began writing on James in the mid 1640s, the comments that various writers made within the exegetical tradition were more than relevant. In his prolegomena to James, he engages each of the most influential commentators on the letter throughout the tradition:

³⁹ Hemmingsen, *A learned and fruitefull commentarie upon the Epistle of James the Apostle*, 1.

⁴⁰ Hemmingsen, *A learned and fruitefull commentarie upon the Epistle of James the Apostle*, 2.

⁴¹ The full title of Manton's commentary is *A Practical Commentary, or an Exposition, with Notes, upon the Epistle of James* (London, 1651). There were three printings of the commentary: 1651, 1652, and 1657.

Eusebius, Jerome, Bede, Erasmus, Cajetan, Calvin, Grotius, and especially Luther. Methodologically, Manton stands in direct line with Hemmingsen in terms of style and posture. Overall, Manton's commentary could be characterized as defensive. He responds decisively to the tradition, stretching back from the time of Eusebius and Jerome to, most recently and, in his view, most scandalously, the time of Luther. In fact, Luther's comments about the Letter of James – a century past – are as provocative as the decade he wrote them. Manton goes to great lengths to prove that James is authoritative, that an apostle did write it, and that it is eminently relevant to the times in which he lives.

Manton's defensive posture characterizes in part the way he handles his prolegomena and James 1:1. Manton organizes his introductory discussion about the letter around six questions:

- 1) Whether this epistle be of divine authority?
- 2) Concerning the subordinate author or instrument, James, what James was this?
- 3) What was the time of writing it?
- 4) The persons to whom it was written?
- 5) What is the occasion, matter, and scope of it?
- 6) The reason of that term in the title, *catholic* or *general*.⁴²

The first question, arguably the most important, indicates Manton's defensive posture – questioning whether the letter is of “divine authority.” The remaining questions, of less importance than the first, need not be discussed here, since the first question adequately sets the tone for much of Manton's aggressive exposition as well as his close engagement with the overall tradition on James – particularly with Luther.

“Concerning the divine authority of this epistle,” Manton begins in relation to the first question, “I desire to discuss it with reverence and trembling.”⁴³ He explains that he would have rather omitted this question but, since “to conceal known adversaries is an argument of fear and distrust,” it is a question of extreme importance. He answers this question by first including the standard comments within the exegetical tradition and then by reproofing those (principally Eusebius and Jerome) who had endeavored “to jostle James out of the canon.” Although Eusebius and Jerome made these comments specifically about James (and the other Catholic Epistles), Manton reasons

⁴² Manton, *Works*, 4:9.

⁴³ Manton, *Works*, 4:9.

generally that they infringe upon the authority of the rest of Scripture. Unlike Calvin, however, who responds to these doubts about James by examining the letter internally (which Manton will eventually do), Manton first appeals to the church councils in the patristic and early medieval periods for proof that James is rightly considered canonical.⁴⁴ This is important to note, as it explains how Manton is able to disagree so strongly with Luther and other influential figures: His authority resides in the collective tradition rather than individual figures like Luther or Calvin.

Aside from Eusebius and Jerome, the remainder of Manton's resolution to the issue of authority focuses on Luther: "Of late, I confess, [James] hath found harder measure. Cajetan and Erasmus show little respect to it; Luther plainly rejecteth it; and for the incivility and rudeness of his expression in calling it *stramineam epistolam*, as it cannot be denied, so it is not to be excused."⁴⁵ Manton then cites Luther's Latin preface to James (originally published in German in 1522), which ultimately denies the apostolicity of the letter. To this quotation Manton then adds: "which was the error and failing of this holy and eminent servant of God; and therein he is followed by others of his own profession: Osiander, Camerarius, Bugenhag[en], &c., and Althamerus." Fortunately, Manton concludes, the "blasphemies" of Luther's successors are not perpetuated by the "modern Lutherans, who allow this epistle in the canon."⁴⁶

Manton certainly answers the question of the epistle's divine authority affirmatively. He explains that he will deal with those "reasons which moved Luther to reject this epistle...in their proper places," that is, James 2:14-26.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Manton offers the standard responses to the reasons given for questioning the authority of the epistle as found in Calvin and Hemmingsen. Manton specifically follows the defensive posture of Hemmingsen and those after him, though in a more heightened fashion, when it comes to claiming the

⁴⁴ Manton, *Works*, 4:10.

