

## Hebrews and the General Epistles

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Hebrews and the General Epistles (we here refer to James, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude)<sup>1</sup> share some common themes and assumptions as they address the problem of sin. All five texts are heavy on exhortation. Their authors direct their epistles to insiders—those who already belong to the community of believers in Jesus.<sup>2</sup> As such, much of the exhortation of these letters focuses on the need to remain firm in one's commitment to this belief and to the community of the faithful. One of the central characterizations of sin in these texts is, therefore, turning away from Jesus and the believing community, and/or returning to a past state and past behaviors.

Each of these epistles also seeks to reinforce a reorientation of disordered desires. Sin arises when one's primary orientation or inclination is towards the present, visible world. This entails accepting the logic and values of the evil age. Humanity in general is inclined to desire the corruptible things of this world. These texts argue that a proper orientation for life looks instead towards unending life in unhindered fellowship with God in the future age. Thus entering into the coming, eternal realm is the goal of such an orientation. This desire for God and for obtaining the promises he has made stands at the heart of faith. Life that is rightly ordered in the here and now—a faithful life—is life lived in line with the eschatological hope of this future inheritance made possible by Jesus' salvific work.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the Johannine epistles see the essay in this volume by Gary M. Burge.

<sup>2</sup> Dale Allison has recently challenged the conclusion that James is directed to communities of believers arguing instead that the epistle intends to foster good relations between Christ-believing Jews and non-Christ-believing Jews in synagogue contexts (Allison, Jr., D.C., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of James* (ICC; London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 33–50 (cf. his earlier article 'The Fiction of James and Its *Sitz im Leben*,' *RB* 108 (2001) 529–70). Yet, most interpreters agree that the connection of Jesus' name in James 1:1 with the title 'Lord' creates a presumption that the text is intended for believers (cf. James 2:1 (Allison argues that the reference to Jesus here is a textual emendation)).

The crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus are, however, more than just the means for salvation. They also reveal a divine/heavenly logic wherein death does not determine or delimit what is real and meaningful. The blessing and glory of restored fellowship with God stands on the other side of suffering. Thus death cannot ultimately prevent God from making good on his promises. Faithfulness to God, even when this results in suffering and death, will find its reward in the future. To continue living in sin or to return to the sin(s) one had previously abandoned upon believing in Christ is to question the character and power of God. Those who live like this risk forfeiture of the inheritance God has promised for his children. The ethical logic of these texts therefore attests, to one degree or another, the influence of apocalyptic sensibilities on their understanding of Christian identity.

In general, these texts also agree on the importance of stability and maturity. As just noted, sin is linked with a lack of confidence in God and in one's own convictions about him. Convictions that shift frequently—beliefs and practices easily adopted or abandoned, are signs of immaturity that correlate closely with an inclination that produces sin. Suffering is viewed in these documents as a proving ground whereon one's mettle is tested. To endure suffering is to grow in maturity, to become more stable and less susceptible to disordered desires. To turn from God in the midst of suffering is to sin because this again elevates the present over the future.

In the discussion that follows we explore each of these epistles noting the ways they characterize sin. It should be noted at the outset that these texts are not systematically reflecting on sin so much as responding to and warning about sin. Hebrews and James seem to say more about the underlying factors that produce sin. On the whole, however, our study must often rely more on implications deduced from the positive exhortations found in these documents than on

their explicit accounts of the logic of sin. We begin with Hebrews, which in many and various ways stands apart from the other letters examined here.

## Hebrews

Hebrews is an ancient sermon whose original preacher wrote out the text and sent it as an epistle (cf. 13:22–25).<sup>3</sup> Unlike the General Epistles (excepting perhaps Jude), the epistolary conclusion of Hebrews and certain details throughout the text (e.g. 10:33–34; 12:4) indicate that the writer and the audience were personally acquainted. This suggests that Hebrews was, like Paul's letters, originally written to a particular congregation facing particular struggles. When, therefore, the author speaks about sin, something he does frequently throughout the homily,<sup>4</sup> he almost certainly intends to redress a specific problems in the congregation of which he and they are aware. The writer's shared knowledge with the text's original recipients likely explains why he says so little about the precise nature of the problems he seeks to correct.

Because the author relays little specific information about himself or his audience, little can be discerned with certainty about his identity, the make up and locale of the original audience, or the precise date of the composition.<sup>5</sup> Interpreters are left to puzzle out the most plausible background for the sermon from the limited evidence that lies within the text.

Nevertheless, the general contours of the author's concept of sin emerge clearly in his brief

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<sup>3</sup> For a succinct summary of the arguments and evidence for the sermonic qualities of Hebrews see esp. Cockerill, G.L., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 11–16.

