



John P. Keenan, *The Wisdom of James: Parallels with Mahāyāna Buddhism*

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FOR OVER twenty years, John Keenan, an Episcopal priest and now Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Middlebury College in Vermont, has been working at the task of reinterpreting the Christian tradition in dialogue with Mahāyāna Buddhism. In two previous books, he has attempted to do so with regard to the doctrines of Christology and the Trinity (*The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology*, Orbis, 1989), and in terms of providing a fresh perspective on the New Testament Gospel

of Mark (*The Gospel of Mark: A Mahāyāna Reading*, Orbis, 1995). In this new book under review, Keenan focuses his Mahāyāna Buddhist hermeneutic on the short New Testament letter of James. The result is a brilliant retrieval of one of the earliest strands of apostolic Christianity that illuminates the relevance of both Jewish-Christian and Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions for our contemporary pluralistic world.

Rather than a verse-by-verse analysis, Keenan proceeds through the letter of James as divided into pericopes of various lengths. His book consists of a 30-page introduction and a 140-page commentary, followed by over 70 pages of endnotes (in smaller font) wherein he interacts with the secondary literature on James. Although trained in Buddhist texts rather than that of the New Testament, these critical exchanges reveal that Keenan's long sojourn through the terrain of NT scholarship, beginning with his re-reading of the Gospel of Mark and now continuing in this study, has resulted in his being equally at home in either Buddhist or Christian exegesis. Throughout, Keenan shows his reading of James to be either consistent with or valid extrapolations of the conclusions put forth by the letter's most respected modern commentators — Peter Davids (in the International Greek New Testament series), Martin Dibelius (*Hermeneia*), Luke Timothy Johnson (*Anchor Bible*), Ralph Martin (*Word Biblical Commentary*), Sophie Laws, Todd C. Penner, and Robert W. Wall, among many others — even while he is also not hesitant about voicing his disagreement with these same authorities on points of both minor and major detail.

Keenan is especially insightful in his cautions regarding the speculative character of modern critical scholarship when it comes to identifying the world “behind the text” of James. Not only are the authorities divided, but there is simply insufficient internal textual data to draw any firm conclusions about the letter's *sitz im leben*. The most that can be assumed, Keenan argues in his “Introduction,” is that the original audience of the “twelve tribes of the Dispersion” (Jas. 1:1) were Jewish followers of Jesus who did not think that their following Jesus was in any way inconsistent with their Jewish faith. From this minimalist assumption, however, Keenan proceeds to argue that James is to be read as an extension of the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, and that the core insight of the letter is in its emphasis on nondiscriminative wisdom expressed in social engagement.

It can hardly be doubted that Keenan's reading of James is deeply informed by Mahāyāna Buddhist perspectives, as he himself admits that is his theological agenda. However, it would be a mistake for Christians in general or New Testament scholars in particular to then think it appropriate to dismiss *The Wisdom of James* as having anything substantive to contribute to either Christian discipleship or Jamesian scholarship. Rather, Keenan's approach to each pericope is to comment first on the text itself before concluding each discussion with a section titled “Mahāyāna perspectives.” In this way, there is a strong sense of Keenan's commitment to allowing the letter to speak first on its own terms before pointing to Mahāyāna Buddhist parallels. Of course, the resultant interpretations are much more dialectical than linear. But perhaps this is suggestive more about the capacity of James' practical wisdom to intersect with Mahāyāna perspectives than it is about Keenan's Mahāyāna lens

distorting the message of James. To highlight some of the accomplishments of this book and to (hopefully) invite readers of this review to pick up *The Wisdom of James* for themselves, let me briefly note a handful of parallels presented by Keenan.

First, the contrast throughout the letter between the wavering judgments of a doubting world and the practical wisdom that is a free gift from God clearly parallels the Mahāyāna contrast between the discriminative obfuscations (*vikalpa*) of a conventional world and the compassionate practical wisdom (*prajñā*) that embodies the Buddha's Dharma. On the one side of this parallel, Keenan calls attention to the many forms of the Greek word *krino* — *diakrino*, to distinguish, differentiate, deliberate, dispute (1:6); *diekrithe*, to discriminate (2:4); *krisis*, *krinon*, and *krinei*, to judge (2:12 and 4:11); *krisis*, *kriseos*, and *krina*, judgment (2:13 and 3:1); *adiakritos*, non-judgmental (3:17); *krites*, (a) judge (4:12 and 5:9) — which by and large has negative connotations. Whereas there is an affirmative notion of judgment or discrimination in the broader New Testament canon (for example, the discernment of spirits in 1 Cor. 12:10), a Mahāyāna perspective observes that in James, the practical side of such discursive judgment is inevitably prejudice. Hence *krino* and its cognates call attention to the doubting discriminations shaped and motivated by conventional ways of thought. The result is arbitrary prejudice normed by the selfishness and occluded thinking of the world.

