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James M. Robinson
General Editor
THE APOCRYPHON OF JAMES (1,2)

Introduced and translated by
FRANCIS E. WILLIAMS

The Apocryphon of James is a pseudonymous work translated from Greek to Coptic, which professes to be a letter written by James, the Lord's brother; the alleged recipient's name is illegible but might have been that of the early Christian heterodox teacher, Cerinthus. The letter in turn introduces a secret writing, or "apocryphon" — hence our title for the entire tractate. This apocryphon is meant for an elect few — even among the disciples, for James and Peter only — but salvation is promised to those who receive its message.

"James"' letter states that the apocryphon is written in the Hebrew alphabet, and mentions another even more secret apocryphon, which James has already sent. These details are presumably inserted for the sake of atmosphere.

The apocryphon, which comprises the bulk of our tractate, makes Jesus appear to the disciples 550 days after the resurrection, take Peter and James aside to "fill" them, and give them, in a series of speeches, his final and definitive teaching, heretofore delivered only "in parables." He then ascends to the Father's right hand, with James and Peter unsuccessfully attempting to follow. This closes the apocryphon; the letter now resumes, and states that the revelation just given was meant, not for the disciples of Jesus, but for the "children" who would be "born" later. While the disciples believed the revelation, they were angry over these later children, and James therefore dispatched them to other places. This, presumably, is meant to explain why our tractate formed no part of the apostolic preaching (or the canonical scripture?).

Jesus’ speeches in the apocryphon are partly the author's composition, but incorporate older material, which seems to be the product of complex oral and perhaps written transmission; some of it can be compared with the material underlying the canonical gospels. The speeches show Jesus announcing that he has descended to save God's "beloved" sons, and inviting them to follow him back to the place from which he (and they?) came. He assures them of salvation in the strongest terms, while at the same time urging them to earnestness and zeal, and warning them that they can be lost. The first and longest of the speeches, however, is a two-page exhortation to martyrdom. Its distinctive style, manner, and subject matter suggest that it may be a later interpolation.

It is clear that the persons for whom this tractate was written made a distinction between themselves and the larger Christian church. Probably they rejected the doctrine of the atonement; they certainly ignored the second coming of Christ and the general resurrection, and hoped to ascend, in soul or spirit, to the kingdom of heaven, which they meanwhile felt to be within themselves. This outlook, together with the large amount of typically gnostic terminology in the tractate, has led most investigators to conclude that the work is Christian Gnostic, even though it lacks the Valentinian, and other well-known gnostic theol-
ogies. The reporting of a special postresurrection appearance of Jesus, and the appeal to James as a source of secret and superior tradition, are means Gnostics often used to legitimate their message.

The exhortation to martyrdom, James’ letter, and the description of Jesus’ appearance to the disciples, may be secondary; these and other questions relating to the document’s literary history have been investigated and deserve further investigation. It has been urged that the tractate must have been written before 150 C.E., while it was still possible to speak of “remembering” orally delivered sayings of Jesus and writing them down; this language, it is argued, would not have been used after the fixing of the Gospel canon. The apocryphon’s many resemblances to the Fourth Gospel’s “farewell discourses” might also help to establish its date. To use these as a criterion, however, one must decide whether they are allusions to the actual text of the Fourth Gospel, or independent discussions of the same questions. In any case the tractate cannot be later than 314 C.E., when the persecution of the church, and with it the risk of martyrdom, came to an end.

THE APOCRYPHON OF JAMES

1 1, 1-16, 30


Since you asked [ that I send] you a secret book [ which was revealed to me] and Peter by the Lord, [ I could not turn you away] or gainsay (?) you; [ but I have written] it in [ the Hebrew alphabet and] sent it to you, and you [ alone. But since you are] a minister of the salvation [ of the saints, endeavor earnestly] and take care not to rehearse [ this text to many] — this [ that the Savior did not wish] to tell to all of us, his 25 twelve disciples. [ But blessed will they be] who will be saved through [ the faith of this discourse.

I [ also sent you, 30 ten months ago, another secret] book which the Savior [ had revealed to me. Under the circumstances, however, I regard that one] as revealed 35 to me, James; but this one 2 [ untranslatable fragments] the twelve disciples [ were] all sitting together 10 and recalling [ what the Savior had said] to each one of them, whether [ in secret or openly, and [ putting it] 15 in books — [ But I] was writing that which was in [ my book] — [ lo, the Savior appeared, ] after] departing from [ us while we] gazed [ after him. And five hundred] 20 and fifty days since he had risen [ from the dead, we said] to him, "Have you departed and removed yourself from us?" [ ...]
But Jesus said, "No, but I shall go to the place from whence I came. If you wish to come with me, come!"

