



[The Apocryphon of James 4.31-6.20](#)

Endorsement of martyrdom

Date: 125 CE to 150 CE

Place: Egypt/Syria-Palestine?

Language: Coptic

Category: Christian and Gnostic

Literary genre: Apocrypha

Title of work: The Apocryphon of James

Reference: 4.23-6.20

Commentary:

Early-Christian reactions to persecution by the Roman authorities were extremely varied. The author of the *Apocryphon of James* represents one extreme of this, not simply encouraging his audience to embrace the opportunity to imitate Christ in his suffering (see, for instance, [The Letter of Ignatius to the Romans 5.1-3](#); [The Martyrdom of Polycarp](#); for a recent treatment of this phenomenon, see Candida Moss, *The Other Christs*), but promoting active pursuit of martyrdom (something which was not approved of by “orthodox” Christian teachers). The views expressed concerning martyrdom and persecution within the Nag Hammadi corpus, where the *Apocryphon of James* is housed, are very diverse; some texts applaud and encourage martyrdom (as in the case of the present text), others (such as the *Testimony of Truth*) rejected it, and still others (such as the *Apocalypse of Peter*) present a more complex understanding, not completely rejecting the merits of martyrdom, but condemning those who try to coerce others to give themselves up for execution. As Ismo Dunderberg remarks, “martyrdom is one of the issues where the binary opposition between “Gnosticism” and other varieties of Christianity is not only unfruitful but also historically misleading” (*Gnostic Morality Revisited*, p. 60). In connection with early-Christian attitudes towards the Roman authorities, the *Apocryphon of James* is interesting also for its possible association of Rome with Satan in its teaching on martyrdom. While we do not find explicit condemnation of the Roman authorities for their treatment of Christians, the author’s frequent connections of suffering and persecution with the devil, the evil one, might imply a similar understanding of the Satanic power behind Rome that we find, for example, in Matthew’s Gospel.

The *Apocryphon of James* (untitled in the manuscript, but variously referred to as the *Apocalypse of James* or the *Secret Book of James*), likely originally composed in Greek, is now preserved only in a Coptic version contained in Nag Hammadi Codex I (the Jung Codex). The text claims to be an epistle from James of Jerusalem to a recipient whose name is now too damaged to be certain of (Hans Martin Schenke, “Der Jacobusbrief,” suggested “Cerinthus” based on the fact that the name ends in *thos*; this is taken up by Einar Thomassen in his more recent translation in the *New Testament Apocrypha*, p. 288-289, 291, but is very uncertain). Although the text purports to be a letter, and does indeed begin in the form of a Hellenistic epistle, it has no closing greeting or benediction. The text claims to be the “secret writing” revealed to James and Peter by Jesus 550 days after his resurrection, written “in the Hebrew alphabet” (1.15-16). The implied author asks his recipient not to share these secrets of truth with too many, as Jesus did not even wish for all the disciples to know them. Following the epistolary opening, the “apocryphon” begins with Jesus’s post-resurrection return, and includes a number of speeches attributed to the risen saviour with occasional interjections and questions by James and Peter. This section closes with Jesus’s final ascent back to heaven.

The text is largely parenetic, and the mixture of genres (epistle, apocryphon, moral exhortation) has indicated to some scholars that it is actually made up of sections from other documents. Kurt Rudolph, argued that the document was excerpted from a longer apocalypse and redacted into a “letter framework” (*Gnosis und Gnostizismus*, p. 169-175), and Scott Brown, maintained that certain inconsistencies – such as the difference between Jesus’s prediction of his ascent at 14.26-28 and what James and Peter actually see at 15.9-28 – betray an editing process (“James: A Religio-Historical Study”). Francis Williams, believes that it is possible that the text is the work of a single author who has shaped traditional materials (“The Apocryphon of James,” p. 19). Dating the text is very difficult, but generally thought to be some time during the second century CE. Ron Cameron, in his comprehensive study of the text, argues that the sayings traditions in the Apocryphon of James are independent of



the canonical gospels (*Sayings Traditions*). However, the document shows a familiarity with the known parables of Jesus, including several that appear in Matthew and/or Luke. Thus, the main body probably dates to the beginning of the second century, when the early sayings traditions were being developed into discourses and dialogues (for a brief discussion of the dating, see, for instance, Dankwart Kirchner, "The Apocryphon of James," p. 287). Henri-Charles Puech argued for between 125 and 150 CE ("The Apocryphon of James"). A reference in 7.21-35 suggested to some an area of provenance where date palms grew, namely Egypt. However, Kirchner prefers Syria-Palestine on the basis of the prominence of James and Peter, and the shared subject matters with the New Testament ("The Apocryphon of James," p. 287).

