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Letter of James (4) *Confession of Sins and Intercession(II)*

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The
STUDIUM BIBLICUM
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III. Illustration of the themes: Confession and Intercession

For a better understanding of the themes of confession and intercession in James, which is central to v. 16, it is necessary to search beyond the boundaries of James to have a view of their tradition history and their parallel contexts. In its precise wording, this twin exhortation does not have any comparable parallel in the biblical literature, although both these themes are well represented. We shall therefore try to have a quick look at the biblical and ancient Jewish texts and to evaluate them in order to discover whether there are some texts which are precursors of or contemporary with Jas 5,16. We hope to identify the *humus* out of which this exhortation grew. We are mainly interested in those texts where there is an analogous association between confession of sin, on the one side, and the prayer of intercession, on the other.

A. The confession of sins

1. OLD TESTAMENT

i) Confession as a Means of Expiation

The Old Testament presents the confession of sins as one of the means to expiation and reconciliation.¹⁴ The classical text of reference is Lev 5,5: "When a man is guilty in any of these (sins), he shall confess (*wh'twdh / exagoreusei*) the sin he has committed" (cf. also Lev 16,21 and Num 5, 6.7).

The effect of confession is forgiveness of sins, the remission of guilt (cf. 2 Sam 12,13; Job 33,27.28; Jer 3,11-13; Hos 14,2-3).

ii) National and Individual Confessions

The confession can be both individual, when it concerns a person who repents and confesses his sins, and national, when it concerns an entire group that humiliates themselves before God. As examples of the first form we can cite Cain's confession (Gen 4,13), that of Jacob (Gen 32,9), and that of David (2Sam 24,10; Ps 41,4; 51; 69,5). On the other hand, collective confessions are that of the Israelites in the desert (Num 14,40), in the land of their enemies (Lev 26,40), after Samuel's admonition at Mizpah (1Sam 7,6) and at Gilgal (1Sam 11,15; 12,10). National confessions are at times made through representatives of all the people, like Moses (Ex 32,31), the high priest on the day of atonement (Lev 16,21), Ezra (9,6.7.15) and Nehemiah (1,6.7; 9,2.33-35).

iii) Confession and Prayer

Since the return from exile (cf. Ezra 9, 6-15; Dan 9, 4-20) confession was an integral part of prayer, and verses from penitential Psalms like 32, 51, 86 were used in liturgy and in private devotion.²² Thus in Judaism, we find on the one hand the national collective confessions (besides Ezra and Nehemiah already cited, cf. Dan 9,4-40), and on the other hand the development of the sense of responsibility and the guilt of the individual.¹⁵

2. QUMRAN

In the Qumran community the rite of renewal and entrance into the covenant demanded a public confession as one of the essential steps: "... all those who go into the covenant shall make confession saying: - We have been perverse, we have rebelled, we have acted unjustly - both we and our fathers,



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for we have walked in injustice and not in truth. But God of salvation fulfills his judgment towards us and our fathers and from eternity showers on us the mercy of his benevolence.”¹⁶

Confession was prescribed at Qumran also on other occasions. In the Damascus Document we read: “Every object acquired illegitimately must be given back. If there is no owner, the one who gives back confesses (his guilt) to the priest, to whom everything will belong except the goat for the sacrifice of reparation.”¹⁷

3. RABBINIC LITERATURE

The Rabbinic literature also offers many a testimony, even though it is difficult to date the texts precisely in every case.

i) Confession of Sins

The Babylonian Talmud quotes this extended and detailed formula of the confession of sins made on the feast of Yom Kippur, the antiquity of which is guaranteed by a “baraita” or a tradition of the Tannaitic period (A.D. 70-200): “We sin, we betray, we are merciless. We destroy, we calumniate, we falsify. We murmur, we hate, we insult, we despise, we kill, we lie, we are scoffers, we revolt, we oppress, we pervert, we complain, we rebel, we transgress, we are wicked, we are violent, we are wrong, we defend wrong causes.”¹⁸

An example of the elaborate confession of sins is found in Prayer of Manasseh composed in the second century B.C. It is thought that it formed part of a midrashic addition to 2Chron 33,19; certainly it was a very much widespread and well-known prayer.²³

ii) Confession in Danger of Death

A widely attested tradition still merits our attention. The Babylonian Talmud contains the following text: “When someone is sick and is at the point of death someone says to him: - Make your confession (of sins)! For all those who are at the point of death have made their confessions.”²⁴ This practice is then justified by a parable very much similar to a Gospel parable (cf. Mt 5,25-26; Lk 12,57-59). “He who goes to a tribunal to be judged is saved if he finds great intercessors; otherwise he is not saved. And therefore the intercessors of man: penance and good works.”²⁵ The Talmudic text continues with a citation from Job 33,23 which speaks of the guardian angel who intervenes in favour of the repentant sinner.