They all answered and said, "If you bid us, we come."

He said, "Verily I say unto you, no one will ever enter the kingdom of heaven at my bidding, but (only) because you yourselves are full. Leave James and Peter to me that I may fill them." And having called these two, he drew them aside and bade the rest occupy themselves with that which they were about.

The Savior said, "You have received mercy. Do you not, then, desire to be filled? And your heart is drunken; do you not, then, desire to be sober? Therefore, be ashamed! Henceforth, waking or sleeping, remember that you have seen the Son of Man, and spoken with him in person, and listened to him in person. Woe to those who have seen the Son [of] Man; blessed will they be who have not seen the man, and they who have not consorted with him, and they who have not spoken with him, and they who have not listened to anything from him; yours is life! Know, then, that he healed you when you were ill that you might reign. Woe to those who have found relief from their illness, for they will relapse into illness. Blessed are they who have not been ill, and have known relief before falling ill; yours is the kingdom of God. Therefore, I say to you, 'Become full and leave no space within you empty, for he who is coming can mock you.'"

Then Peter replied, "Lo, three times you have told us, 'Become full'; but we are full."

The Savior answered and said, "For this cause I have said to you, 'Become full,' that [you] may not be in want. They who are in want, however, will not be saved. For it is good to be full, and bad to be in want. Hence, just as it is good that you (sg.) be in want and conversely, bad that you be full, so he who is full is in want, and he who is in want does not become full as he who is in want becomes full, and he who has been filled, in turn, attains due perfection. Therefore, you must be in want while it is possible to fill you (pl.), and be full while it is possible for you to be in want, so that you may be able to fill yourselves the more. Hence become full of the Spirit, but be in want of reason, for reason (belongs to) the soul; in turn it is (of the nature of) soul."

But I answered and said to him, "Lord, we can obey you if you wish, for we have forsaken our fathers and our mothers and our villages and followed you. Grant us, therefore, not to be tempted by the devil, the evil one."
The Lord answered and said, "What is your merit if you do the will of the Father and it is not given to you from him as a gift while you are tempted by Satan? But if you (pl.) are oppressed by Satan and persecuted and you do his (i.e. the Father's) will, I [say] that he will love you, and make you equal with me, and reckon [you] to have become beloved through his providence by your own choice. So will you not cease loving the flesh and being afraid of sufferings? Or do you not know that you have yet to be abused and to be accused unjustly; and have yet to be shut up in prison, and condemned unlawfully, and crucified without reason, and buried shamefully, as (was) I myself, by the evil one? Do you dare to spare the flesh, you for whom the Spirit is an encircling wall? If you consider how long the world existed before you, and how long it will exist after you, you will find that your life is one single day and your sufferings one single hour. For the good will not enter into the world. Scorn death, therefore, and take thought for life! Remember my cross and my death, and you will live!"

But I answered and said to him, "Lord, I do not mention to us the cross and death, for they are far from you."

The Lord answered and said, "Verily I say unto you, none will be saved unless they believe in my cross. But those who have believed in my cross, theirs is the kingdom of God. Therefore, become seekers for death, like the dead who seek for life; for that which they seek is revealed to them. And what is there to trouble them? As for you, when you examine death, it will teach you election. Verily I say unto you, none of those who fear death will be saved; for the kingdom belongs to those who put themselves to death. Become better than I; make yourselves like the son of the Holy Spirit!"

Then I asked him, "Lord, how shall we be able to prophesy to those who request us to prophesy to them? For there are many who ask us, and look to us to hear an oracle from us."

The Lord answered and said, "Do you not know that the head of prophecy was cut off with John?"

But I said, "Lord, can it be possible to remove the head of prophecy?"

The Lord said to me, "When you (pl.) come to know what 'head' means, and that prophecy issues from the head, (then) understand the meaning of 'Its head was removed.' At first I spoke to you (pl.) in parables and you did not understand; now I speak to you openly, and you (still) do not perceive. Yet it was you who served me as a
parable in 1 parables, and as that which is open 10 in the (words) that are open.

"Hasten 1 to be saved without being urged! 1 Instead, be 1 eager of your own accord and, 1 if possible, arrive even before me; 15 for thus 1 the Father will love you. 1

"Come to hate 1 hypocrisy and the evil 1 thought; for it is the thought 20 that gives birth to hypocrisy; 1 but hypocrisy is far from 1 truth.