<sup>4</sup> 'Sin' language (i.e., words built on the *hamart-* root) occurs 29 times in 27 verses in Hebrews (see 1:3; 2:17; 3:13, 17; 4:15; 5:1, 3; 7:26, 27; 8:12; 9:26, 28 (2x); 10:2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 12, 17, 18, 26 (2x); 11:25; 12:1, 3, 4; 13:11 (note that 10:6, 8, 18, and 13:11 refer not to sin committed but to the so-called 'sin offering' often rendered in LXX as *peri (tēs) hamartias*)). A number of other related words, phrases, and concepts are also used (e.g., *parabasis*, transgression (2:2; 9:15); *parakoē*, disobedience (2:2); *parapikrasmos*, rebellion (3:8, 15; see the cognate verb *parapikrainō* in 3:16); *sklēronein tēn kardian*, to harden the heart (3:8, 15; 4:7; cf. 3:10, 12, 13; 10:22); *apeitheia*, disobedience (4:6, 11; see the cognate verb *apeitheō* in 3:18; 11:31); *nekrōn ergōn*, dead works (6:1; 9:14); *adikia*, unrighteousness (8:12); *agnoēma*, transgression committed out of ignorance (9:7)).

<sup>5</sup> See the careful discussion of these matters in Attridge, H.W., *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 1–13.

‘word of exhortation’ (cf. 13:22), even if the specific circumstances and problems facing the first readers are now hard to explain.

The writer begins his homily by emphasizing the ongoing reality of God’s speech. God spoke in the past by way of prophets, but now he speaks to his people by way of his Son (1:1–2). The author continues this emphasis on God’s speech throughout the sermon by identifying God as the speaker of a variety of statements in scripture (see, e.g., 1:5–13; 3:7–18; 5:5–6; 8:8–13; 10:30; 13:5). At times God’s voice in scripture directly exhorts the audience (esp. 3:7–15; 12:5–6). The congregation is even now being warned by God from heaven, presumably, as he says in 1:2, through the voice of the Son (12:25; cf. 3:1).

The author, in keeping with his insider focus, stresses that the congregation had responded appropriately to God’s voice in the past. Specifically, they had previously accepted the message they heard about Jesus from his earliest disciples (2:1–4). They had even been subject to and endured past persecution as a result of their commitment to Jesus (10:32–34; cf. 6:10). Because they previously believed the report about Jesus, the author identifies the central root of their current problem as *apistia*—unbelief or, more literally, lack of faith/faithlessness (*a-faith*). Among the primary manifestations of such faithlessness are: 1) failing to maintain one’s commitment to the shared confession<sup>6</sup> (e.g., 4:14; 10:23; cf. 2:1; 3:14); 2) departing from the

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<sup>6</sup> The author refers to a particular confession three times in the homily (3:1; 4:14; 10:23). Two of these references, 4:14 and 10:23, occur in the context of exhortations to hold to the confession. He also speaks in 13:15 of confessing ‘his name,’ which most likely means the name of Jesus. While the writer never details the full content of this confession, three factors imply that it included some affirmation of Jesus’ identity as high priest: 1) the author calls Jesus ‘the high priest of our confession’ in 3:1, 2) the material that stands between the exhortations of 4:14 and 10:23 not to surrender the confession (i.e., 5:1–10:20) consists largely of an extended discussion of Jesus’ high-priestly status and service, and 3) the argument of Heb 7 offers a legitimation of Jesus’ high-priestly status *in spite of his Judahite lineage* (esp. 7:13–14). The repetition of the exhortation to hold to the confession therefore suggests that some were doubting or repudiating their earlier belief that Jesus was a high priest. The fact that Jesus did not descend from the tribe of Levi might well be at the heart of such doubt and/or rejection. For a more lengthy discussion of this position see Moffitt, D.M., ‘Jesus the High Priest and the Mosaic Law: Reassessing the Appeal to the Heavenly Realm in the letter “To the Hebrews”,’ in *Problems in Translating Texts about Jesus: Proceedings from the International Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, 2008* (eds Caspi, M. and Greene, J.T.; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2011) 195–232.

community of the faithful (esp. 10:25; cf. 6:4–6); and, 3) spurning Jesus, the blood of the covenant he mediates, and the Spirit (10:29). The common thread running through these descriptions is that of actions that disobey God’s call to come into his presence and orient one instead away from God and his people. Thus, sin in Hebrews is primarily conceptualized as the refusal to obey God’s voice that follows from lack of faith in God’s ability to make good on his promises.