We cannot enter here on the problems of the date of this text, nor in the polemics which we may be implied by the drastic restriction of the intercession to penance and good works.²⁶ However, there are very good reasons to retain this tradition as very ancient. In fact it is a “baraita”, the theme of which occurs again in other texts. Let us quote from Mishnah: “When one [the one condemned to death] was about ten yards away from the place of stoning, it was said to him: - Make confession of your sins because it fits all those who are condemned to death to confess first their own sins; for he who confesses his own sins participates in future life.”²⁷ Epstein holds that this text is dated before A.D. 70.²⁸ Hence we have a most valid testimony to compare with Jas 5,16.²⁹

Hence, while in the Old Testament there is no prescribed formula of confession, the intertestamental literature provides us with various formulations, which draw on biblical expressions (cf. for example, 1Kings 8,47; Ps 106,6; Dan 9,5) and were used on different occasions both official¹⁹ and private.²⁰ Among these the most important for the theme of confession is that of Yom Kippur, which incorporates the expressions “I have sinned, transgressed, rebelled.”²¹ Moreover, it seems to me that the Mishnaic tradition is very useful to understand Jas 5,16 within its context.

Three are at least three themes which stand in common both in the Mishnaic tradition and in Jas 5,16, viz., sickness, confession and intercession. The text of James is to be read in the light of this Jewish context. Even if the sacred writer does not say so, it can legitimately be supposed that the sick person, if able, should make his confession. It appears thus less unexpected the generalized exhortation to mutual confession.

4. NEW TESTAMENT

i) Act of Confessing

We know that the New Testament does not speak so much of the confession of sins but rather of the act of confessing sins. The explicit texts, already cited, are Mt 3,6; Mk 1,5; Acts 19,18; 1Jn 1,9, naturally besides Jas 5,16. The confession of guilt is implicit in passages like Mt 6,12 and its parallels: Lk 5,8.18.

ii) Intercessor

Besides, similar concept is also present in 1Jn 2,1: “My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate (intercessor) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

iii) Preventive and Curative Forms

Biblical scholars and theologians have tried to shed light on the praxis of the apostolic Church with regard to Christian sinners. They have identified two main forms:³⁰ the preventive and the



curative form. As for the *preventive form*, the community felt a strong obligation to sustain it in an unblemished nature. This obligation fell mainly upon the leaders, but it was not limited to them. All the members of a Christian community had to contribute to help others to have victory over the sinful way of life. This required avoiding to be a cause of sin for others (cf. 1Cor 8,11-12; Heb 3,12), advising and exhorting (cf. 1Thess 5,11.14; Jude 22; Heb 3,13-14; 10,25) and offering mutual prayer (cf. 1Jn 5,16-17; Jas 5,16). The safest defense against the infiltration of sin was intense charity which had to permeate the community - a charity whose source was Christ.

As for the *curative form*, the community felt forced to expel from her bosom stubborn sinners (cf. 2Thess 3,6-15; 1Cor 5,1-13; 2Cor 12,20-13,10; 1Tim 1,20; 3Jn 11). This practice had two aims: avoiding the contamination of the whole community, as well as correcting and saving the sinners (cf. 2Cor 2,5-11: case of the reconciliation of a repentant sinner; 2Cor 7,8-11). Thus, the text of James was part of the ordinary instruction or catechesis that early Christian communities held in order to purify continuously the life of their members from sin and its consequences. We could also add that the letter presents itself as a set of admonitions and instructions intended at not only eliminating evil but also at making the brothers "perfect and integral without lacking anything" (1,4). This is evident in the often-repeated exhortations of James, viz., to put away "every impurity and malice" (1,21); to "preserve oneself pure from this world" in order to practise a "religion pure and without stain" (1,27); to "purify the hands" and "sanctify the hearts" (4,8); to abstain from every form of personal judgment on the sins of the brothers because the judgment belongs to God (4,12; cf. 2,4).

B. Intercession for the forgiveness of sins

"Pray for one another." Thus James exhorts all to make prayers of intercession. According to him, there is no need for a special call or particular attitude for intercession. This idea represents a newness compared to the Old Testament concept of intercession.

1. OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament does not contain any prescription on mutual prayer although numerous cases of intercession, even in favour of pagans, have been transmitted to us. The following characters are preserved as intercessors: Abraham who prays for Sodom and for Abimelech (cf. Gen 18,22-23; 20,7.17), and Isaac for Rebecca (cf. Gen 25,21); above all, Moses who makes supplication to the Lord for the Pharaoh (Ex 8,4-9.25-27; 9,27-33; 10,16-19), for Miriam (cf. Num 12,11-14), for Aaron (cf. Deut 9,20) and especially for the entire people (cf. Ex 32,11-13; 34,9; Num 11,2; 14,13-20; Deut 9,18-19.25-29). Intercession was also done by prophets like Samuel (cf. 1 Sam 7,5-9; 12,19-23), Elijah (cf. 1Kings 17,20-22; 18, 42), Elisha (cf. 2Kings 4,33; 6,17), Jeremiah (cf. 7,16; 11,14; 14,11; 15,1.11 etc.) and Ezekiel (cf. 9,8; 11,13), and by kings like Solomon (cf. 1Kings 8,22-53) and Hezekiah (cf. 2Kings 19,15-19). The intercessory role of priests results from the importance given to priests like Aaron (cf. Ex 8,8; 9,28; 10,17; Num 16,22; 17), Joshua (cf. Zech 3,7), to priests in general (cf. Joel 2,17), and to Oniah (cf. 2Mac 3,31; 15,12). Isaiah announces the intercession of the Servant of the Lord (cf. 53,12) while Zechariah speaks of a celestial intercessor (cf. 1,12). In wisdom literature and in post-exilic history we find many examples of pious persons who intercede for the people (cf. Job 42,8; Sir 45,23; 46,5; 48,20; Ezra 9,6-15; Neh 1,5-11 etc.).

From this simple list we learn that the topic of intercession is very large. It underwent a change from outlining the simple idea of solidarity towards members of the community in need, to presenting concrete figures of intercessors, and to defining rites and conditions for intercession.

2. INTERTESTAMENTAL LITERATURE

Complexity, vastness, and evolution characterize the theme of intercession in the intertestamental literature. I may not attempt a detailed analysis of all these texts, rather prefer to accentuate on some texts which are particularly similar to the exhortation of the letter of James in as much as they present intercession for the forgiveness of sins.³¹

i) Sacrifice of Isaac and the Forgiveness of Sins

A marginal gloss of the Targum (the Aramaic version of the Old Testament) Neophyti and the Fragmentary Targum of Gen 22,14 bring the following prayer of Abraham: "I pray to you for your mercy, Lord God! When the sons of Isaac will enter into times of anguish, you will remember in their favour of the *aqedah* [the binding for the sacrifice] of Isaac, their father; you will remit and forgive their sins and save them from every anguish."³²

ii) Intercession of Isaac

Another Targumic tradition attributes to Isaac an intervention in favour of Abimelech similar to that of his father described in Gen 20: "When Isaac left Gerar (driven out by Abimelech) the wells of the inhabitants became dry, their trees did not give fruits any more and they had a presentiment that

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all that happened to them because they had driven him out. They come to Isaac and he tells them as follows: - For what reason have you come to me so that I may pray for you, when you hate me and have driven me out?... Then Isaac prayed for them and they were healed.”³³

iii) Preventive Power of the Intercessory Prayer

We have already referred to various texts related to the confession of sins by the high priest on the day of atonement. The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of Num 35,25 goes so far as to establish a direct relation between the prayer of the high priest on that day and the crimes committed by the people, in the sense that the high priest is held guilty for not having avoided them. As the text reads, “This because he did not pray on the day of Atonement, in the Holy of Holies, regarding three grave transgressions - so that the people of the house of Israel may not be led to fall in idolatry, in incest, and in shedding of innocent blood. Yet it was in his power to avoid them with his prayer, but he did not pray and therefore he will be condemned to die that year.”³⁴

iv) Intercession and the Forgiveness of Sins

The Targum of Job from Qumran presents another example, certainly ancient, of intercession in favour of others' guilt. "... and God listened to the voice of Job and he forgave them their sins because of him.”³⁵ The efficacy of Job's prayer for his friends is already suggested in the Hebrew text (42,8) and in the Septuagint version, which affirms two times that Job's prayer obtained the forgiveness of their sins (48,9.10). It seems that this Greek interpretation has its correspondence in Qumran.