"Do not allow 1 the kingdom of heaven to wither; 1 for it is like a palm shoot 25 whose fruit has dropped down 1 around it. They (i.e., the fallen fruit) put forth 1 leaves, and after they had sprouted, 1 they caused their womb to dry up. 1 So it is also with the fruit which 30 had grown from this single root; 1 when it had been picked (?), 1 fruit was borne by many (?). 1 It (the root) was certainly good, (and) if 1 it were possible for you to produce the 35 new plants now, (you) (sg.) would find it.

"Since 1 I have already been glorified in this fashion, 1 why do you (pl.) hold me back 1 in my eagerness to go? 8 For after the [labor], you have 1 compelled me to stay with 1 you another eighteen days for 1 the sake of the parables. It was enough 5 for some (to listen) to the 1 teaching and understand ‘The Shepherds’ and 1 ‘The Seed’ and ‘The Building’ and ‘The Lamps of 1 the Virgins’ and ‘The Wage of 1 Workmen’ and ‘The Didrachmæ’ and ‘The 10 Woman.’

"Become earnest about 1 the word! For as to the word, 1 its first part is faith; 1 the second, love; the 1 third, works; 15 for from these comes life. 1 For the word is like a 1 grain of wheat; when someone 1 had sown it, he had faith in it; and 1 when it had sprouted, he loved it because he had seen 20 many grains in place of one. And 1 when he had worked, he was saved because he had 1 prepared it for food, (and) again he 1 left (some) to sow. So also 1 can you yourselves receive 25 the kingdom of heaven; 1 unless you receive this through knowledge, 1 you will not be able to find it.

"Therefore, 1 I say to you, 1 be sober; do not be deceived! 30 And many times have I said to you all together, 1 and also to you alone, 1 James, have I said, 1 ‘Be saved!’ And I have commanded 1 you (sg.) to follow me, 35 and I have taught you 1 what to say before the archons. 1 Observe that I have descended 1 and have spoken and undergone tribulation 1 and carried off my crown 9 after saving you (pl.). For 1 I came down to dwell with 1 you (pl.) so that you (pl.) in turn 1 might dwell with me. And, 5 finding your houses 1 unceiled, I have made my abode 1 in the houses that could receive me 1 at the time of my descent.

"Therefore, trust 10 in me, my brethren; understand 1 what the great
light is. The Father has no need of me, — for a father does not need a son, but it is the son who needs the father — though I go to him. For the Father of the Son has no need of you.

"Hearken to the word; understand knowledge; love life, and no one will persecute you, nor will anyone oppress you, other than you yourselves.

"O you wretches; O you unfortunates; O you pretenders to the truth; O you falsifiers of knowledge; O you sinners against the Spirit: can you still bear listen, when it behooved you to speak from the first? Can you still bear to sleep, when it behooved you to be awake from the first, so that the kingdom of heaven might receive you? Verily I say unto you, it is easier for a pure one to fall into defilement, and for a man of light to fall into darkness, than for you to reign or not reign.

"I have remembered your tears and your mourning and your anguish, (while you say) 'They are far behind us.' But now, you who are outside of the Father's inheritance, weep where it is necessary and mourn and preach what is good, as the Son is ascending as he should. Verily I say unto you, had I been sent to those who listen to me, and had I spoken with them, I would never have come down to earth. So, then, be ashamed for these things.

"Behold, I shall depart from you and go away, and do not wish to remain with you any longer, just as you yourselves have not wished it. Now, therefore, follow me quickly. This is why I say unto you, 'for your sakes I came down.' You are the beloved; you are they who will be the cause of life in many. Invoke the Father, implore God often, and he will give to you. Blessed is he who has seen you with Him when He was proclaimed among the angels, and glorified among the saints; yours (pl.) is life. Rejoice and be glad as sons of God. Keep his will that you may be saved; accept reproof from me and save yourselves. I intercede on your behalf with the Father, and he will forgive you much."

And when we had heard these words, we became glad, for we had been grieved at the words we have mentioned before. But when he saw us rejoicing, he said, "Woe to you (pl.) who lack an advocate! Woe to you, who stand in need of grace! Blessed will they be who have spoken out and obtained grace for themselves. Liken yourselves to foreigners, of what sort are they in the eyes of your city? Why are you disturbed when you cast yourselves away of your own accord and separate yourselves from your city? Why do you abandon
your dwelling place of your own accord, making it ready for those who want to dwell in it? O you outcasts and fugitives, woe to you, for you will be caught! Or do you perhaps think that the Father is a lover of mankind, or that he is won over without prayers, or that he grants remission to one on another’s behalf, or that he bears with one who asks? — For he knows the desire and also what it is that the flesh needs! (Or do you think) that it is not this (flesh) that desires the soul? For without the soul the body does not sin, just as the soul is not saved without [the] spirit. But if the soul is saved (when it is) without evil, and the spirit is also saved, then the body becomes free from sin. For it is the spirit that raises the soul, but the body that kills it; that is, it is (the soul) which kills itself. Verily I say unto you, he will not forgive the soul the sin by any means, nor the flesh the guilt; for none of those who have worn the flesh will be saved. For do you think that many have found the kingdom of heaven? Blessed is he who has seen himself as a fourth one in heaven!