The author appeals to the failure of Israel in the wilderness, particularly as this is mediated through Ps 95, as especially illustrative of sin. When God commanded the people to enter their inheritance, associated in Hebrews with God’s protological rest (4:4–7), they listened instead to other voices and refused to obey God’s voice (cf. Num 13:27–14:10). In a way analogous to that episode, Hebrews locates the congregation in the wilderness poised to enter the ultimate, promised inheritance.<sup>7</sup> In the past the people in the wilderness sinned because, although they heard the word of God (3:16; 4:2), they did not have faith/they were *apistia* (3:19). Rather than moving towards God and the promised inheritance being offered to them (3:12; 4:11), Israel at that time disobeyed. Because of this they were not allowed to enter the land. The negative example of Israel implies that the audience must not turn back from the divine summons that they now hear in Christ. If they do, they too might lose the opportunity to enter the promised rest (cf. 6:4–6). Such a refusal to obey God’s call is directly contrary to God’s will not only because it rejects the blessing God wants to give his children, but also because it calls into question God’s ability to do what he has promised to do.

While this lack of faith primarily expresses itself in sins that orient one away from God and the promises he offers his children, one might wonder: what motivates such faithlessness and

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<sup>7</sup> For an excellent exploration of this point see Thiessen, M., ‘Hebrews and the end of Exodus,’ *NovT* 49 (2007) 353–69.

sin? As is shown below, James identifies passion or desire that inclines toward evil as the root cause of sin (James 1:14–15; cf. 1 Pet 2:11; 2 Pet 1:4; Jude 16). Hebrews, however, nowhere explicitly answers this question. The author does, though, assume that something is fundamentally wrong with the present human condition. Apart from Christ, humans are both enslaved to the fear of death and subject to a guilty and impure conscience. These two interrelated forces appear to be the main drivers of *apistia* and so also of sin. As such, humanity is in need of salvation by having these two problems solved. Humans, that is, need both to be freed from their slavery and to be purified if they are to obey God's voice and do his will by moving towards him rather than away from him.

On the one hand, then, salvation is necessitated by humanity's peculiar subjection to the power of death and the one who wields this power—the devil (2:14). Because of this situation, humanity lives in a state of perpetual enslavement to the fear of death (2:15). The author never plainly affirms Paul's claim that death came into the world through Adam's sin (Rom 5:12–19), nor does he explicitly refer to Adam anywhere in the homily. Yet his argument that the heavenly Son of God is the particular human being, Jesus, who, in accordance with Ps 8, has now been elevated above everything else in creation, including the angels, suggests that he has Adamic traditions in mind (see Heb 2:5–18).<sup>8</sup> The idea of Adam's fall is also likely to be assumed by the author as the explanation for why humanity finds itself subjected to the devil and enslaved to the fear of the power of death.

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<sup>8</sup> Several have noticed possible allusions to Adam in Heb 2 (e.g. Bruce, F.F., *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed. (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 72–4; Héring, J., *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (CNT 12; Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1954) 34; Gäbel, G., *Die Kult Theologie des Hebräerbriefes: Eine exegetische-religionsgeschichtliche Studie* (WUNT 2/212; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 142–4; Marcus, J., 'Son of Man as Son of Adam, Part 1,' *RB* 110 (2003) 38–61, esp. 52–5. For my own defense of the importance of Adam in Heb 2 see Moffitt, D.M., *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NovTSup 141; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 130–44.

In keeping with Paul and other New Testament voices, the author believes that Jesus' death solves this problem by defeating the devil and freeing those enslaved by fear of the power of death (2:9, 14–15; 9:15). It should be noted that the significance of Jesus' resurrection in Hebrews has often gone unnoticed in modern scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Yet both 1) the logic of Jesus' elevation as a human being above the angels in the heavenly realms; and, 2) the emphasis that Hebrews places on Jesus' high-priestly ministry of offering and interceding for his siblings in the heavenly tabernacle (7:23–26; 8:1–6; 9:24–26; cf. 2:17–18) suggest that Jesus' resurrection from the dead is essential to the author's claim that Jesus defeated death and the devil. Nevertheless, Heb 2:9 and 2:14–15 especially identify Jesus' death as a key element within the larger narrative of the Christ event for how he accomplished the redemption of God's people from slavery.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, the author also believes that humanity suffers from the interrelated problems of guilt and impurity, especially at the level of the conscience. The Levitical sacrificial system provided means for dealing with problems of sin, guilt, and impurity. Specifically, the manipulation and presentation of blood, which is life (e.g., Lev 17:11, 14; cf. Gen 9:4; Deut 12:23), was essential for obtaining purification and forgiveness for the offerer (e.g., Lev 4:20, 26; 12:8; 14:19–20; 16:15–16). Because God punishes sin and refuses to dwell in earthly spaces tainted by impurity or allow impurity to come into his presence, purity and forgiveness were necessary to maintain the covenant relationship. Obtaining forgiveness and purification, which was among the central goals of sacrifice, helped ensure that God's presence would remain

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<sup>9</sup> See Moffitt, *Atonement*, esp. 1–43.