In the Targum of Is 53 there are at least three allusions (53,4.11.12) to the remission of sins obtained by the prayer of the Servant.³⁶

An interesting testimony is offered by the apocryphal 2Baruch: “In earliest times our fathers enjoyed the help of the just and the prophets; they helped us when we sinned and they interceded for us with the One who created us. They used to rely on their deeds and the Strong One used to grant their requests. But now the just are gone and the prophets are dead and we have nothing except the Strong One and his law.”³⁷

4Baruch (or the supplement to Jeremiah) recalls many times prophet Jeremiah who, with his head covered in ash, “prayed for the forgiveness of sins of the people.”³⁸

The apocryphal 4Ezra, certainly not less authoritative than the books quoted so far, enumerates a whole list of famous intercessors saying: “And Moses (prayed) for the fathers who sinned in the desert.”³⁹

In the Testament of Benjamin we read: “In fact our father prayed to Joseph, that he might pray in favour of his brothers in order that the Lord might not impute to them as sin the evil which they had done to him.”⁴⁰

Thus, we possess a whole series of texts which stood as preparatory for the idea underlying the neat exhortation of Jas 5,16. However in almost all the cases mentioned above, the intercessor for the sins is an extraordinary figure by himself or by his office. In the letter of James, on the other hand, the intercession is for all and is the duty of all the believers.

3. NEW TESTAMENT

The idea of intercession, according to the teaching of James, has a peculiarity even if compared with the doctrine of the New Testament, though intercession plays an important role both in the Gospels and in the Pauline epistles.

In fact Jesus prays for his disciples (cf. Lk 22,31-32; Jn 14,16; 16,26), for the believers of all times (cf. Jn 17) and even for his crucifiers (cf. Lk 23,44); he also teaches to pray for the persecutors (cf. Mt 5,44; Lk 6,28). St. Paul, for his part, attributes the efficacy of his apostolate to the intercession of the faithful (cf. 2Cor 1,11), he both intercedes for them (cf. Rom 10,1; 2Cor 13,7.9; Eph 3,14; Col 1,9; 2Thess 1,11; 2Tim 1,3; Philem 25) and recommends himself to their prayer (cf. 1Thess 5,25; 2Thess 3,1; Eph 6,19; Col 4,3). Besides, in New Testament there is no lack of texts in which prayer is directly connected with the forgiveness of sins requested from God and that to be given to the brother (cf. Mt 6,14; 11,25; 18,35; Lk 11,4 and parallels).

However the text closest to Jas 5, 16 is 1Jn 5,16: “ If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life – that is for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; it is not for that sin that I say that one should pray.”

Together with the letter of James, this text testifies that the primitive Christian communities were convinced that prayer of intercession was an effective means, a means within the reach of all in the Church for the defense against sin. However, James does not limit the fraternal intercession to some classes of sins.⁴¹

Further, some authors think that confession and intercession are to be seen in dependence to one another. They mean to say that confession should be made for being able to exercise an efficacious intercession.⁴² It seems to me that such subordination is neither favoured by the text - the two imperatives are only juxtaposed with the Greek conjunction *kai* - , nor by the context, where various realities and themes are evoked without a direct connection with one another. Besides, the epistle evokes many times prayer and its conditions without referring to confession.

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C. Conclusion

One can observe some kind of a growth and enlargement with regard to the theme of the confession of sins starting from the Old Testament. Though it shares some common grounds with the Mishanaic tradition and forms part of the general catechetical thrust of other New Testament writings, it exhibits real uniqueness in its combination with other constitutive themes. Similar history of tradition is observable in the case of the theme of intercession too. But the universal nature of intercession both in relation to its subject and object gives the exhortation of James the colour of ingenuity and singularity.

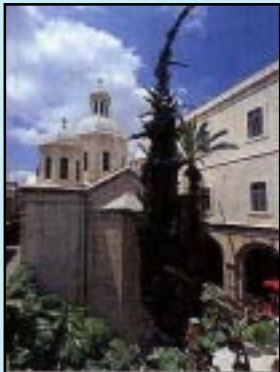
IV. Message of James 5,16

Sin, according to the epistle of James, gives birth to a tragic process of death (cf. 1,14-16) which involves the whole man (5,1-5) in his indivisible physico-spiritual reality. Unfortunately, nobody is exempt from the deceitful seduction of concupiscence, not even those who have been “generated by a word of truth” (1,14-15) of the “Father of light,” by the “word that has been implanted... and which is able to save” (1,16.18.21) are immune from it (1,14-15). But man is not left alone or helpless in the mercy of occult powers. He has brothers who help him to be converted “from his way of error” (5,20) and with them he can turn to God who is the Father, the giver of “every endowment and every perfect gift” (1,17). He is the One who “gives to all (who ask with faith) generously and without reproaching” (1,5).

