Romans versus James: A Contradiction in Scripture?

The great religious reformer, Martin Luther, actually wanted to *remove* the book of James from the New Testament! Apparently he, like many who have lived after him, could not reconcile the teachings of the apostle Paul and James. After all, Paul writes that "**If Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God.**" Then quoting from Genesis 15:6, Paul writes, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." (Romans 4:2-3) However, James writes, "**Was not Abraham our father justified by works?**" (James 2:21) Hopefully, the following notes will help us realize that **there is no contradiction**.

First, notice that **neither writer tries to exclude faith *or* works. Paul**, writing the single New Testament book which deals with grace perhaps more than any other (namely, Romans) also **speaks of obedience** (e.g., "obedience to the faith", 1:5 and 16:26, dying with Jesus in baptism to rise to walk in newness of life, 6:3-4, etc.) and of godly living (e.g., chapter 12). By the same token, a book that emphasizes the role of our obedience and works (namely, **James**) also **speaks of the importance of** maintaining a sincere and confident **faith** (James 1:6-8; chapter 2; etc.) Paul does not teach salvation by *faith only*, nor does James teach salvation by *works* only!

Second, we need to understand **how the terms "faith" and "works" are being used**, and understand the point of the respective passages. Paul, in Romans 4, for example, is clearly discussing *the basis for justification* (e.g., 4:2 "If Abraham was justified by works..."). That *basis* cannot be works, for all are condemned as sinners because no one's works are perfect. But **James** is talking about whether our "faith" is dead or alive. Notice that James says, "**Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead**" (2:20) and again, "**faith without works is dead.**" (2:26)

What *faith*? A key to understanding the different writers' perspectives is found in **James 2:19**: "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe - and tremble!" That is obviously not the "faith" that Paul has in mind in the book of Romans! As W.E. Vine says in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*,

> The two writers use the words 'faith' and 'works' in somewhat different senses. With Paul, faith is acceptance of God's word; with James, it is acceptance of the truth of certain statements about God (v. 19), which may fail to affect one's conduct. Faith, as dealt with by Paul, results in acceptance with God, i.e., justification, and is bound to manifest itself. **With Paul, works are dead works; with James they are life works. The works of which Paul speaks could be quite independent of faith; those referred to by James can be wrought only where faith is real, and they will attest its reality.** So with righteousness, or justification: Paul is occupied with a right *relationship* with God; James, with right *conduct*.

What *works*? Paul is referring to **works** "**of the Law**" (Romans 3:20, 28), that is, the Law given through Moses to the Jews. Beware that at least three looser translations — The Living Bible, God's Word Translation, and the Names of God Bible — leave out that key phrase and *interpret* (rather than *translate*) the passage to have Paul discounting any of our "efforts" or "the good things we do." But James is speaking *precisely* of our "efforts" and "good things we do" to ***show our*** faith, like Abraham did when he offered Isaac in Genesis 22.

As Vine again says, "The two writers have before them **different epochs in Abraham's life** - Paul, the event recorded in Genesis 15, James, that in Genesis 22."

Genesis 15 was when God promised that Abraham would have descendants as numerous as the stars, before Abraham even had a son. Verse 6 says Abraham "believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." In Genesis 22, after Abraham had begotten Isaac, he was told to offer him on an altar. (!) When Abraham did according to God's word, God said, "Now I know that you fear God" (22:12). Clearly, God "knew" this before, when He called Abraham out of his country and made the promises to Abraham in Genesis 11:31 - 12:3. But **Abraham's works**, as James teaches, *perfected* or *completed* **his faith.**

> Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? —**James 2:22**

Abraham's faith from Genesis 15 was completed in Genesis 22, and God then repeated the promises to Abraham, explaining that the promises were offered, "because you have obeyed My voice" (**Gen. 22:15-18**).

In conclusion, Martin Luther fell victim to the same misunderstanding that is reflected in the three looser translations mentioned above (namely, equating "works of the Law" of Moses with our active obedience of God's commands) and so, like those translators, dared to *interpret* the Scripture rather than simply *translate* it. In **Romans 3:28**, the New King James Version reads, "a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." But Martin Luther added the word "only"*, "justified by faith <u>only</u>". Because he *perceived* a contradiction (where one actually does not exist!), he *created* an *obvious* contradiction, having Paul (in Romans) say that "a man is justified by faith only" while James clearly says "not by faith only" (**James 2:24**). God's part in our justification is His grace. Man's part, as the basis for justification, is a combination of believing facts about Jesus (what James calls "faith") and an active demonstration of that belief (what James calls "works"), which looks very different from following the works of the Law of Moses, to which Paul was refering, and by which no one can be saved.

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*To be precise, Martin Luther translated from the Greek and Latin into *German.* He rendered the part of **Romans 3:28** that is in question as, "der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, allein durch den Glauben", but there is no word in the Greek or Latin to support his insertion of "allein" (trans., "alone, only, solely").

Quotes are from the New King James Version unless otherwise stated.