<sup>10</sup> The author famously emphasizes Jesus' Yom Kippur sacrifice and high-priestly ministry throughout his sermon more than any other sacrificial ritual or role. His connections in Heb 2:14–15 and 9:15–18 between Jesus' death, redemption, and covenant inauguration suggest, however, that he has not ignored the importance of the historical and conceptual linkage between Jesus' death and Passover. The only explicit reference to Passover in Hebrews occurs in 11:28 where the author notes that the blood of the Passover lamb protected Israel from the 'destroyer of the firstborn' (*ho olothreuōn ta prōtotaka*). Nevertheless, the connection of Jesus' death with freedom from the devil's enslaving power and with the inauguration of the new covenant recalls the feast that celebrates God's redemption of his people from their slavery in Egypt and the inauguration of the Mosaic covenant that the exodus made possible.

among his people and that God's people could dwell close to his presence.<sup>11</sup> Hebrews works with this sacrificial logic to develop an analogy between Jesus' sacrifice and the Yom Kippur sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus. Thus, when reflecting on Jesus' atoning sacrifice, the author emphasizes one of the most central atoning elements of the sin offerings of Yom Kippur—the high priest's conveyance of the blood/life of the sacrifice into God's presence in the holy of holies (cf. Lev 16:15–16). Jesus, as humanity's great high priest, passed through the heavens (4:14) in order to offer his sacrifice to God in the heavenly sanctuary (8:1–6; 9:11–14, 24–26). The author believes that the priestly acts of drawing near to God and offering blood effected limited purification for God's people (9:10, 13, 22). By way of analogy to the Levitical prescriptions, the author explain how Jesus' act of passing through the heavens and appearing before his Father in the heavenly holy of holies brought ultimate forgiveness and purification (i.e., sacrificial atonement) to those for whom he ministers (9:14; 12–13; cf. 1:3). Moreover, Jesus' purification extends even to the conscience, something the author thinks the Levitical sacrifices were unable to do. Jesus' performance of the heavenly, high-priestly Yom Kippur sacrifice therefore maintains the covenant he mediates. Thus, as was the case in a limited way under the Mosaic covenant, God and his people can now dwell together. The forgiveness and purification Jesus has obtained for his people ensures that they can approach God and dwell in his presence in their eternal inheritance.<sup>12</sup>

The proceeding discussion suggests that the twin problems of enslavement to the fear of death and impurity both exert negative pressure that influences people to disobey God's voice.

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g. Klawans, J., *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 68–72; Maccoby, H., *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and Its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) esp. 1, 11, 27, 47, 170.

<sup>12</sup> For a similar account of this logic particularly with a view to the new covenant promise in Jeremiah 31 see Whitlark, J.A., 'Fidelity and New Covenant Enablement in Hebrews' *Getting "Saved": The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (eds Talbert, C.H. and Whitlark, J.A.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 72–91, esp. 81–91.



Instead of approaching God and moving towards the promised inheritance he offers, death and impurity motivate people to turn away and thereby sin. In other words, *apistia* and its manifestation as sinful actions flourish when these problems are unresolved and/or allowed to determine the way one lives. The author of Hebrews therefore appeals to the confession of Jesus' death, resurrection, and high-priestly entrance into God's presence to assure the congregation that both of these problems have been solved. Because of Jesus, full atonement is now a reality.

Thus, instead of living in a way determined by an orientation that pushes one to refuse God and turn from him, Hebrews exhorts its readers to live in line with the reality of the atonement Jesus' has obtained for them. Because of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, they are the redeemed, forgiven, and purified community who can (and one day ultimately will, 9:28; 12:27–29; cf. 1:14) enter God's presence and worship together with the angels (esp. 12:18–13:21). Even now they can boldly go where only Jesus has gone, before the very throne of God (4:16). They must, therefore, persevere in their confession and, by so doing, push forward into the promised inheritance that Jesus's work has made available to them. Instead of turning away as Israel did in the wilderness, they must follow the positive example of Jesus as well as others who acted in line with God's promises even in the face of death (cf. 5:7–10, 11:1–12:2). In this way they will do the will of God by living in line with the reality they cannot yet see, but nevertheless confess to be true.

All of this indicates that the coherence between one's action/way of life with one's confession about Christ lies at the heart of Hebrews' understanding of *pistis*—faith or, perhaps better, faithfulness. Faith, by way of contrast to *apistia* and sin, orients one towards God. By faith one can do the will of God and move forward into the future he has promised for faith centers one's focus beyond death and the limitations of the visible, temporal realm of this world.