⁴⁵ Manton, *Works*, 4:10.

⁴⁶ According to Manton, *Works*, 4:10, the "modern Lutherans" are the following: "Hunnius, Montrer, Gerhard, Walther, [and] Brochmand." It remains difficult to determine if Manton read these works directly; in the case at hand, he is citing Grotius. Whether or not he was directly familiar with the others, he was certainly familiar with and favorable to Danish Philippist Jesper Brochmand, who wrote his commentary on James in the early 1640s.

⁴⁷ Manton, *Works*, 4:11.

inspiration of the Scriptures.⁴⁸ By the time he writes his commentary in the 1640s, the fluidity of the canon had solidified to such an extent that those who recognized the disputed history of letters like James – even those as authoritative as Martin Luther – were questioning not just the status of the biblical canon but also God, who inspired the writers of the canon in the first place.

Conclusion

Beginning with John Calvin, it is clear that the Genevan reformer was less interested and less confident about determining the question of authorship. He was equally less concerned about the question of authority, though he clearly – if not altogether quietly – disagreed with Luther. For Calvin, James of Alpheus is most likely the author; but it does not ultimately matter. For Niels Hemmingsen and Thomas Manton, by way of contrast, the issue of authorship became extremely important. They were apologetic. James must be an apostle or the authority or canonicity⁴⁹ of the letter is jeopardized. This illustrates the differences between Calvin the reformer and Hemmingsen and Manton the post-reformers.⁵⁰ The fluidity of the canon functioned during Calvin's era in a way that it did not at the time of Protestant orthodoxy – at which time the canon was fairly complete.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Manton's views here parallel the recently written Westminster Confession of Faith.

⁴⁹ As Muller notes, *PRRD*, 2:375: "Absolute closure of the canon and its integral perfection were issues that came to be of doctrinal importance only when the bounds of the canon and its relation to the authoritative tradition and *magisterium* of the church became a matter of faith – a confessional or creedal issue."

⁵⁰ Hemmingsen and Turnbull parallel their Protestant orthodox contemporary Girolamo Zanchi, whose *The Whole Body of Christian Religion* (London, 1659 [1608]), 2-5, reads thus in relation to canon: "We do not doubt; but those are the writings of the Prophets and Apostles, which the Church of God is therefore wont to call by the name of *Canonicall* books, because knowing assuredly that they were *given by inspiration of God*, she hath alwayes acknowledged for the *canon* and rule." Zanchi then concedes that "in former times there hath been some question concerning" some of the New Testament letters (Hebrews, Catholic Epistles [save 1 John], and Revelation), but he concludes: "...yet afterwards in processe of time they have been acknowledged for Apostolicall as well as the rest."

⁵¹ See Westcott's dated yet important study of the canon through the course of the history of the church, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1896), 485. For the sixteenth century he

In this respect, the two decades that elapsed between the publication of Calvin's commentary in 1551 and Hemmingsen's in 1572 were extremely significant ones. As the fluidity of the New Testament canon solidified, those books that Luther had relegated to a secondary status – in this case, the Epistle of James – became equal participants of the biblical canon. By the time Manton published his commentary on James exactly 100 years after Calvin, he had settled the question of authorship definitively: Not only was James (of Alpheus) one of the twelve apostles but he was also Bishop of Jerusalem (thus James the Just) and cousin to Christ. His letter is therefore apostolic – a clear refutation of the views that Manton perceived Luther to hold. Nevertheless, the combined and combative efforts of interpreters commonly classified within the era of Protestant orthodoxy who attempted to correct Luther, though decisive in regards to the inclusion of the Letter of James as canonical within the subsequent Protestant tradition, did little to remove the stigma of James within the exegetical tradition. Luther's comments about the letter are as enduring today as they were half a millennium ago.

notes the importance of the Tridentine Council, which effectively settled the biblical canon in 1546, and made it “an absolute article of faith” to hold within the Roman Catholic Church. The early Reformed confessions, for instance, the Belgic and Second Helvetic Confessions confirm the closure of the canon (which includes the Letter of James); so, too, does the Westminster Confession of Faith. The parallelism between Protestant and Catholic thought in relation to the canonicity of James is striking.