When we heard these words, we were distressed. But when he saw that we were distressed, he said, “For this cause I tell you this, that you may know yourselves. For the kingdom of heaven is like an ear of grain after it had sprouted in a field. And when it had ripened, it scattered its fruit and again filled the field with ears for another year. You also, hasten to reap an ear of life for yourselves that you may be filled with the kingdom!

“And as long as I am with you, give heed to me and obey me; but when I depart from you, remember me. And remember me because when I was with you, you did not know me. Blessed will they be who have known me; woe to those who have heard and have not believed! Blessed will they be who have not seen, [yet have believed]!

“And once more I [prevail upon] you, for I am revealed to you (pl.) building a house which is of great value to you when you find shelter beneath it, just as it will be able to stand by your neighbors’ house when it threatens to fall. Verily I say unto you, woe to those for whose sakes I was sent down to this place; blessed will they be who ascend to the Father! Once more I reprove you, you who are; become like those who are not, that you may be with those who are not.

“Do not make the kingdom of heaven a desert within you. Do not be proud because of the light that illumines, but be to yourselves!
as I myself am to you. For your sakes I have placed myself under the curse, that you may be saved."

But Peter replied to these words and said, "Sometimes you urge us on to the kingdom of heaven, and then again you turn us back, Lord; sometimes you persuade and draw us to faith and promise us life, and then again you cast us forth from the kingdom of heaven."

But the Lord answered and said to us, "I have given you (pl.) faith many times; moreover, I have revealed myself to you (sg.), 14 James, and you (pl.) have not known me. Now again I see you (pl.) rejoicing many times; and when you are elated at the promise of life, are you yet sad, and do you grieve, when you are instructed in the kingdom? But you, through faith [and] knowledge, have received life. Therefore, disdain the rejection when you hear it, but when you hear the promise, rejoice the more. Verily I say unto you, 15 he who will receive life and believe in the kingdom will never leave it, not even if the Father wishes to banish him.

"These are the things that I shall tell you so far; now, however, I shall ascend to the place from whence I came. But you, when I was eager to go, have cast me out, and instead of accompanying me, you have pursued me. But pay heed to the glory that awaits me, and, having opened your heart, listen to the hymns that await me up in the heavens; for today I must take (my place at) the right hand of the Father. But I have said (my) last word to you, and I shall depart from you, for a chariot of spirit has borne me aloft, and from this moment I shall strip myself that I may clothe myself. But give heed; blessed are they who have proclaimed the Son before his descent that, when I have come, I might ascend (again). Thrice blessed are they who were proclaimed by the Son before they came to be, that you might have a portion among them."

Having said these words, he departed. But we bent (our) knee(s), and Peter, and gave thanks and sent our heart(s) upwards to heaven. We heard with our ears, and saw with our eyes, the noise of wars and a trumpet blare and a great turmoil.

And when we had passed beyond that place, we sent our mind(s) farther upwards and saw with our eyes and heard with our ears hymns and angelic benedictions and angelic rejoicing. And heavenly majesties were singing praise, and we too rejoiced.

After this again, we wished to send our spirit upward to the Majesty, and after ascending we were not permitted to see or hear anything, for the other disciples called us and asked us, "What did
you (pl.) I hear from the I Master? And what has I he said to you? And where I did he go?"

But we answered 35 them, "He has ascended and I has given us a pledge and I promised life to us all and I revealed to us children (?) I who are to come after us, after bidding 16 [us] love them, as we would be I [saved] for their sakes."

And I when they heard (this), they indeed believed I the revelation, but were displeased 5 about those to be born. And so, not wishing I to give them offense, I I sent each one to another I place. But I myself went I up to Jerusalem, praying that I 10 might obtain a portion among the beloved, I who will be made manifest.

And I pray that I the beginning may come from you, I for thus I shall be capable of 15 salvation, since they will be I enlightened through me, by my faith — I and through another (faith) that is I better than mine, for I would that I mine be the lesser. 20 Endeavor earnestly, then, to make I yourself like them and I pray that you may obtain a portion I with them. For because of what I I have said, the Savior did 25 not make the revelation to us I for their sakes. We do, indeed, proclaim I a portion with those I for whom the proclamation was made, I those whom the Lord has made his 30 sons.