The present section sees an exhortation to martyrdom, and along with the prophecy section which immediately follows it (6.21-7.10), are the longest discussions of any singular topic in the document. Francis Williams admits that this might evidence the insertion of these sections into an earlier work, partly because these sections contain a higher concentration of Greek loan words and biblical allusions ("The Apocryphon of James," p. 19). The author's fellow believers appear to be a group of James-venerating Christians who viewed themselves as elect and specially called to follow Jesus (1.18-28, 16.20-30). The aim of the implied community was to put off the flesh and seek salvation in the "kingdom of God" (7.11-16). The kingdom and the saviour himself are also said to be within the believer (13.17-19), but s/he is in danger of going astray (13.9-11) unless s/he engages in fervent prayer and makes significant self-effort to ensure salvation. This latter theme is reflected in the endorsement of martyrdom found in the present passage; volunteering for martyrdom, thereby rejecting the flesh completely, is viewed as the ultimate commitment to attaining one's place in God's kingdom. Elaine Pagels argues that the author was likely a second-century Christian anxious about the prospect of death at the hands of the Roman authorities, and so imagines himself in James's and Peter's position, talking with the risen Jesus while they await torture and death. Their vision of Jesus interprets their impending suffering in terms of what the saviour himself suffered ("Views of Christ's Passion," p. 271-272; *The Gnostic Gospels*, p. 105). The above passage insists that Christ really did suffer and die (possibly combatting the views of Christians who taught that the figure who died on the cross was not really Jesus (for instance, the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* claims that this was merely "his likeness," and the *Treatise on the Resurrection* argues that because Jesus was the Son of God, his divine spirit could not die, and so transcended suffering and death). The fact that the community are urged to become "seekers for death" in the assurance that those who "put themselves to death" will gain the kingdom (5.6-20), along with the frequent mentioning of hypocrisy throughout the text (e.g. 7.17-18) imply an attempt by the author to remedy a lost fervour amongst his audience for martyrdom and the hardships of following the Christian faith more generally.

Satan is referred to in three different ways in the course of the present passage – "Satan," "the evil one," and "the devil." 5.9-20 in particular, however explicitly refers to the "evil one" as being responsible for the unjust accusation, imprisonment, and crucifixion which Jesus claims his followers are yet to experience. Given that this suffering would be at Roman hands, this could be seen to implicitly link the devil with Rome's power and dominion, suggesting that the authorities who will arrest and put Jesus's followers to death are doing the bidding of Satan – they are effectively acting as his agents on earth. Arguably, the author of Matthew's Gospel takes a similar line of suggestion in his narration of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (4:1-11) when Satan unsuccessfully offers Jesus "the kingdoms/empires of the world." As Warren Carter has argued, the language of "kingdoms/empires" is used here in Matthew in reference to what Satan currently possesses and can therefore offer to Jesus. This same terminology is of course used also of Rome (see, for example, *Sibylline Oracles* 3:37; Josephus, *Jewish Wars* V.9; Appian, *Civil Wars* II.86) (see Warren Carter, "Matthew and the Gentiles," p. 267-268). The Matthean author implicitly links Satan, the agent who currently holds humanity in his clutches, with Rome, as though he were one of the deities supporting the Empire (like Jupiter, who was responsible for sanctioning and up-keeping Rome). While according to Roman myth Rome is also ruled by overseeing deities, such as Jupiter, whose will [Aeneid I.257-296](#) describes as being carried out by Rome, for the Gospel writer it is Satan's puppet, and therefore directly in conflict with God's will.

For the author of the *Apocryphon of James*, the temptation offered to believers by Satan is less material than that offered to Jesus; it is the temptation to flee physical pain and potential death. When the text speaks of believers inappropriately favouring the flesh, this is not an admonition against material wealth or bodily pleasure, but against the desire to protect one's body from fatal harm ("will you not cease loving the flesh and being afraid of sufferings?"). However, the author of the present text, while apparently understanding those responsible for persecution of Christians as being inspired by an evil cosmic force, wants his audience to pursue this suffering nonetheless. Indeed, it is only by giving oneself up to death that the "kingdom of God" can truly be attained (6.15-20). A more complex and paradoxical understanding seems to be at work here than in say Matthew's Gospel when the anti-Roman polemic is arguably clearer, as the present author seems capable of both viewing Rome's power as demonic, yet understanding one brutal expression of this as fundamental to Christian fulfilment.



Keywords in the original language:

- [????????](#)
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Thematic keywords in English:

- [martyrdom](#)
- [persecution](#)
- [Roman authorities](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Satan](#)

Bibliographical references: Pagels, Elaine H., "[Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ's Passion: Paradigms for the Christian Response to Persecution?](#)", in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28-31, 1978, Volume I: The School of Valentinus* (ed. Bentley Layton; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 262-288
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Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Matthew 4:1-11](#)

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Text



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Text

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