Faith thereby challenges the basic logic of the fear of death and of the guilt of impurity and strives instead to enter God's rest. In the present world where the submission of all things to the Son's rule is not yet fully seen, faith looks to Jesus, whom God led out of the dead (13:20), and considers that, even when death and impurity seem to speak the final word, the one whose voice promises his children eternal life in his presence is faithful.

## **James**

The Epistle of James says surprisingly little about Jesus. Yet, like Hebrews and the other General Epistles, James links sin with actions that are inconsistent with or not properly oriented towards the eschatological judgment, hope of future life, and the Lord's return (cf. 1:12; 5:7–9).<sup>13</sup> Unlike Hebrews, James' more general or typical perspectives correlate with a broader conceptualization of sin.<sup>14</sup> He therefore provides a partial catalogue of particular sins, but also roots these sins generally in the universal human desire (*epithumia*) that inclines towards objects of temptation and evil rather than towards God (1:14–15; 4:1–3). Also unlike Hebrews, this epistle shows no explicit interest in a sacrificial account of atonement for sin. Forgiveness of sins, which is barely mentioned in James, is linked with intercessory prayer and confession (5:15–16), and with the bringing back of those who have wandered away (5:19–20). James does imply a connection between a conception of purity and nearness to God (4:8–10),<sup>15</sup> but he says nothing about the specific ways that Jesus has made this possible. Instead, the emphasis in this

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<sup>13</sup> For a thorough discussion of the eschatological framework of the epistle see Penner, T.C., *The Epistle of James and Eschatology: Re-reading an Ancient Christian Letter* (JSNTSup 121; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Richard Bauckham, who argues that the epistle is an encyclical, comments, 'We must take seriously the implication that James addresses not specific but typical situations, such as he knows it is quite likely his readers in many parts of the Diaspora might encounter, and rebukes typical failings, such as he might think likely to occur in many Jewish Christian communities in the Diaspora' (Bauckham, R.J., *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Routledge, 1999) 26).

<sup>15</sup> There may well be a deeper sacrificial logic underlying the use of purity language here (so, e.g., Bauckham, *James*, 146–7, 165). On the theme of purity in James see also Darian Lockett's recent study. Lockett argues that one of James' main uses of purity categories is to help identify and delimit boundaries that shape the readers' identity and help keep them separate/distinct from their surrounding culture (Lockett, D.R., *Purity and Worldview in the Epistle of James* (LNTS 366; London: T&T Clark, 2008)). This also coheres well with aspects of 1 Peter (see below).

letter rests on the need to live in line with heavenly wisdom and thereby control desires that incline one towards evil.<sup>16</sup> James, like 1 Peter, also uses the concept of waiting patiently to receive God's promises for describing the stance of the moral life (e.g. 5:8) rather than developing a metaphor of moving forward, as in Hebrews.

James identifies the root of sin in the human inclination towards evil. This identification of certain innate and disordered desires as the source of sin aligns closely with the Jewish concept of the 'evil inclination' (*yeşer hara*).<sup>17</sup> Thus, James avers, temptation does not come from God, but from the innate human inclination towards evil (1:13–15) and from the devil who appeals to it (4:7). The end result of following this inclination is death (1:15).

In a central passage of the epistle (3:13–4:11) James warns his readers that to live in line with disordered desires such as selfish ambition, covetousness, envy, and pride (3:14, 16; 4:1–6) is to accept the wisdom or logic of the world and its values (3:14–16). This path disrupts relationships, is opposed by God, and will eventually issue in destruction when the judgment comes (e.g. 4:1–6, 11–12). Faith turns one instead towards God and the wisdom that comes from heaven (3:13, 17–18). The fruits of such living may not be easily recognized in the present, but the eschatological orientation of faith understands that present comforts are fleeting (1:10–11; 5:1–5). Faith assures one of fellowship with God, blessing in the coming judgment, and the reward for living in line with heavenly wisdom (e.g., 1:12; 3:18; 4:6–10; 5:7–8).

As noted above, James details a number of particular expressions of sin. Chief among them are instability of mind and character, and doubt in relation to God. These themes explicitly

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<sup>16</sup> Bauckham suggests that the 'law of freedom' (1:25; 2:12) language in James is related to the notions of 'birth by the word of truth' (1:18) and the 'implanted word' (1:21). Thus the power to control passion and so not to sin does not come from within, but from above, that is, from the salvific work of God (*James*, 146). For a different account, as well as a thorough summary of interpretive views, see Allison, *James*, 311–16.