On the other side of this parallel, James insists that prejudicial discrimination according to the conventions of this world is to be abandoned for the freely given wisdom of God (1:17 and 3:15). Such wisdom belongs to those who are already slaves or servants of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1), manifests mercy, peaceableness, and impartiality (3:18), and embodies the faith in compassionate practices. This practical wisdom expresses the true religion on behalf of the poor, widows, and orphans (1:27). Whatever the *sitz im leben* of the epistle, James attacks throughout the “community's preferential option for the rich” (p. 207n38). There is a concern about favoritism that oppresses and marginalizes the poor (2:1–11, 5:1–6), the social structures that produce the covetousness that lead to wars and murders (4:1–3), and the slandering of others (4:11). So if “true faith cannot coexist with human prejudice, that is, social discrimination” (p. 64), if to discriminate is “to waver, alternate, and here by extension to choose certain people over others” (p. 69), and if demonic wisdom is the practice of selfish ambition, of partiality (3:14–16), and of social oppression, then the wisdom of God cannot be according to the wisdom of this world. Rather, divinely endowed wisdom leads to solidarity with the poor and to overturning the social structures of oppressive violence, even as authentic faith in God is lived out as efficacious or engaged prayer (5:16). The Mahāyāna parallel on this “positive” side of the ledger is the subordination of discursive formulation (what James calls discrimination) to the practice of compassionate wisdom.

This Mahāyāna reading of James unsurprisingly culminates at one place (among others) in the discourse on teaching and the untamed tongue in the middle of the epistle (3:1–12). From the Mahāyāna perspective, the problem of the tongue is neither merely its capacity for abuse nor only the possibility of false teachings, even if

both are matters of concern. Rather, the problem more simply put is that verbal constructs emanate from the tongue. Insofar as discursive and prejudicial discrimination is dependent on words, to that same extent James' concern can be understood with teaching itself as "an act of language-formed delusion" (p. 217n4). Keenan thus suggests the virtue of one of the main heroes in the epistle, Job, is the exemplary silence that characterizes his faith (pp. 159–63; cp. 5:11–12 and Job 42:1–6). This understanding of Job dovetails not only with the broader observation, perennially noted by James interpreters, that the letter is devoid of doctrinal claims, but also with the fact that "James never identifies any conceptual content for the wisdom God gives" (p. 40). All of this is in line with the Mahāyāna tendency to subordinate conventionally articulated doctrinal teaching, because of its emptiness, to practical wisdom. But the Mahāyāna teachers themselves recognized emptiness is neither an end in itself nor to be grasped as such, since this would be to reify an abstraction. Hence recognition of the emptiness of conventional language leads the sage beyond speech to the embodiment of practical wisdom that is capable of transforming the world. Similarly, with James, "It is not that one should not think, but that one should not think within the framework of friendship with the world [cp. 2:23, 3:13–18, 4:4], within the measure of the world, where distinctions between rich and poor are very important, where the classes of society are almost metaphysical entities" (p. 138).

On Keenan's reading, then, the letter of James emphasizes "an operative wisdom that discerns needs and responds compassionately" (p. 119). In this framework, the goal of teaching is not discriminatory knowledge (of the world's) but rather an understanding that leads to merciful compassion. But could we not also see the Mahāyāna tradition in light of James such that, if James is divinely revelatory, then the letter itself judges human thoughts and actions? If God is the ultimate judge, as Keenan rightly refuses to interpret away, then the insistence that James writes in the wisdom tradition of Torah interpretation and practice suggests it should be read as a prophetic tract through which divine imperatives and judgment appear with illocutionary force. In this case, a more dialectical and dialogical relationship between the New Testament and Mahāyāna Buddhism would see mutual illumination and transformation: the text of James is opened up through the Mahāyāna hermeneutic on the one hand, even as Mahāyāna discourse is itself called to accountability before the ultimate law and judgment of God on the other.

This capacity of the text to "kick back" and perhaps resist being fit too comfortably onto a Mahāyāna grid may be most evident in Keenan's handling of the apocalyptic and eschatological elements in James. Keenan rightly emphasizes that the call to conversion in the letter includes humble submission to God on the one hand (e.g., 4:6–10) and toward merciful and compassionate practice toward the marginalized on the other. This assumes the final judgment of God understood as overturning all worldly measures and conventions. The result for Keenan, however, is that James' eschatology replaces an apocalyptic version with one focused only on moral and social transformation. In saying then that the eschaton represents "the full and complete reversal of discrimination and false judgment" (p. 228), Keenan commits him-

self to a realized (this-worldly) rather than future eschatology. But even if Keenan is right to point out there will be more continuity and discontinuity between the “now” and the “not yet” (based on the metaphor of the farmer waiting patiently for the land to yield its crop as a parallel to the accomplishments of the parousia — see 5:7–9), he is also correct to admit that such an eschatological reduction is derived more from his Mahāyāna commitments since it is unsupported by the early Christian milieu that provides the backdrop for James.

Keenan’s *The Wisdom of James* will be of interest to those involved in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. But it should also be read by Christian biblical scholars and theologians since the forces of globalization today dictate that our sacred texts are increasingly being read in environments with established philosophical lineages that are a far cry from the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions that have shaped biblical reading for millennia. May this professor emeritus be blessed with sufficient longevity to produce further Mahāyāna readings of Christian Testament texts.

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