On these anthropological and theological pillars is based the parenthesis on confession and intercession, as we have already seen. It seems to me that this brief exhortation contains a profound message which remains valid also for the Church of today.

The fact that it is difficult to refer this text to the sacramental confession as it is practiced today should not create in us an indifference towards it.⁴³ Indeed, the expression “I confess” that we recite at the beginning of every Eucharistic celebration can be regarded as a liturgical rendering of the exhortation of James. But I think that more can be said. Hence I emphasize some aspects of such a message.

1. Confession and intercession should be associated to obtain the healing of the moral and physical consequences of sin. Jas 5, 16, understood in its rich context, can help us not to forget that sin is an evil which affects not only the soul but the whole man in his psychosomatic nature.
2. Confession and recognition of one's own sins take place not only in the sanctuary of individual conscience and before God but also in front of the brothers. Thus, the confession of personal sins is not simply an expression of the humble admission of common fragility or of collective responsibility of sin, but becomes a sign and instrument of growth in the solidarity among brothers.
3. The confession of sins made to the brothers is also a call for help because a human being can not unfortunately overcome evil by himself. No Christian is to place himself above his brother; no one is to be a judge of his fellow brother; rather, one is to be an intercessor before the Lord, “the only Judge who can save and destroy” (4,12). How much light can come from this theme for the catechesis on the sacrament of Penance! Jas 5,16 stimulates us to overcome the recurrent temptation of considering sin and confession as a private matter and illuminates the sense of the communitarian celebration of Penance. Besides, it brings to light the role of the priest-confessor as the qualified intercessor, a no less important role than that of the judge and the spiritual physician, as is commonly underlined. If he acts in the person of Christ, is it not participation in the intercession of Christ the perfect intercessor for our sins (cf. 1 Jn 2, 1-2)? In fact until the eighth century in the East as well as in the West this role was made explicit also from an imploring formula of the absolution. The parenthesis of James, whether or not it refers to the sacramental confession, invites us in every case not to neglect this dimension of the confession of sins.
4. In the tradition of religious life, even if in various forms, the practice of fraternal confession which recalls Jas 5,16 has always been a living practice. In the *Regula non bullata* of S. Francis of Assisi we read a famous text: “If [the friars who have committed a sin] in that moment are not able to have a priest, confess to one of their brothers as says apostle James: ‘Confess one another your sins’ ” (Rnb 20; FF 53). Today a lot is being talked about revision of communitarian life, of the group therapy and of encounter groups, where the manifestation of one's own human and spiritual problems, a kind of confession, plays an important part. For those who turn to the Bible and to the Christian experience the exhortation of Jas 5,16 can undoubtedly say something also in this field. Confession and intercession, they are a double track for a healthy and efficient group healing for the sickness of human soul.



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Conclusion

1. The history of exegesis reveals that Jas 5,16 until the 16th century has constantly been called upon in the theological reflection on the sacrament of Penance. It was one of the biblical texts that were invoked by the Council of Trent. The same thing cannot be said of the last centuries. Recently the text of James has been neglected; for example the Order of Penance, the Ritual for the sacrament of Penance renewed after the Council of Vatican II, does not even cite it.
2. Studied in its context, the exhortation becomes part of a parenetic catechesis involving various themes and suggestions such as personal prayer, prayer by the presbyters and the unction of the sick, the remission of sins, healing, salvation.
3. The study of the topics of confession and intercession shows that Jas 5,16 rests on a very ancient biblico-Jewish tradition and on a practice well documented as far as the essential points are concerned.
4. The singularity of the text of James appears in the association of confession and intercession for the aim of healing from sins. It is also peculiar that the intercession is extended to all the members of the community and can be applied to all situations of sin.
5. We can hold with strong probability that the exhortation refers to a communitarian practice, also attested at Qumran. Perhaps it was also known to other circles of Jewish religiosity contemporary to the New Testament.
6. The message of Jas 5,16 deserves an important place in today's catechesis on the sacrament of Penance. Although a strictly sacramental interpretation is not possible, the text of James can inspire renewal and enrichment of the Christian communities in their relationships toward God and toward the fellow brothers.