<sup>17</sup> See esp. Marcus, J., 'The Evil Inclination in the Epistle of James,' *CBQ* 44 (1982) 606–21; Allison, *James*, 246–8; Neusner, J., 'Sin, Repentance, Atonement and Resurrection: The Perspective of Rabbinic Theology on the Views of James 1–2 and Paul in Romans 3–4,' *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity* (eds Chilton, B. and Evans, C.; NovTSupp 115; Leiden: Brill, 2005) 409–34, here 431).

occur at the beginning of the letter (1:6–8) and again at the end where James speaks of sinners being prone to wander away from God and the community (5:19–20). Implicit references to the problem of instability, however, run through the epistle both in its discussions of the need to persevere in the midst of trials and temptations (e.g. 1:2–4 12; 4:7–8), and in its emphasis on consistency and coherence in one’s life between faith and what one says and does (e.g. 1:22–24; 2:1; 3:10–12). Maturity or perfection (*teleios*) in James is primarily about living with integrity—living in a way that is consistent with one’s eschatological hope.<sup>18</sup> The implication seems to be that because the mature are more settled and stable in their faith, they have greater control over their passions and thus are less prone to sin.

The body of the epistle proceeds by way of a series of loosely-structured discussions that generally relate to two major categories of sin—improper speech and improper use of wealth in relation to self and those in need (1:26–27). Taking the last element first James 2:1–13 demonstrates that privileging and pandering to the wealthy dishonors the poor in the context of the congregation and is sin (2:9). To show such partiality or favoritism is to live in line with the inclination towards evil and with the logic and values of the world and its shortsighted orientation towards the present life. Genuine faith, the kind that is oriented towards and assured of future salvation, does not simply wish the poor well, but uses wealth to provide for their needs (2:14–26). This kind of living is in line with the command to love the neighbor (2:8). Wealth used only for one’s own aggrandizement, especially at the expense of the poor, will soon rot away. Those who sin in this way will find no ultimate security in their wealth and can expect one day to face divine judgment (5:1–6).

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<sup>18</sup> For a detailed defense of this view see Hartin, P.J., *A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

James 3:1–12 and 4:11–17 especially focus on the ways that disordered desire issues in sinful speech. The tongue, James says, is one of the main conduits through which evil desire is actualized in the world. The tongue, though a small part of the body, is a portal or tool for evil desire and can influence the course of one’s entire life. The tongue can be used to bless, but also to curse (3:9), speak evil of others (3:11), and express arrogance through boasting (4:16). Thus controlling the tongue is a central feature of standing firm in temptation and resisting the evil inclination.

In sum, throughout James sin is identified as the outcome of being controlled by desire that inclines towards evil. This leads to instability, doubt, and double-mindedness. Those who live in this immature/imperfect way value and misuse wealth, cannot control their tongues, and are prone to wander away from God and the community of believers. Faith, by contrast, orients one towards God and the coming judgement, with both its potential punishments and rewards. This orientation enables one to endure trials and temptation and to resist the devil, in short, to control the inclination towards evil. Such living is counter-intuitive relative to the values of the here and now. Instead of speaking from envy and selfish ambition, heavenly wisdom enables gentle, peaceable, and merciful speech and action. Instead of hoarding wealth or pandering to the wealthy, faith shares with those who have needs and by so doing obeys God by loving the neighbor. James may say little explicitly about Jesus, but the wisdom from above that he emphasizes repeatedly echoes the wisdom that Jesus spoke about and embodied when he proclaimed the kingdom of God.<sup>19</sup>

## **1 Peter**

1 Peter addresses itself to congregations of believers characterized as part of the Jewish diaspora. Like Hebrews, the letter depicts its readers as already having heard the word of God—

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<sup>19</sup> See esp. Bauckham, *James*, 29–108.

the good news about Jesus—from others. Because they accepted this word, they have been born anew (1:3, 22–25). They have also been baptized (3:21). Moreover, the letter appears to be directed largely at gentile believers whose identity is now being re-described in terms of the language and symbols of Israel (1:1–2; 2:5–9).<sup>20</sup> Although they once were not a people, through Jesus they have been incorporated into God’s people such that they themselves can now be said to live among the gentiles (esp. 2:10–12; cf. 4:3–4).

Salvation in 1 Peter, as in Hebrews, involves obtaining an inheritance that one looks forward to receiving when Jesus is revealed in the near future (e.g. 1:3–5, 13; 4:7). The orienting concept in this letter differs, however, from that of Hebrews. While Hebrews generally develops a directional metaphor which casts the moral life in terms of moving forward into the promised inheritance, Peter, like James, encourages patience while one waits for the inheritance to be revealed. In keeping with Hebrews and James, 1 Peter exhorts his readers to live in a way that is consistent with this future hope and the reality of the coming judgment (1:13–17). Faith and hope are properly oriented towards God and have Jesus’ resurrection as their proper ground (1:21).

All of this means that, much like James, the disordered desires or passions (*epithumiai*, 1:14; 2:11; 4:2–3) that controlled one’s life in the past must now themselves be controlled. Indeed, 1 Peter also seems to root sin in the passions, and makes a passing reference to the agency of the devil and the need to resist him (5:8–9). In view of the coming judgment (1:17; 4:4–5), a life enslaved to the passions is a life lived in ‘ignorance’ (*agnoia*, 1:14) and characterized as ‘futile conduct’ (*mataia anastrophē*, 1:18). In 1 Peter love in the community

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<sup>20</sup> See Achtemeier, P.J., *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 50–1, 69–72.

covers a multitude of sins (4:8; cf. James 5:20), which likely means that sin in the context of the community can be eradicated when people act lovingly toward each other.<sup>21</sup>

1 Peter, however, goes beyond James in its more explicit emphasis on sin being at odds with the salvation Jesus has accomplished and the believer's resulting new identity, an identity which includes priestly associations. Thus, in language reminiscent of God's redemption of his people from slavery in Egypt (e.g. Exod 6:6; Deut 7:8), the audience has been redeemed (*elutrōthēte*) by Jesus' blood from their futile ways (1:18–19).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the contrast in 1 Peter between being led by passions/desires on the one hand, and obedience that enacts divine holiness (1:14–16) on the other, is linked with the identity Peter attributes to and inculcates within the readers. Already in the mention of Jesus' sprinkled blood (1:2) one detects resonances with the covenant inauguration ceremony at the altar (e.g. Exod 24:3–8).<sup>23</sup> The initial blessing of 'grace' and 'peace' (1:2) followed closely by a reference to God's 'mercy' (1:3) calls to mind the special priestly blessing of God's people (cf. Num 6:22–27). Further, in language replete with allusions to the temple and its service, the readers are called living stones being built into a spiritual house, and a holy and royal priesthood who offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus (2:5, 9). It is unsurprising, therefore, to find Peter using holiness and purity language with reference to the letter's recipients (e.g. 1:2, 15, 22; 3:2, 15). Thus, to continue to submit to the passions is to sin and to live in a way that directly challenges and contrasts with one's identity as a Christian.<sup>24</sup>

While a clear connection exists between holy living and the reader's reception of the future blessings and salvation (e.g. 1:14–17; 3:9–12), Peter also stresses the need for insiders to

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<sup>21</sup> So Michaels, J.R., *1 Peter* (WBC 49; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988) 247.

<sup>22</sup> See the recent and thorough discussion of the influence of Passover/Exodus themes here in Williams, M., *The Doctrine of Salvation in the First Letter of Peter* (SNTSM 149; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 85–97 (cf. Caird, G.B., *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980) 156). For a contrasting opinion see Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 128–9.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 88–9; Michaelis, *1 Peter*, 12–13.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Peter is one of only two NT books to use this term (1 Peter 4:16; cf. Acts 11:26; 26:38).

be holy/avoid sin as a witness to outsiders. To sin is not only to disobey God, but to live among the gentiles just like the gentiles live, with no discernible difference. Living in accordance with God's will, by contrast, sets one apart and will be noticed by outsiders (2:11–12, 15; 3:16; 4:2–4). Holiness and priestly identity mean that one is/must be different, set apart from the norms, logic, and values of the world.

Sin in 1 Peter, then, is action that issues from being under the control of the inclination towards evil. Such living neither aligns with the holiness of one's new priestly identity, nor takes seriously the future judgment wherein sinners and the righteous alike will receive the rewards for the ways they have lived (e.g. 1:9, 13, 17; 4:17–18). The power of God that guards his people (1:5) and Jesus' redeeming work that frees them from ignorant and futile living (1:18–19) mean that now they can separate themselves from such behaviors and live by the example that Jesus himself set for them (2:21–23). To fail to do so is to submit again to sin and deny one's new identity.

## **2 Peter and Jude**

The very close similarities between sections of 2 Peter and Jude have long been noted. Most modern commentators conclude that 2 Peter has used Jude as a source.<sup>25</sup> As with the other General Epistles, both of these letters are written to congregations of insiders (cf. 2 Pet 1:1–8; Jude vv. 1–3). 2 Peter, in keeping with all the texts discussed here, envisions judgment and full salvation as something yet to come and thus as determinative for how one lives now (2 Pet 3:10–14, 17; cf. 1:11). While less developed, hints of this same perspective are present in Jude as well (Jude 14–15, 20–21, 24).

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<sup>25</sup> For a succinct discussion of the options and for support of this view see Bauckham, R.J., *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC 50; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983)141–3.



Sin in these two texts is linked with specific individuals against whom both authors warn their readers. These sinful persons appear to be members of the communities addressed by the letters. Thus, they participate in the communal feasts (2 Pet 2:13; Jude 12). 2 Peter describes them as people who started out on the right path, forsook sin, and learned about Jesus (2 Pet 2:15, 20–22). Now, however, they are known to be ‘false teachers’ (2 Pet 2:1). Jude characterizes such people somewhat differently suggesting that they were intentionally deceptive from the beginning—they have ‘snuck in’ (*pereisedusan*) among the congregation (Jude 4). Whatever their original motives for joining with the community of believers were, both letters agree that they now deny Jesus in some way (2 Pet 2:1; Jude 4). This probably means that their sinful acts, which are inconsistent with their claims to be believers, are tantamount to a denial of Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

Both letters detail a number of sinful attitudes and actions that characterize these individuals. Chief among their faults are sexual sin and greed (2 Peter 2:2–10; cf. Jude 4, 6–7, 11–12, 16). 2 Peter says that they use their position in the community to lead others into sexual sin (2 Pet 2:14, 18–19). Their greed leads them to promote themselves and seek only their own gain (2 Pet 2:14–15; cf. Jude 11–12, 16). Further, they have no respect for authorities and angelic figures (2 Pet 2:10; Jude 8–10). Both letters agree that they also spread dissension in the community (2 Pet 2:1; Jude 19). They twist God’s grace into license to justify their sinful behaviors (Jude 4; cf. 2 Pet 2:19).

Somewhat like James and 1 Peter, the sins of such people are linked with the unrestrained influence of their passions (*epithumiai*, 2 Pet 3:3; Jude 16, 18). Moreover, they appeal to the passions of others in order to lead them into sin and enslave them, even as they themselves are enslaved (2 Pet 2:14, 18–19, cf. 2:2–3). 2 Peter and Jude, again like the other General Epistles,

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<sup>26</sup> So, e.g. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 40, 241; cf. Hafemann, S., ‘Salvation in Jude 5 and the Argument of 2 Peter 1:3–11’ *The Catholic Epistles and Apostolic Tradition: A New Perspective on James to Jude* (eds Niebuhr, K.–L. and Wall, R.L.; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009) 331–42, here 339.

identify those who follow their passions as unstable people. Thus, 2 Peter compares them to mists driven around by a storm (2 Pet 2:17). Jude likens them to clouds or waves whipped up and driven along by the wind (Jude 12–13). Those whom they try to entice are also ‘unstable souls’ (*psuchas astēriktous*, 2 Pet 2:14). The end that awaits them is destruction (2 Pet 2:3; 3:7; cf. Jude 5–7, 13).

Unlike the other texts discussed here, however, the sin mentioned in 2 Peter appears to have flourished in part because Jesus had not yet returned.<sup>27</sup> Thus, 2 Peter suggests a connection between the sinful behavior of these individuals and their doubts about Jesus’ coming (2 Pet 3:3–4). 2 Peter also emphasizes the fact that while from a human perspective Jesus’ return and the final judgment has not happened as quickly as expected, God is not slow to fulfill his promises since time for God is different than for humans (2 Pet 3:8–9). It seems that those in these communities who are again allowing their passions to dominate them have fallen prey to temptation in part because, having waited for Jesus to return for what seemed to them to be an inordinate amount of time, they no longer have the faith or confidence to continue in their commitment to fight the passions and the logic of gratification in the here and now. Their faith is being challenged by the quotidian reality of life that continues apace and, rather than looking to the ways God has judged and fulfilled promises in the past, their passions have regained control of them.

## **Conclusion**

While each of the texts studied above has its own voice, they share a number of assumptions about sin. They more or less agree that sin follows from elevating the logic and values of one’s present experience of the world above those that God has revealed in scripture

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<sup>27</sup> So, e.g., Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, esp. 154–6, 294–5; DeJardins, M., ‘The Portrayal of the Dissidents in 2 Peter and Jude: Does it Tell us More About the “Godly” than the “Ungodly”?’ *JSNT* 30 (1987) 89–102, here 98–9.

and also in the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. By contrast, faithful living in the last days separates one from the wider culture by orienting one towards the world to come. They also agree that sin is the outworking of disordered desires. For Hebrews this is primarily linked with fear of death and guilt. In the General Epistles, especially James, the failure to control this impulse and instead be controlled by it results in sinful acts. Sin, all these letters agree leads one away from God and cause fractures in the community of believers. Instead of inheriting the blessings God has promised, sin, according to each of these texts, results ultimately in judgment and destruction.